Towards Thinking Classrooms: Foundation Stage Possibilities in Northern Ireland.

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of Doctorate of Education

School of Education

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July 2021

Abstract

The integration of thinking skills programmes into primary and secondary school curricula has gained increasing prominence in global educational policy over the past two decades. This research investigated the factors that influence how a particular approach to the development of thinking skills adopted in the Northern Ireland (NI) context is interpreted and implemented by teachers in early years classrooms. The Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework (TSPC) was introduced as a statutory component of the revised NI curriculum in 2007 and this study explores its enactment through the perceptions of key groups that interface with the policy from a range of different contexts: teachers and Head Teachers, Curriculum Advisory and Support staff, university academics and Initial Teacher Education staff. The study adopted an interpretive approach, utilising interviews with members of these key groups to explore their perceptions of the factors that influence the effective and consistent implementation of the TSPC and to explain possible reasons why it has embedded effectively in some NI primary schools and not in others. In addition to interviews, policy analysis of key texts that shape teachers' approaches to the TSPC was undertaken using a framework based on Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis. The purpose of this analysis was to explore the connection between the discourses used in these texts, and the extent to which the ideological cues that underpin them exert an influence on how teachers interpret and implement thinking skills in their practice. The study also explored how human capital theory, and an ecological approach to the enactment of the TSPC based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (1979), provide different frameworks for understanding how the TSPC is interpreted and implemented in practice, with particular reference to Northern Ireland.

The findings suggest that there are a number of significant factors that both enable and constrain the effective implementation of the TSPC across schools. The region's political, social and historical context was viewed by participants as playing a key role in how policy reforms are interpreted and implemented. School

leaders can play a central role in mediating the impact of these reforms to ensure that they are implemented in ways that take account of diverse and specific school contexts. From the perspective of participants, Head Teachers and school leaders also play a pivotal role in nurturing teachers' professional learning, skill, and motivation in the teaching of thinking skills. Consistent opportunities for professional development, including collaborative working, and sharing of practice, both in and beyond the school, was viewed as the primary means of ensuring the development of a shared vision and language about thinking skills, and participants agreed that this is central to its consistent implementation across all schools.

Analysis of the participants' understandings of the purpose of teaching thinking skills, and the aims of education more broadly, highlighted a tension between approaches to education that focus on children's holistic development, and policy discourses, especially those related to Human Capital Theory that view education as a mechanism for achieving economic goals. The influence of these discourses across a range of public policy areas, as well as the disconnect between what participants and policy-makers viewed as the purpose of thinking, was highlighted in the analysis. For participants, the integration of thinking skills into the curriculum was about developing autonomy, criticality, and independence in children's thinking, whereas policy-makers viewed it from a human capital perspective and strongly linked it to discourses of 'lifelong learning', 'employability' and 'skill'.

From the perspective of participants, the findings indicate that for policy-makers in Northern Ireland to better understand how to embed the TSPC as a core component of the curriculum in all schools a number of cross-system actions need to be undertaken. These include a baseline review of the impact of the TSPC in the ten years since its inception as part of the comprehensive review of education announced by the Minister for Education in January 2021. The data suggests that this review should ensure that teachers and school leaders are central to its design and approach and that it is fully inclusive of all schools in Northern Ireland that sit within its scope. A return to more localised support and advice services with a

coordinated approach to the development of the TSPC in all schools was also viewed by participants as essential to its development and embedding in all schools.

A more coordinated, multi-disciplinary approach to implementation would, it was argued, ensure that ongoing professional learning in thinking skills was accessible, including the establishment of more strategic, collaborative partnerships with higher education, ITE and Inspection Services. This changed focus, I conclude, requires a move away from human capital and sector specific approaches to the consistent development of thinking skills programmes in all Northern Ireland schools. Recommendations also centre on future policy reforms that are inclusive and that give teachers their professional place as the primary implementers for the development of thinking skills programmes in schools.

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Dedication

This Dissertation is dedicated to my Grandfather, Philip John Donaghy (1921-1983), who taught me that there are no victims in life, only survivors. This is for you, with love unlimited.

Acknowledgement

My sincere thanks and appreciation are extended to my Dissertation Supervisor, Professor Nicki Hedge. Throughout this journey she provided constructive input and advice and helped me to navigate the many challenges and distractions that came my way over the years. Suffice to say that without her expertise and patience this work may never have come to fruition. Thank you so much for everything Nicki.

Sincere thanks is also extended to colleagues and friends from Queen's University Belfast for your genuine interest as the study progressed. To my work colleagues, too many to mention by name, who stepped in when the going was tough and celebrated even the addition of a sentence and a full stop with tea and cakes in the meeting room. It is because of your encouragement, positivity and propensity for a good party that I was able to enjoy the challenge and not take myself too seriously. My sincerest thanks to you all.

A very special word of thanks goes to my participants who gave of their time so generously. Your unshakeable commitment, professionalism and courage in the furthering of this important agenda despite the many challenges has been truly humbling. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to work with you as part of this study and have learned so much from you. You are an inspiration to us all. Thank you.

To my grandparents, Phil and Kathleen, for always believing in me and for teaching me that there isn't much in life that can't be resolved with a good Ceilidh and a generous slice of Victoria sponge. It is because of you that we all left home thinking that we could defy gravity. You made me who I am and I am forever in your debt. Miss you both every day. Thank you so much for everything.

To my son John Philip, and my family and friends, who travelled this road with me. I cannot express how appreciative I am of you all. You gave me the time and space to achieve this goal and I promise that a chicken casserole cooked from scratch with mashed potato will be produced at least once a week forever.

James, here we are. You stuck with me every step of the way and without your love and support this dream would not have been possible. I haven't the words to express how thankful I am for you in my life. We did it.

So here it is, and I can only hope that I have done you all the justice you so richly deserve.

Thank you all so much,
Michelle

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: Michelle Maria Donaghy

Signature:

Date: 31st March 2021

List of Abbreviations

ACEs	Adverse Childhood Experiences
ASCLN	Association of School and College Leaders
B.Ed.	Batchelor of Education
CASS	Curriculum Advisory and Support Service
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CCEA	Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
CCMS	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CH	Cultural Heritage
CI	Chief Inspector of Schools
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DENI	Department of Education for Northern Ireland
EMU	Education for Mutual Understanding
ESaGS	Every School a Good School - a framework for school improvement Policy
ETINI	Education and Training Inspectorate for Northern Ireland
GFA	Good Friday Agreement
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
KE	Knowledge Economy
HCT	Human Capital Theory
LLL	Lifelong Learning
LMS	Local Management of Schools

NI	Northern Ireland
NICC	Northern Ireland Curriculum Council
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PfG	Programme for Government (draft) Framework for Northern Ireland (2016-2021)
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PLS	Plain Language Statement
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
TSPC	The Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework
WEF	World Economic Forum

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

> So if I haven't been teaching children to think, then what exactly have I been doing for the past 35 years?
>
> **Participant 1A, Primary teacher, 35yrs experience**

1.1 Introduction and background

Over the past three decades there has been growing global interest in the development of teaching and learning programmes that integrate subject content with a broad range of transferable 'thinking' skills, and the capabilities and dispositions necessary to support them. As a response to this, the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework (hereafter often TSPC) was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2007 as part of the statutory arrangements for the revised curriculum with the aim of ensuring the integration of thinking skills across all areas of learning. The TSPC does not, of course, stand alone and is embedded in the wider policy field of education in NI which includes a suite of policies developed by government to combat inequalities in Northern Ireland society and address the long tail of underachievement that has plagued schools and communities for decades. Its introduction could be understood as NI's response to the global policy shift away from the more formal, subject-oriented, approaches to teaching and learning that had prevailed in primary education since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1987. This shift also places the expertise and knowledge of the teacher back front and centre with a key role in supporting students 'to think for themselves and work with others, and to develop identity, agency and purpose' (OECD, 2005:1).

However, the comment made by an experienced foundation stage teacher in the epigraph to this chapter suggests that the aims and objectives of the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework may not be universally understood by all teachers. In this Dissertation I will also argue, using analysis and research, that although the TSPC has been in place for over ten years, it has not been implemented consistently across all schools due to a number of system-wide constraints. I will

suggest that this inconsistency highlights a clear contradiction between a central aim of the TSPC to develop students' autonomy in their thinking and learning, and the wider global, political, and economic imperatives that drive reform in education policy and practice. Rather than a lack of enthusiasm or motivation on the part of teachers and schools, I will suggest that the global influence of neoliberal approaches to education based on human capital theory may have distorted how teachers can and do interpret and implement the TSPC with the result that its original purpose and intentions may not be realised.

In section 1.3 of this chapter a summary of the research paradigm and the methods used to conduct the study is presented, not least because I use extracts from my data, as in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, before I turn to a detailed account of the methodology in Chapter Five. In sections 1.4 and 1.5 the position of thinking skills in the wider educational policy context is discussed and Northern Ireland's adopted approach to the teaching of thinking skills, the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework (TSPC), is presented. In section 1.6 I discuss my positionally in relation to the research using the three themes identified by Merriam (2001) as being relevant for framing the insider/outsider debate, namely positionality, power, and representation. The research question and three sub-questions are presented in section 1.7 followed by a discussion of my approach to the TSPC from an ecological perspective. In this section Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological System's Theory as a lens through which teachers' interpretation and implementation of the TSPC might be understood is explained. In the final three sections of the chapter the key concepts that underpin the TSPC approach, namely autonomy and critical thinking, are presented. This is followed by a summary of Human Capital Theory as the organising principle on which current national education systems are, arguably, based and the tensions between autonomy as an educational aim and this prevailing ideology are highlighted. The chapter concludes with an outline of the Dissertation structure and the content of the chapters to follow.

1.2 Motivation for the study

When in practice as a foundation stage teacher, colleagues and I often bemoaned the lack of focus on the development of thinking skills and dispositions in curriculum documents which had a content heavy focus. Some minimal change was undertaken via initiatives such as The Enriched Curriculum (2002) and, while my classroom was used as a pilot, the approach still lacked wider system buy-in. Interestingly, The Enriched Curriculum initiative was developed by Professor Carol McGuinness who also co-authored the TSPC as part of the revised curriculum in 2007. At the point of its introduction I left teaching to work in a different sector but have remained curious about how effectively the TSPC has been embedded in practice, particularly in the foundation stage (primary one and two in the NI curriculum) which is my particular area of interest. Embarking on this Dissertation was an opportunity to explore this further and to understand the challenges and opportunities of implementing the approach from the perspective of those closest to it, that is, teachers, Head Teachers, academics, and advisory staff who support schools in its development and delivery.

The primary schools that I worked with in this study have been recognised by the Department of Education in NI as schools that have made significant progress in the embedding of effective thinking skills approaches, despite the challenging economic and political context. These schools have also identified the development of thinking skills as a whole school focus over the past number of years and have devoted considerable effort to ensuring its success. On this basis, I assumed that the integration of the TSPC would be central to their practice, that they would be in a strong position to advise on the challenges to its implementation and to make informed recommendations for its future development. As detailed in Chapter Six, additional participants in this study include retired teachers, Head Teachers, school nurture staff, curriculum advisors, and university academics and Initial Teacher Education Lecturers. These participants were selected because they engage with the thinking skills agenda in NI in different ways as part of their professional role and could, I hoped, provide views and opinions on its aims and implementation from a broader perspective than from those teaching in the primary school setting.

The Education and Training Inspectorate for NI (hereafter often ETI) were also approached to take part in the study but unfortunately declined my invitation. A brief outline of the methods used to conduct the study are now presented with more detail provided in Chapter Five.

1.3 Methodology

As the study seeks to explore the views and experiences of teachers in a specific social context, it is located in an interpretive paradigm. In keeping with this tradition, the methods used to conduct the research were qualitative in nature and drew on data gathered from two sources, namely qualitative, in-depth, interviews and policy analysis using an approach based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model for discourse analysis (CDA), to be explained in more detail in the Methodology Chapter. My approach to the interviews with participants assumed that how individuals make sense of the TSPC and how they implemented it in the classroom would be shaped by their personal experiences and interactions, and that the meanings that they attached to those would be diverse and determine 'truths' for them. In conversation with participants, I set out to explore their views on a range of different aspects of the TSPC including its purpose, the key factors that underpin and influence their decisions and approaches to its implementation, and the conditions that they believe enable or constrain the development of classroom environments in which all children's thinking skills can truly flourish. Policy analysis using Fairclough's three-dimensional model as a guiding framework was undertaken after the interviews had been conducted with participants. Analysis was undertaken on extracts from three related and highly influential documents: The Programme for Government Draft Framework 2016 - 2021 (NI Executive, 2016), Every School a Good School: A Policy for School Improvement (Department of Education NI, 2009), and The Chief Inspector's Bi-Annual Report 2016-2018 (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2019). These texts were selected due to the powerful role that they play in shaping the content and structure of education in Northern Ireland through the language and discourses that they draw upon and the effects they had. Applying both methods, interviews and policy analysis, would, I hoped, facilitate a rich exploration of the factors that contributed to an

understanding of why the TSPC was successfully implemented in some schools and yet failed in others. Hence, the approach to the research combines the perspectives of teachers and the staff who support them at the local level with an exploration of the language and discourses used in the key policy documents that might have shaped these experiences. These policies reflect particular perspectives on the purpose of education and on the role of thinking skills within a wider policy context, a subject to which I now turn in the following section.

1.4 Thinking skills and the wider policy context

Willingham (2011:88) refers to the renewed global emphasis on the development of thinking skills as 'a cognitive revolution' and a paradigm shift from learning to thinking. In this model, teachers' attention is now focused on the development of skills and dispositions that enhance students' ability to think independently and critically, build confidence, and engender character traits such as perseverance and resilience. Such programmes, it is argued, mitigate the reductive and damaging effects of narrower, more instrumental, approaches to learning favoured by government policy in NI from 1989 until 2008. These approaches were based on the teaching of subject knowledge, with success measured through competency frameworks, performance indicators, and various forms of high-stakes testing. In 2004, when the TSPC was being considered in Northern Ireland, a number of global organisations had engaged in their own research activity to identify the skills and dispositions that young people would require for effective 21st century working (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2007; International Labour Office, 2010; WEF, 2007), and the strategies that should be deployed by education systems to facilitate their development. These reports were extremely influential across the world and their recommendations were adopted, often unquestioningly, by national governments and promoted as an evidence base to inform education policy-making and change at a local level. It is against this backdrop that the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework was developed and introduced explicitly into the Northern Ireland context as a statutory component of the revised curriculum arrangements in September 2008, as outlined in the following section.

1.5 The Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework (TSPC) - the Northern Ireland approach

The content and structure of the TSPC and the approach to its implementation emerged from a review and evaluation of research into thinking skills commissioned by DfEE and undertaken by Professor Carol McGuinness (Queen's University Belfast) in 1998. While the development of the TSPC is presented in detail in Chapter Three, a summary is provided here. One of the key recommendations from the McGuinness review was that inclusion of thinking frameworks into the curriculum should move beyond a narrow focus on thinking skills and competencies and should also include the development of personal dispositions such as resilience and perseverance, risk-taking, collaborating with others, and the ability to cope effectively with uncertainty and change. The report also recommended a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. According to McGuinness, a whole school approach ensures that thinking is culturally embedded in the life and work of the school from the early years, and characterised by a shared language, and consistency of approach that empowers children to think critically across all areas of learning. The outcomes from the review also placed a high premium on the centrality of the teacher in the development of pupils' thinking skills and the need for teachers to be able to access professional development and training in this area on an ongoing basis was highlighted.

However, authors such as Leat (1999) and Jones (2009), in their research into thinking skills programmes in schools across the UK, concluded that many of these approaches, despite evidence of their effectiveness, fail to embed in any lasting way into school systems. The reasons given for this by the teachers interviewed by them were variable, with many citing lack of confidence and the belief that they do not have the knowledge or appropriate training to deliver thinking skills programmes effectively. However, the research also pointed to the adverse impact of external demands and pressures on teachers' ability to implement thinking programmes in the classroom and the knock-on effect that this had on their ability to engage in professional development and learning. The pressures referred to included inspection processes, bench-marking, league tables, and the demands of the wider

education system which did not, in the view of the authors, take sufficient account of the complex range of social determinants impacting on learning outcomes, particularly for the most vulnerable. These outcomes resonate in the NI context as confirmed by the findings of the most recent Chief Inspector's Report (2016 - 2018) which stated that, despite a range of policy interventions over time, too many learners underachieve and struggle to learn (ETI, 2019:12). The outcomes from the research led by Leat (1999) concluded that the range of pressures experienced by teachers in schools, particularly around accountability and performance measures, compromised the effectiveness of thinking skills programmes. Leat argues that these pressures, from a constellation of different sources and systems, place the teaching of thinking skills and capabilities and the demands of the education system, in conflict. These issues are not new and were matters for debate when I was a classroom teacher over a decade ago. Through this study I hoped to revisit them, by exploring teachers' experiences of implementing the TSPC and evaluating the extent to which it has made a difference. However, I remained acutely aware that I was returning to a field of practice that I had been a part of for many years to explore a subject that I held strong views about. Doing this effectively would involve being fully aware of the assumptions and biases that I would be taking into the research, and taking steps to mitigate any adverse effects from this, a subject to which I now turn in the sections below.

1.6 My position regarding the research

According to Hall (1990:18) 'There is no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all'. What I understand this to mean is that while we strive to maintain our objectivity as relevant in a research situation we must always be mindful of our subjectivities, both conscious and unconscious, and the overlapping identities that shape who we are as individuals as we move in, and between, social situations. As contended by Bourke (2014:3) 'striving to achieve a pure objectivism in research is a naive quest'. Relatedly, for England (1994:80), research represents a shared space and is 'a dialogical process' shaped by both researcher and participant. From this perspective it follows that the identities assigned to each party by the other and the

power relations at play in this relationship have an important role in the design of the research process and its outcomes. Identities come into play via our perceptions of ourselves and how we expect others will perceive us and, as explained by Kezar (2002:96), 'within positionality theory, it is acknowledged that people have overlapping identities. Thus, people make meaning from various aspects of their identity'. On this basis it was important for me as the researcher to consider these aspects from the outset and throughout the research process. Central to this was an awareness of how the levels of privilege and power that I may be perceived as having by some of my participants, particularly the school-based staff, might influence their view of me and what I was trying to achieve through the research. According to the feminist theorist Diane Wolff (1996) there are three key perspectives on power relations in research that require to be considered and which may shift depending on the researcher's positionality as an 'insider' or 'outsider' in the process. These include how an identity as both an academic and a member of the community is perceived by research participants, how the research process is constructed, and how the voices heard in the writing of the research are decided upon. Following Wolff, it was therefore important to answer a number of key questions in relation to my research, including, for example, where I stand in relation to the research subject, how my identity is perceived by my research participants, how my positionality as a researcher with intersectional identities between the university and the primary school community affects the research design, decision-making processes and levels of power sharing. Additionally, I needed to ask how might my relationship with my participants influence my findings and whose voices will be privileged and heard in the writing up and to question if I was an insider or an outsider in this research endeavour and if this really mattered.

1.6.1 The insider/outsider debate

According to Merriam et al (2001:411) positionality is determined by where one stands in relation to the 'other' and these positions are often multiple and in flux. What I take this to mean is that the commonly held assumptions about whether a researcher is either an 'insider' or an 'outsider' in the research process overly

simplify this status which is not clearly delineated. These assumptions contend that being an insider affords researchers easy access to participants, the ability to ask more meaningful questions and to be able to provide a more truthful, authentic understanding of participants' views and experience than if an outsider. By contrast, outsiders are seen as non-aligned with participants and their interests, as having a curiosity with the unfamiliar which can be an asset in terms of eliciting fuller, richer, explanations, non-biased in terms of research outcomes, and more able to ask provocative questions. Merriam (2001) contends that three themes in particular - positionality, power, and representation - are relevant for framing the insider/outsider debate. In the sections below my reflections on my positionality in relation to this research are explored through these lenses.

1.6.2 Positionality

For the past twenty-five years I have worked in a number of professional settings, as a teacher and school leader and, latterly, in a strategic managerial role within the health sector. These shifts brought with them new identities and experiences as I made the transition from being a teacher in a primary school to a managerial role in another sector in another region and at the same time began my doctoral journey as a student at the University of Glasgow. This evolved further as I was appointed as an Associate Tutor in the School of Education, a role which involved teaching and supervising Masters level students and which brought a further identity into the mix. In hindsight, in just a decade there have been many changes to my career and personal life which brought with it many new challenges, opportunities and identities since my days as a primary school teacher in Northern Ireland. As part of the research process I also needed to consider how these multiple and overlapping identities might influence my research participants' view of me and what I was trying to achieve through the interviews with them.

As a primary school teacher and school leader for many years I considered that I would be perceived by participants as an 'insider', a fellow professional with a shared, practical understanding of the various systems in which teachers were working. I could also readily identify with the challenges that teachers faced in

trying to interpret and implement new approaches in the classroom since I had been in their position many times over the years. In addition, Northern Ireland is the place where I grew up, went to school, trained as a primary school teacher, and taught for many years and so, in many respects, it is in my blood. On this basis I assumed that as I had lived experience of the unique political, social, and cultural context of the area that I would be able to understand and relate to the structural barriers that Northern Ireland's legacy of sectarian conflict has created in the education system and its cross-system impact.

On the other hand, I could also be considered as an 'outsider' in so far as I was no longer living in Northern Ireland, was no longer working as a primary school teacher and was studying at doctoral level in the education department of a Russell Group university. This may have led some of my participants, particularly those working in schools, to believe that I had a more advanced skill-set than they did because I had achieved post-graduate qualifications in education and was also teaching at the university. In this respect, I was coming to the research process from a position of privilege and power in so far as I was in the position of 'researcher' with a higher level of control over the questions to be asked and how the information provided would be interpreted and written up in this final Dissertation. Thus, my position in relation to the 'other', the 'other' being my research participants, was comprised of a complex interplay of identities, motivations and connections which moved between being both an insider and an outsider at various stages of the research process.

1.6.3 Power

Following Merriam (2001: 413), power-based dynamics are inherent in all research and power is not something only to be aware of, but to be negotiated in the process. In relation to teacher research, Cochran-Smith and Lytle make the following observation.

> Teacher research is based on the notion that knowledge for teaching is 'inside/outside', a juxtaposition intended to call attention to teachers as knowers and to the complex and distinctly non-linear relationships of

> knowledge and teaching as they are embedded in the contexts and relations of power. (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993:xi)

What I understand this to mean is that there is a constant tension between the field of teaching and learning and the multiple systems and contexts in which these activities take place. While teachers are recognised as professionals in their field of practice this position is embedded in relations of power that work across a number of different systems. With this in mind, I ensured that all reasonable steps were taken to maintain an appropriate balance of power in the interviews with participants in all stages of the process. These steps are set out in detail in the Methodology Chapter and include, for example, ensuring that participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research and their role within it; that they could choose to participate or not, and that a 'participant as colleague' (Merriam & Simpson, 2000) approach was adopted where open-ended questions were posed to encourage interaction, dialogue and reflection. In addition, completed transcripts of the interviews were provided to a sample of participants and all suggested amendments were accepted. This approach illustrates the fluidity of my status as both an insider and an outsider in the research process. On the one hand I was able to ask questions and elicit answers as a primary teacher with a shared knowledge and understanding of the subject and context, but on the other hand, I was no longer a part of that community of practice in the present-day context and needed to confirm that the meanings that I made from the data aligned with what participants intended.

In addition, whilst as a researcher my purpose in conducting the research was part of the requirements for obtaining a Doctorate, for participants, their purpose was different. A key question for them was how would their input and the telling of their stories lead to improvements in the system and the effective and consistent implementation of the TSPC equally across all schools? This question remained at the forefront of my mind throughout the research process and, most prominently, in the writing up phase of the Dissertation where their insights and experiences were considered and included as appropriate in the future policy and practice recommendations.

1.6.4 Representation

According to Merriam (2001:414), every researcher struggles with representing the truth of their findings as well as allowing the voices of their participants to be heard. Ensuring the participants' desire that their contribution would make a positive difference was an underpinning driver in my approach to the research, one that would be given effect through an authentic and accurate representation of their views and experiences of implementing the TSPC in practice. In keeping with the interpretive paradigm in which the study is located, participants' views and positions were accepted, given equal significance, and acknowledged as constituting 'truths' for them. The content of the interviews was reviewed and agreed with participants and any questions or concerns about my interpretation of the data were answered in an open and honest manner.

Muhammed (2015:1060) contends that understanding the importance of identity and positionality 'allows us to guard against appropriating knowledge, to work towards co-learning and collaborative knowledge production, and it makes us better teachers'. In Chapter Six the insights from participants' professional experience of interpreting the TSPC in a policy landscape, in ways which have not always been conducive to its underpinning aims and principles, is presented. I can only hope that I have done them the justice that they deserve.

In the following section, the overarching research question and the three sub-questions that framed the research and guided the selection of research methodology and methods is presented.

1.7 Research Questions

As outlined in section 1.3 the study is located in an interpretive paradigm and a qualitative approach was adopted using interviews as the primary research tool to investigate the following overarching question:

In the current educational context in Northern Ireland, what are the range of factors that influence how Foundation Stage teachers interpret and implement the TSPC approach in the classroom?

This key research question was explored through three sub-questions:

1. What are the factors that enable or constrain teachers' ability to interpret and implement the TSPC effectively and consistently in practice?

2. What are the dominant discourses in the key documents and policy texts that influence the interpretation and enactment of the TSPC? what questions do they raise? How do they connect with teachers' experiences in the classroom?

3. What changes are required at policy, school, and teacher level to ensure the effective and consistent implementation of the TSPC Framework across all primary schools in Northern Ireland?

These questions provided a guiding framework for the study, the key purpose of which was to explore, from a cross-system perspective, the reasons why, despite the many benefits that the TSPC approach has shown to bring to students' attainment and experience, it has failed to embed in any meaningful across all schools in Northern Ireland, a subject to which I now turn in the section below.

1.8 The TSPC Framework - an ecological perspective

Understanding the contradiction between the benefits of implementing the TSPC identified in the literature, and its failure to embed in a consistent way across all schools in Northern Ireland, lies at the heart of this research. The data from the interviews suggested that the factors driving this position were not only present at the classroom or school level and needed to be explored from a broader, systems perspective. This approach to the research developed over time and was informed by a number of different elements. For example, in reviewing the literature it became clear that the development of the TSPC by McGuinness and colleagues was informed by the outcomes from research carried out across a number of different disciplines. These included cognitive and behavioural psychology, philosophy, and

organisational development, as well as education. Each of these disciplines has their own philosophical underpinnings and approaches to research and each views the purpose of education through their own unique lens. From this perspective, the TSPC is the realisation of a rich and complex mix of different theories, philosophies and approaches to the teaching of thinking skills. Its introduction and development as a policy has also been influenced by a range of national and global drivers, each again with their own agendas and ideologies that view the role and purpose of education in very particular ways.

The policy-making process generally is also presented in the literature as a contentious one, laden with multiple and often competing interests that shift over time and according to context. Trowler (2003:96) contends that interpretation of policy is an 'active and dynamic process' and that policy statements 'are almost always subject to multiple interpretations depending on the standpoints of the people 'doing the interpretive work'. In the interviews with participants this point was confirmed as the influence of contextual factors and wider policy discourses on teachers' sense-making and implementation of the TSPC was identified as a recurring theme. From this perspective, interpretive work is not just affected by individual standpoints but must also consider the complex range of contextual factors, as well as the personal and professional background, beliefs and levels of experience that shaped these standpoints in the first place. As observed by Ball (1994:16), the actual policy outcome, the policy as articulated, will be the result of a micro political process and a 'muddling through' by those tasked with developing it.

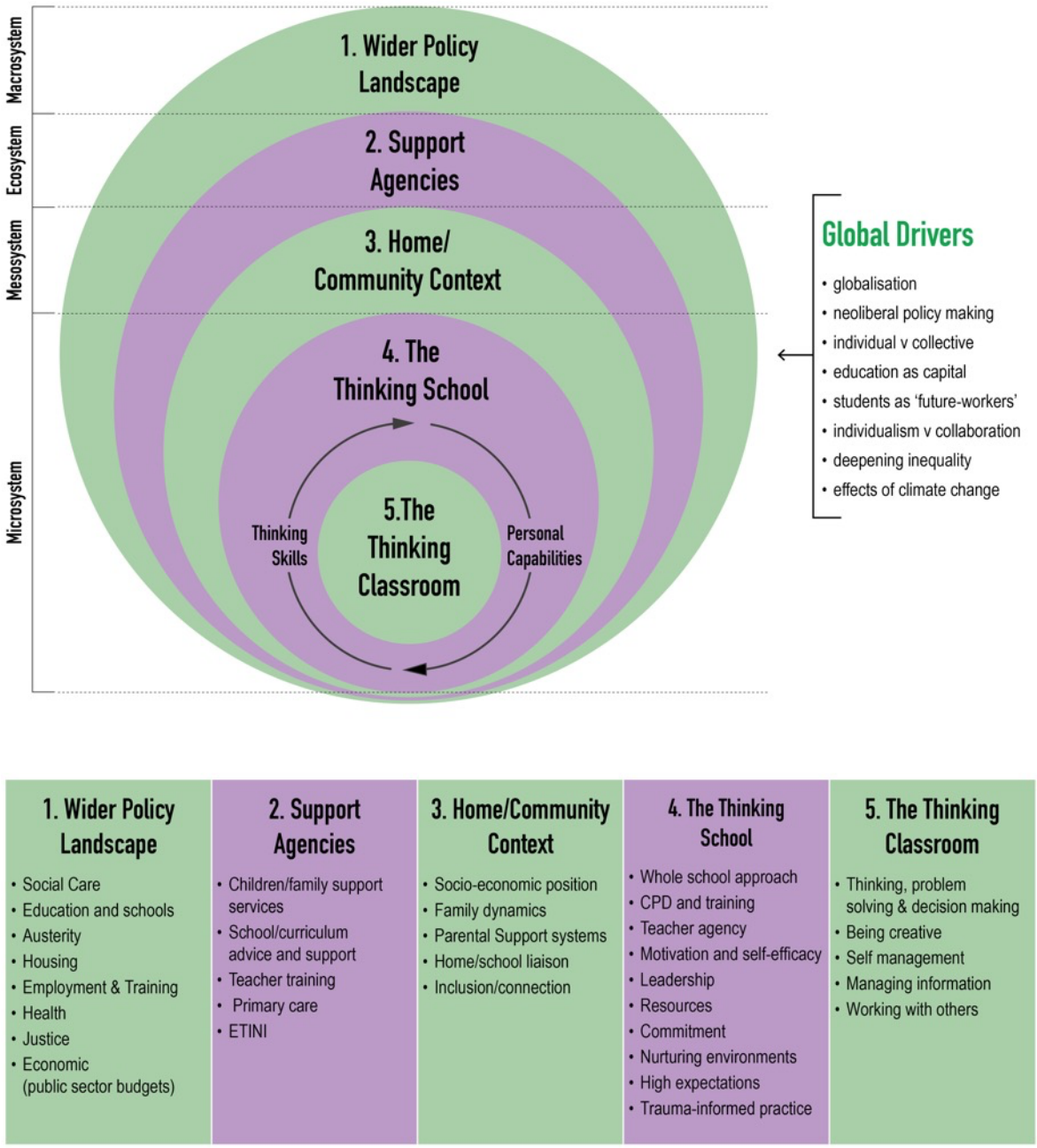
Having considered all of these perspectives it became clear that adopting an approach to the research based on a view of implementation of the TSPC as an individual set of actions and outcomes undertaken by teachers in the classroom would not be sufficient. Rather, it required viewing the TSPC as a concept nested in an integrated and complex web of wider influencing factors; one which recognised the importance of context with regard to learning and development processes. On this basis, I needed to broaden my perspective in ways that focused on the wider system influences that shape teachers' ability to make sense of the

policy, and to integrate it into their practice in ways that align with its objectives. What became clear, from an early stage, was that implementation of the TSPC was not a straightforward policy to classroom process.

This realisation confirmed for me the importance of approaching the research from an ecological perspective, one which, according to Bronfenbrenner (1976, 1979), captures the embedded and holistic nature of human development, and recognises that individuals are embedded in, and affected by, different levels of context at any given time. According to Bronfenbrenner, individual behaviour is described as 'a function of the interaction of the person's traits and abilities with the environment' (White & Klein, 2008:258). He contends that to understand why individuals behave in the way that they do the researcher must take account of the actual environments and systems in which people live and learn, the relationships between these individuals and these systems, and the relationships between the systems themselves.

Bronfenbrenner used the term 'ecological' to capture the embedded and holistic nature of human development. As individuals develop they are not only influenced by their unique characteristics but also by their family, school, community, and the wider social system in which individuals are nested (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory Approach and how it relates to this particular study is discussed in more detail in the Methodology Chapter but this connection is mapped here in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The TSPC from an ecological perspective



I developed this model to illustrate the integrated nature of the TSPC Framework and to highlight the network of discrete but related systems, both within and beyond the field of education, that influence how teachers implement the approach in their classrooms. The model was used in the Dissertation to understand more deeply the responses from participants that related to the influence of context as a barrier or enabler to implementation. It was also used alongside the policy analysis framework as a lens to explore the extent to which the language and discourses used in key policy documents impact on teachers' interpretations and their effects in practice.

In the sections below, the two fundamental concepts on which the TSPC is based, namely autonomy and critical thinking, are outlined.

1.9 Key concepts in the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework (TSPC) - autonomy as an educational aim

The concept of personal autonomy lies at the heart of the TSPC, described by Dworkin as a 'form of art' rather than a concept, due to its complexity and multitude of meanings. This led him to conclude that 'about the only features held constant from one author to another are that autonomy is a feature of persons and that it is a desirable quality to have' (2015:9). According to Dearden (1975), autonomous thinkers are able to adopt a critical stance, consider multiple perspectives free from coercion and control, and are reasonable, ethical, and informed about the world. However, authors such as Papastephanou and Angeli (2007) argue that the current dominant conception of critical thinking in education, as a 'skill' that can be taught and applied to learning tasks, is reductive and insufficient to cover the broad range of what is 'critical about critical thinking' (2007:605). They refer to the emergence of a 'skills paradigm' which has its roots in Human Capital Theory (HCT) and the development of a 'knowledge economy' which views people as a form of capital, education as an investment, and academic achievements as playing an instrumental role in enhancing economic rather than individual goals. In this Dissertation, through the lens of Human Capital Theory, I will question the assumption that the TSPC was introduced into the NI curriculum with the sole purpose of enabling all learners equally to develop autonomy and criticality in their thinking and learning as its end goal. Through a combination of conversations with teachers and analysis of key policy texts and related documents, I will attempt to untangle the messy, and often uneasy, relationship between teaching approaches that successfully integrate the TSPC in the foundation stage classroom and the wider, prevailing, policy discourses. I will also argue that these discourses and their objectives seek to effect education development and reform in NI from a HCT perspective and with particular intentions and preferred outcomes for the learner, a subject to which I now turn in the section below.

1.10 Human Capital Theory as a theoretical lens

According to Gillies (2015:1), Human Capital Theory (HCT) has become one of the most powerful underpinnings of education policy discourse world-wide, exerting considerable influence at both supranational level and within national education systems. Put simply, the theory asserts that the more, and better, education people possess, the better their financial return and the more the national economy flourishes. The theory has come under strong criticism from authors such as Ball (2008), Coffield (1999), and Marginson (2017) who hold that its logic has led to a flawed and narrow understanding of the relationship between education and work. This in turn, they argue, has led to an approach to education that is reductive and enabling of a narrowing of the curriculum to 'skills for work' rather than on the promotion of any fuller conception of what it means to be educated. For example, Marginson (2017) argues that the dominance of Human Capital Theory in the economics of education is matched by its authority in the public and policy domains and despite its failure to meet the test of 'realism' - described as 'the gap between the world imagined in the theory and the real economic and social world in which it is applied'. Instead, the theories that propagate it continue to function as a form of default explanation despite their shortcomings rather than highlighting the controversies, complexities and contextual issues that continue to have shaping effects on people's lives. In this Dissertation, I will argue that HCT, as the realisation of a neoliberal agenda, has a significant and negative effect on foundation stage teachers' ability to interpret and implement the TSPC effectively into their practice in ways that are consonant with its underpinning purpose and intentions.

1.11 Dissertation structure

This Dissertation is comprised of eight chapters. In this introductory chapter the background and rationale for the study was set out and the research questions were presented. The theoretical lenses through which the issues were explored, namely, Human Capital Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, were also presented. Chapter Two presents a summary of the historical, political and cultural context in which education reform is implemented in NI. This includes a critical

review of the various systems and processes that are unique to NI and which influence educational policy-making and implementation at every level.

In Chapter Three the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework is presented. This includes a critical review of the development and introduction of the approach to thinking skills in NI using Human Capital Theory and the associated concept of lifelong learning as a lens. Chapter Four explores the theoretical underpinnings of the policy and includes a review of the literature on the key concepts of autonomy and critical thinking. A critical evaluation of the extent to which these principles align with current policy approaches that view thinking as a 'skill' and a form of 'capital' in wider policy discourses is also presented.

Chapter Five details the methodology and research design that guided this study. In addition, the ethical implications of the study and the steps taken to mitigate associated risks are presented and discussed. The decisions that informed my chosen approach to the coding and analysis of the interview data, Template Analysis (Brooks et al, (2015), and to policy analysis (Fairclough, 1995), are also presented.

In Chapter Six, I detail the key themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews with my fourteen research participants. These recurring themes were identified from interview transcripts through the coding process and are: the NI context; the characteristics of a 'thinking school'; the overarching purpose of the TSPC, and teachers' experiences - challenges and enablers. Chapter Seven continues the presentation of the findings from the data, now in relation to outcomes from the policy analysis of three key documents. In this chapter Fairclough's three-dimensional model is applied to extracts from three key policy documents related to the TSPC. Specifically, I outline how genres, discourses and language are used in policy texts for specific purposes with implications for how the messages inherent in them are received, interpreted and implemented.

Chapter Eight synthesises and provides a critical analysis of the key findings from the study. This chapter also provides a discussion of the overarching themes and explores connections to the literature and conceptual framework provided in Chapter One and thereafter. In addition, the implications for future policy and

practice are explored and discussed with a series of recommendations proposed for each level of the system through reference to my adaption of Bronfenbrenner's system's theory: schools (microsystem); support agencies (exosystem), and policy-makers (macrosystem). The chapter concludes with my reflections on the limitations of the study and possibilities for future research in this area as well as considering the implications for my own professional practice.

Chapter 2: The Northern Ireland (NI) Context

Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing.

From 'Whatever You Say Nothing', North, Seamus Heaney (1975:32)

2.1 Introduction

Peace in Northern Ireland (NI) is widely acknowledged as a work-in-progress and whilst the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998 signalled the end of nearly thirty years of sectarian violence across the province, the legacy of 'the troubles' still persists. As the poet Seamus Heaney portrays so eloquently in the extract from his early collection 'North' cited above, trust, in government, in institutions, and in communities was so badly broken during the era of the troubles that to be seen to speak up, or speak out, was, and in many respects still is, a treacherous undertaking. This position is confirmed by recent figures published by the BBC for 2019 that reported a total of 79 casualties due to paramilitary style shootings and assaults, a stark reminder that problems remain both above and below the surface.

However, whilst division is part of NI's history it does not have to be part of its future and education has an important part to play in the healing process. In this chapter, I will set out the key aspects of the NI political and social context that have a direct influence on education across all levels of the system. First, and in order to locate the current position regarding education in NI in context, a summary of the historical development of education to date is presented. Second, the current system of education is explained with reference to academic selection and religious segregation, two significant drivers underpinning those systems. Third, NI's current status in relation to outcomes across a broad range of areas that affect people's lives, including education and its links to employment and wellbeing, is presented. Finally, the training and deployment of teachers as a key driver within the education system and its potential for perpetuating the very cycle of division that it seeks to address is explored. Here I highlight the connection between the

powerful political agendas at play and the influence that these have on how teachers interpret and implement policy reforms such as the TSPC Framework in the classroom.

2.2 The history of education in Northern Ireland

As part of the Good Friday Agreement, most central government power was devolved to a Northern Ireland Assembly, including primary legislative powers over many key areas such as health, social services, economic development, and education. The peace process in Northern Ireland remains a fragile and contentious affair arguably due to a lack of cooperation and compromise between the two main political parties which has led to the Assembly being suspended on five separate occasions since its inception. These events highlight the instability of the institutions and it is against this backdrop that decisions about the future direction of education and the funding of schools during this time have been made. In the absence of a functioning Assembly and a Minister for Education, the Programme for Government (2016-2021) has remained in draft form with its key objectives taken forward by civil servants and reported on via a series of Outcome Reports. Issues were further compounded in schools during this period by Action Short of Strike which was directed by the teaching Trade Unions due to a long standing pay dispute and concerns about teacher workload and wellbeing. This was a situation that, whilst now resolved, had a significant impact on teachers' time and ability to implement reforms in the classroom.

In a discussion piece for 'The Leader' magazine (Sept 2009) about the current system of education in Northern Ireland, Frank Cassidy, Regional Officer for the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCLN) made the following observation.

> We are a 'house divided', both into broadly denominational/catholic sectors and selective and non-selective post-primary schools. The educational arguments are difficult enough, but they are further compounded by conflicting political and social change ideologies and the direct involvement of politicians. (Cassidy, 2009:1)

This position was not arrived at overnight and is the legacy of years of political wrangling between church and state about how best to educate children in Northern Ireland. Essentially, the outcome was that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland would not be educated together, at any level, and most schools would remain denominational in ethos, character and practice, a 'house divided' that has persisted to this day, and a subject to which I now turn.

2.3 The current system of schooling in Northern Ireland

Despite the relatively small size of Northern Ireland, the system of education is complex, rooted in history, and characterised by a continued practice of religious segregation and a system of academic selection at age eleven for some students to attend a grammar school. Although the selection process is still in place, there have been a number of attempts to eradicate it on the basis that it is unfair and perpetuates inequality and disadvantage, a concern shared by teachers, employers and society more generally (Gallagher, 2000:85). In summary, Northern Ireland has operated a selective system of secondary education since 1947 and while the Labour Government had initiated a move towards non-selective arrangements between 1976 and 1979, all further debate about the future of selection was suspended when the conservative government came into power in 1979. In 1989, Northern Ireland saw the introduction of the Education Reform (NI) Order which significantly altered the context in which schools are managed and funded. It was not until the election of the New Labour government in 1997 that the issue achieved renewed focus and the then Minister for Education commissioned research to inform the debate on the future arrangements for education in NI. Two studies were published, one providing an evaluation of the two-tier system which operated in the Craigavon area (Alexander et al. 1998) and the other providing a detailed analysis of the effects of academic selection. (Gallagher and Smith, 2000). The Gallagher and Smith (2000) report had three main conclusions: first, performance on the selection tests and entry to grammar schools was mediated by social background; second, the curriculum of primary schools was disrupted as a consequence of time spent on preparation for the selection tests; and third, the selective arrangements

produced a bi-polar distribution of school performance and, in particular, a long tail of schools with low performance outcomes (Gallagher, 2000:22). After the Gallagher and Smith report was published two independent reviews of the system of education in NI were undertaken which resulted in two further reports being published, each with their own set of recommendations. Both the Burns Report (2000) and the Costello Report (2004) recommended that academic selection should be abolished and both reviews presented a number of proposals for alternative arrangements for public consultation. However, when the Northern Ireland Assembly was restored in 2007, it was clear that there was no consensus on the issue. The Minister for Education at that time announced that the Department of Education would cease issuing the tests and that academic selection would end by 2010. However, in 2009, two consortia of grammar schools established unofficial tests which continue to be administered in Northern Ireland schools today. In short, despite years of intense debate, the issue of academic selection was divided on political lines with the unionist parties in favour of retaining academic selection and the nationalist and more moderate parties opposing it. By the end of the 2000s debates about the issue had lost momentum as all of the arguments had essentially been presented. This was despite the inequity and the social challenges that such a system continues to perpetuate in Northern Ireland society.

Another distinctive feature of the school system in Northern Ireland is religious segregation. Essentially this has resulted in two separate systems running in parallel - a Catholic (maintained) system and a Protestant (controlled system). Controlled schools (nursery, primary, special, secondary and grammar schools) are under the management of the schools' Boards of Governors and the employing authority is the Education Authority (EA). Maintained schools (nursery, primary, special and secondary) are under the management of the schools' Boards of Governors and the employing authority is the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). One of the most significant developments in school provision in Northern Ireland has been the introduction of the integrated sector where students of different religions are educated together. Although formal legislation had been passed in 1978 offering schools' governing bodies a mechanism to begin the process of integration, there were few signs of change until the late 1980s. By that

time a number of integrated schools had been formed, mainly driven by parents who could demonstrate their viability and prove that they had sufficient support to the extent that integration was actively promoted and supported by government through the 1989 Education Reform (NI) Order. To date, a number of controlled schools have opted for controlled integrated status, but none of the Catholic maintained schools have chosen to do so, and it is doubtful that they will given the Catholic church's strong opposition to integration. Although currently accounting for only 7% of the overall school population in Northern Ireland, integrated schools have been a source of considerable controversy. Criticisms have centred around practical concerns in relation to the allocation of resources and funding and there is also a prevailing view that integrated schools are treated more favourably than their counterparts with public funds being disproportionately skewed in their direction. On another view, integrated schools are seen as potentially playing a significant role in bridging the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland. The central principles of integrated education are based on tolerance, recognition and mutual respect for difference, for other cultures and people. Having presented alternative models of cross-community engagement with parents and carers, the sector viewed itself as challenging the current system of religious segregation and questioning the appropriateness of having churches directly involved in the management of schools. Other parallel developments have been the increase in the number of Irish-medium schools which is a further reflection of the diversity of society in Northern Ireland. In addition, the expansion of the Shared Education Signature Programme (SESP) has maintained a clear focus on raising educational standards and promoting reconciliation through the provision of opportunities for teachers and young people from different religions and socio-economic backgrounds to collaborate and learn together.

The complex and often contentious history of educational provision in Northern Ireland does not appear to have contributed in any tangible way to more streamlined and straightforward structures or more cohesive and collaborative ways of working. The system today remains disparate, convoluted and fraught, with vested interests and political agendas still the driving force behind every aspect of decision-making in education. The overall governance structure is wide-ranging, spanning pre-school

to post-primary, with a range of arm's length and sectoral bodies involved in its management and administration. A strategic overview of the current system of education in Northern Ireland is provided in Appendix 4.

As Neil Fleming comments in his discussion piece on Educational Reform in 1920s Northern Ireland below.

> It is ironic that today in Northern Ireland the churches speak with one voice for peace and unity between the communities. The same churches refused to withdraw their grip on education in the embryonic 1920s and consequently maintained the deep-rooted divisions that have be-devilled Northern Ireland society ever since. (Fleming, 2001:9)

Fleming's reflection conveys how the deep-seated historical divisions that are embedded in Northern Ireland's communities continue to be perpetuated by powerful institutional forces to this day. These divisions are systemically built into social structures at every level and are also reflected in how teachers are trained and deployed across the school system, a subject which is explored later in this chapter. Moreover, the legacy of the conflict and the political agendas that continue to shape Northern Ireland society have real effects on outcomes for all of its citizens, as discussed in the following section.

2.4 Northern Ireland - current profile

Northern Ireland has a population of 1.8 million people accounting for nearly six per cent of the total UK land area with this figure is expected to increase significantly by almost 200,000 residents in the period 2016-2039 (NISRA census data, 2012). The data also highlights that the region has a relatively young population, with 55% of people aged 40 years and below, with the life expectancy for men 78.5 years and women 82.2 years. 89% of residents were born in Northern Ireland and 98% of the population is white with 86% identifying as either British, Irish or Northern Irish. The region is recognized as one of the most deprived areas in the UK, hence its transition status within the EU (Regional Policy of the European Union 2014-2020). In January 2019, the unemployment rate had reached record levels and with one in four people aged between sixteen and sixty-four

registered as economically inactive (neither working nor seeking work), persistently above the UK average. In 2017, 23,694 households were reported to be in housing stress and 17% of the population was diagnosed as having a possible mental health problem (NISRA, 2018). For the period 2016-2019, the region had a poverty rate of 19%, the lowest of the four countries mainly due to lower rents and the availability of low cost housing and 23% of children were living in relative poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2019). Social disadvantage has long been recognised as a key mediating variable in academic performance and has been the subject of much policy attention in Northern Ireland that aims to tackle the long and persistent tail of underachievement and improve the life chances of all young people. Whilst the region appears to perform reasonably well in international assessments such as PISA, the widening attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more affluent peers at all levels of the system remains stark (Gallagher, 2020:24).

The latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores in 2019 ranked Northern Ireland's performance in line with the OECD average in mathematics and science and slightly above the OECD average in reading. Similarly, the performance of Northern Ireland pupils at the end of primary school on the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2016), ranked Northern Ireland 6th in the world in terms of reading ability at age ten. However, on closer inspection, the PISA scores identify that approximately 15% of 15-year-olds lacking basic reading, maths and science skills irrespective of their religious background. This long tail of underachievement is lower than the OECD average but nonetheless significant in terms of the challenges that it presents for the young people of Northern Ireland and their future prospects. Interestingly, the reading skills of the highest achieving pupils in Northern Ireland have also declined over the past decade and on the PISA Socio-Economic Index (ESCS) the figures indicate that more disadvantaged pupils have significantly less chance of performing as well as their counterparts across the OECD. This view is endorsed by findings from the Pivotal Public Policy Report (2019: 17-22) which states that young people from poorer backgrounds in Northern Ireland are much less likely to achieve good qualifications, putting them at much higher risk of continuing to live in poverty as

adults. The report also found that Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of adults with only low-level qualifications of any UK region and the third lowest proportion of adults educated to degree level (Pivotal Public Policy Report, 2019:18).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is predicted that the scale of contraction in the NI economy will be much faster and larger than in previous recessions. Thus, economic recovery in the region is likely to be a long-term endeavour. In the following section a summary of curriculum reform in NI is presented to provide a background to the structure and systems that are currently in place and that have a shaping effect on student outcomes today.

2.5 Curriculum development and reform in Northern Ireland

Prior to the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order in 1989, schools had a high degree of autonomy in deciding the curriculum content for their students. The Order established a new statutory curriculum, open enrolment, the reform of governing bodies and introduced the Local Management of Schools (LMS). In addition to the core curriculum, six cross-curricular themes were introduced: Information Technology, Health Education, Economic Awareness, Health Education, Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage (CH). The introduction of EMU and CH was a bold step toward acknowledging and seeking to address issues of intolerance and respect for difference as an integral part of the curriculum.

> Through EMU and CH pupils will learn to respect and value themselves and others… to know about and understand what is shared as well as what is different about their cultures and to appreciate how conflict may be handled in non-violent ways. (NICC, 1990:17)

A revised statutory curriculum was introduced into all grant-aided schools on a phased basis from 2007 with a number of key aims in mind: to ensure that the core curriculum delivered in all schools was relevant to the needs, aspirations and career prospects of all young people and to promote a greater focus on skills and their

application as well as knowledge on how to connect learning across the curriculum. Another key aim of the revised curriculum was to reduce the level of prescription that had been implemented since 1989 and to give teachers more flexibility to exercise their professional judgement in planning and delivering lessons that were connected, relevant, enjoyable and supported pupils in achieving their full potential. There is, for all Key Stages from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 4, statutory minimum content which must be covered in schools. The revised curriculum also has a particular focus on core cross-curricular skills (CCS) of Communication (literacy); Using Mathematics (numeracy); and Using ICT as well as the development of thinking skills through a 'Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework' (TSPC), integrated across the curriculum and infused through all subjects and areas of learning. The aims and objectives of the new NI curriculum suggest a strong connection to personal development and to the development of skills which will enable students to contribute effectively to society and to building the region's economy. There is a clear commitment to the consistent development of skills which go beyond the acquisition of subject content to be achieved through the implementation of the TSPC Framework and its five key components: Managing Information; Thinking, Problem-solving and Decision-making; Being Creative; Working with Others; and Self-Management (CCEA, 2017). Through the integration of the TSPC Framework into planning and practice, the government's aim is to develop students' thinking across disciplines, transferring skills and strategies to a range of learning situations and contexts through metacognitive teaching strategies that actively engage them in self-regulated learning and 'thinking about their thinking'. McGuinness (2012:210) suggests that while the introduction of the TSPC as a statutory component of the revised curriculum is a welcome development, the issue of how to assess and evaluate how consistently and effectively all students use these strategies remains a challenge (McGuinness, 2012:211). As long as assessments remain paper-based, he asserts, teachers will continue to 'teach to the test', results of which will only serve to capture students' ability to recall information and handle data, rather than testing skills required by the world of life and work. Central to the success of this new approach is the teacher and so I turn to teacher education in Northern Ireland in the following section.

2.6 The Foundation Stage and the position of the TSPC in the NI curriculum

The Foundation Stage in the NI education system is made up of years one and two of the Primary School. This stage builds upon pre-school/home experiences and serves as a bridge between informal and formal learning in Key Stages One and Two which cover the 6-11 age range. In this critical phase of schooling, pupils learn through well-planned, challenging, play-based activities that develop their interests, curiosity and creativity, both individually and in collaboration with their peers, across a broad range of learning contexts. The statutory curriculum in the Foundation Stage in NI is structured into six key Areas of Learning (Language and Literacy; Mathematics and Numeracy; Personal Development for Mutual Understanding; Physical Development and Movement; the World Around Us; the Arts), three Cross Curricular Skills (Communication; Using Mathematics; Using ICT) and an infusion approach to the focused development of thinking skills and personal capabilities across all Areas of Learning. Religious Education is also compulsory for all primary school pupils.

As outlined in Chapter One, the TSPC Framework was not intended to be a standalone construct but was designed to be an integrated component of the revised curriculum infused throughout all areas of learning and standard subject content. However, Walsh et al (2007), in their review of the literature in relation to the development of thinking skills in the Foundation Stage in NI, assert that whilst policies may set out the rationale, aims and objectives of implementing thinking skills in the early years classroom they do not provide teachers with sufficient guidance on how to actually achieve these objectives consistently and effectively for all learners. One of the aims of Walsh et al's (2007) review was to identify key indicators of a high-quality and powerful thinking environment in the early years and to provide teachers with practical, evidence-based teaching and learning strategies to facilitate the development of such environments. Their findings suggest that in order for settings to be classified as powerful thinking environments they must demonstrate three key characteristics. Firstly, they must be physically attractive and appropriately resourced. Secondly, they must have a positive ethos in

place and, thirdly, they must have a curriculum which is play-based, practical, challenging, flexible and open-ended. Within the revised Foundation Stage curriculum, young children are viewed as being actively involved in the learning process and the collaborative nature of the learning that takes place is also highlighted. The outcomes of the Walsh 2007 review also suggested that to fully support the development of children's thinking skills a holistic approach to teaching and learning is required which pays attention to six key areas: social and emotional development; motivation and dispositions for learning; cognitive development; linguistic development; creative development, and the quality of their reflective responses. Again, the restructuring of the Foundation Stage curriculum from core subjects into broad Areas of Learning and Cross Curricular Skills creates the conditions and opportunity for such a holistic approach to the integration of thinking skills and the dispositions that support them and for the effective transfer of these skills across learning contexts.

The five TSPC strands, whilst discrete, are interrelated and the types of thinking that they activate require what Claxton and Carr (2004) refer to as 'potentiating' environments to enable and sustain them. According to those authors, such classrooms not only invite children to explore a range of thinking skills and dispositions but actively stretch and develop them. Here power is shared between the teacher and the learner enabling thinking to be fully activated using story, dialogue, and open-ended, child-directed play as a medium through which the teacher can identify teaching moments to intervene and help children to adopt a deep understanding of their subject matter through collaborative and creative experiences (Taggart et al, 2005). This approach reflects the views of Mc Guinness (1999) on the centrality of the teacher in the development of the thinking process with young children and the need for teachers to have a sound understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the TSPC Framework to provide the foundation for approaches to its effective enactment in practice. This is an approach posited by Taylor (2001) as a dialectical relationship between the children, the context, and the ways in which adults help children to learn. As the focus of my research is to understand the reasons why the TSPC has been enacted effectively in some foundation stage classrooms and not in others, a closer analysis and evaluation of

the extent to which these elements are reflected in effective classrooms and their influence on engagement with the TSPC will be explored in Chapters Six and Seven.

2.7 Teacher education in Northern Ireland - a contested space

The development of teacher education in Northern Ireland has been strongly influenced by the distinctive nature of the dual system of schooling which emerged in the 1920s. The current system of teacher education is partially denominational in character with the vast majority of students undertaking initial teacher training in institutions which reflect their religious affiliation (Montgomery; 2006:50). Despite this, the model of teacher education in Northern Ireland is broadly reflective of the systems in place in the other three UK countries (England, Wales, and Scotland); predicated on a competence framework and provided in partnership with schools.

Plans regarding the amalgamation of the five initial training institutions have surfaced intermittently since the 1980s and are invariably met with fierce opposition from the two main churches, keen to protect their own interests, ethos and distinct cultural identities. For example, in 2011, in an attempt to bring the fragmentation and duplication within the current system to an end, the then Minister for Employment and Learning announced his proposal to review the current system of initial teacher training in Northern Ireland on the grounds of its cost-effectiveness and fitness-for-purpose. The panel's report was published in June 2014 and proposed four options for a more efficient, shared and integrated system. In February 2015, the Executive debated the issue and decided that additional funding should be restored to both institutions, essentially over-ruling the Minister's decision. The Minister expressed his bitter disappointment and concern at the Executive's decision, arguing that it was not in keeping with their stated commitment to promote shared education and the inclusive future of Northern Ireland. As predicted by Montgomery.

> For the immediate future it would appear that the thornier issues, related mainly to the specific historical context of Northern Ireland with its particular

> commitment to denominational education, and the future viability of current structures, remain relatively untouched and unaddressed.
>
> (Montgomery 2006:56)

The position to this day remains unchanged and, as observed by Montgomery, only serves to perpetuate the cycle of segregation and deep divisions that persist in NI society despite the political and religious rhetoric.

In this chapter the Northern Ireland context in which educational policy and reforms have been interpreted and enacted was presented. The historical development of education in the region, as well as recent structural reforms to the current system of education, were also discussed. The current status of Northern Ireland in terms of its key outcomes, including education, was presented and the chapter concluded with an analysis of the role that the current system of initial teacher education plays in perpetuating the problematic nature of the divisions caused by religious segregation and academic selection within the current system. In the following chapter I will discuss the wider policy context in which the TSPC Framework was originally developed and explore the extent to which the discourses inherent in these policy texts have influenced both its purpose and implementation in primary education policy in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 3 - The Thinking Skills & Personal Capabilities Framework

> You don't exist just to be useful.
>
> **President Michael D. Higgins, Irish Times, May 2019**

3.1 Introduction and Background

At a speech given at the Irish Young Philosopher Award in 2019, Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland and a strong advocate for the role of history and philosophy in the core curriculum in schools, had some choice words for the promising young students who attended the event from across the island of Ireland.

> Talk of a 'knowledge society' and the demand to enable our young people to meet its needs has come to dominate our view as the ultimate aim of a secondary school education. We need to be careful.
>
> (President Michael D. Higgins, Irish Times, May 2019)

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the primary purpose of the TSPC was to combat such an instrumental approach to education. The TSPC was introduced as a statutory component of the revised NI curriculum to ensure an increased emphasis on the development of a thinking curriculum that would guard against approaches that only privilege skills for work. However, in contrast to that aim, page 1 of the introduction to Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities for Key Stages 1 & 2 guidance (CCEA, 2007) sets out its purpose in the following terms.

> At the heart of the Revised Curriculum lies an explicit emphasis on the development of pupils' skills and capabilities for lifelong learning and for operating effectively in society. By engaging pupils in active learning contexts across all areas of the curriculum, teachers can develop pupils' personal and interpersonal skills, capabilities and dispositions, and their ability to think both creatively and critically. (CCEA, 2007: intro)

Interestingly, the development of pupils' skills and capabilities for 'lifelong learning' is foregrounded in this opening section, an intention strongly related to the

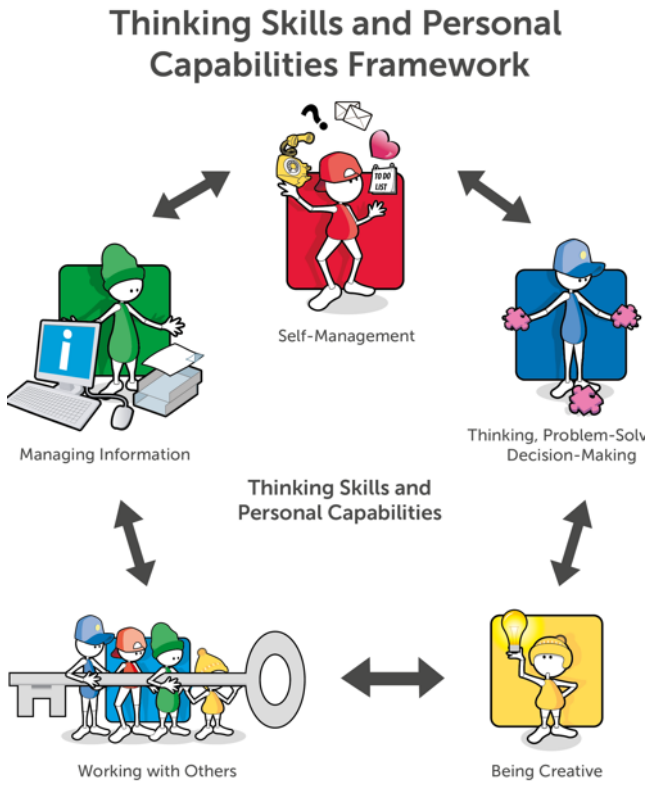
concept of the Knowledge Society. This is a subject that is explored in more detail later in the chapter but highlights the strong connection between thinking skills and economic objectives that is embedded in the approach from the outset.

This chapter sets out the background to the development of the TSPC Framework in Northern Ireland and explores the extent to which global policy discourses that drive education policy directions across the world impact on how it is interpreted and enacted by foundation stage teachers in ways that can often be in conflict with its overarching purpose and intentions. First, the global policy drivers dominant during the 1998-2006 period are presented to provide the context for the introduction of the TSPC into the revised NI curriculum in 2007. Second, a discussion of globalisation, its definitions and associated concepts, and the influential role that it has in shaping education systems world-wide in ways that have deepened the connection between schooling and the economy is undertaken. Third, an analysis of Human Capital Theory, as the primary lens through which education policy and discourse is interpreted in these 'new times' (Taylor, 1997:1), is presented and critiqued.

3.2 The TSPC Framework - the NI approach

Rather than a standalone thinking skills programme delivered outside of the standard curriculum, the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) opted for an approach which integrated thinking skills into standard subject content as part of the revised curriculum arrangements. This approach was comprised of five distinct but interrelated strands as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: The Five Components of the TSPC Framework



Curriculum Council for Examinations and Assessment, (CCEA), online resource for teachers (2008)

The above diagram illustrates the integrated nature of the TSPC's five core components and the online guidance document suggests a number of strategies that primary teachers can implement to embed the approach effectively into planning and practice across all areas of learning. The Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework document from which the foundation stage approach was developed was published in 2007 and the content is set out in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities for KS1& KS2 (CCEA, 2007)

Full Title	Author and Yr of Publication	Sections
Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities for KS1 & KS2 Guidance Document - Pgs 1-40	Curriculum Council for Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) 2007	1. Introduction Pg 1 2. The Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework Pg 2 3. Planning Pg 8 4. Infusion and Implications for Teaching Pg 9 5. Progression of TS&PC in Pupils Pg 17 6. Links with Assessment for Learning Pg 23 7. Additional Resources Pg 24 8. Bibliography Pg 25 **Appendix 1**: Classroom Strategy Briefing Sheets **Appendix 2**: From-To Progress Maps **Appendix 3**: Strand Development

A distinctive feature of the current framework is that it integrates a range of different types of thinking skills and learning dispositions with collaborative learning (working with others) and independent learning (self-management and taking responsibility). Developing thinking skills requires teachers to be proficient in designing learning experiences that will support pupils to think more skillfully and engage them in better quality thinking. Thus, thinking skills can be viewed as tools that help pupils to go beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge in order to deepen their understanding and apply ideas, generate new possibilities and make

decisions as well as to plan, monitor and evaluate their progress. Personal and interpersonal skills and capabilities underpin success in all aspects of life and developing personal capabilities means creating opportunities for pupils to experiment with ideas, take initiative, learn from mistakes, work collaboratively and become more self-directed in their learning. It is therefore important that pupils' self-esteem and self-confidence are explicitly fostered along with their ability to manage their own emotions, to interact effectively with others and to regulate and enhance their own learning. In this way, Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities links closely with Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at Key Stages 1 and 2 and Learning for Life and Work at Key Stage 3 (CCEA, 2008:3)

In sum, developing these thinking skills and capabilities is important for several reasons: they help students to focus on the processes of learning and not just the outcomes, are more likely to engage pupils in active rather than passive learning and enable pupils to go beyond the recall of information and to develop deeper understanding of subjects and topics. In addition, this approach to teaching and learning creates positive dispositions and good habits for learning and provides a new range of opportunities and criteria against which pupils can evaluate their progress in learning. Essentially, the development of thinking skills activates metacognition and enables pupils to apply a range of personal, procedural and strategic thinking moves across learning contexts that help them to learn how to learn independently.

The TSPC Framework across all phases is comprised of five discrete, yet interrelated, strands as presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Core thinking skills and personal dispositions within the TSPC Framework

Strand	Purpose	Learning Objectives/Core Skills	Key skills to be developed
1. Thinking, Problem-Solving & Decision - Making	To engage pupils in active learning so that they can go beyond the mere recall of factual information and the routine application of procedures.	• Searching for Meaning • Deepening Understanding • Coping with Challenges	Sequence, order, classify and make connections Make predictions, examine evidence, and distinguish fact from opinion Make links between cause and effect Justify methods, opinions and conclusions Generate possible solutions, try out alternative approaches, and evaluate outcomes Examine options and weigh up pros and cons Use different types of questions Make connections between learning in different contexts.

2. Being Creative	To encourage pupils' personal responses. Curiosity, exploration, experimentation and invention should be integrated into learning across the curriculum along with the development of knowledge and understanding.	• Imagining • Generating • Inventing • Taking risks for learning.	Seek out questions to explore and problems to solve Experiment with ideas and questions Make new connections between ideas/information Learn from and value other people's ideas Make ideas real by experimenting with different designs, actions, and outcomes Challenge the routine method; Value the unexpected or surprising; See opportunities in mistakes and failures Take risks for learning.
3. Managing Information	To develop pupils' abilities in an information- intensive environment.	• Asking • Accessing • Selecting • Recording • Integrating • Communicating	Ask focused questions Plan and set goals and break a task into sub-tasks Use their own and others' ideas to locate sources of information Select, classify, compare and evaluate information Select the most appropriate method for a task Use a range of methods for collating, recording and representing information Communicate with a sense of audience and purpose.

4. Working With Others	To engage pupils in collaborative activities and to make the most of their learning when working with others. To develop the confidence and willingness to join in, have the social skills required for working in face-to-face groups, show empathy, and develop a more general social perspective. To appreciate some of the aspects of group dynamics and the roles that can be assumed in groups	• Being Collaborative • Being Sensitive to Others' Feelings • Being Fair and Responsible	Listen actively and share opinions; Develop routines of turn-taking, sharing and cooperating; Give and respond to feedback; Understand how actions and words affect others; Adapt their behaviour and language to suit different people and situations; Take personal responsibility for work with others and evaluate their own contribution to the group; Be fair; Respect the views and opinions of others and reach agreements using negotiation and compromise; Suggest ways of improving their approach to working collaboratively.

5. Self-Management	To support pupils to become more self-directed, so that they can manage their learning in new situations and in the longer term. To become more knowledgeable about themselves as pupils, be more aware of their personal strengths and weaknesses, consider how they feel about learning, and identify their interests and their limitations.	• Evaluating Strengths and Weaknesses • Setting Goals and Targets • Managing and Regulating Self.	Be aware of their personal strengths, limitations and interests; Set personal targets and review them; Manage their behaviour in a range of situations; Organise and plan how to go about a task; Focus, sustain attention and persist with tasks; Review learning and some aspect that might be improved; Learn ways to manage their own time; Seek advice when necessary Compare their own approach with others' and in different contexts.

Adapted from Thinking Skills & Personal Capabilities in KS1 & KS2 (CCEA, 2007:2-4)

For many teachers in Northern Ireland this development was viewed as a welcome addition to the curriculum, particularly by those who had bemoaned the lack of a more thinking-based curriculum in the previous, more content-focused, arrangements. However, implementation was not without its challenges including, practically, questions about primary teachers' current level of knowledge and skills in the teaching of thinking and how professional learning needs in this area should be addressed. On a more philosophical level, it challenged the profession's core beliefs about the aims and purpose of education and the kinds of people that the teaching of thinking skills and personal capabilities was seeking to develop. Foundation Stage teachers' interpretations and enactment of this new approach were also shaped by wider system pressures that influence their work and the wider policy discourses that drive particular ways of seeing and doing the teaching of

thinking skills in order to meet these demands, as discussed in the following section.

3.3 Making the case for change

In October 1998, the Department of Education and Employment (DEE) in the UK commissioned a review and evaluation of research into thinking skills and related areas. The review was undertaken by Professor Carol McGuinness (Professor of Psychology, Queens University Belfast) and its overall purpose was to explore what was commonly understood by the term 'thinking skill' and its role in the learning process. The review had four overarching aims which were: to identify current approaches to the development of children's thinking and evaluate their effectiveness; consider how teachers might be able to integrate thinking skills into their teaching; explore the role of ICT in promoting a more positive approach to thinking skills; and evaluate the current research into thinking skills and how it might be translated effectively into classroom practice (McGuinness, 1999). The recommendations from the McGuinness review highlighted that this would require a fundamental shift in how teaching and learning is understood by policy makers and practitioners, both conceptually and in practice. The changes required included the need to make thinking skills more 'visible' and explicit in the curriculum, teaching thinking from a metacognitive perspective through a form of coaching, and the development of dispositions and habits of good thinking. Several of the studies examined as part of the review linked the explicit teaching of thinking skills to learning outcomes and demonstrated that the more successful approaches tended to have a strong theoretical underpinning, well-designed and contextualised materials, explicit teaching, and good teacher support. In relation to teacher development, problems with scaling up and transferring the impact of thinking skills programmes to everyday classroom practice was identified as an issue, with more successful interventions characterised by explicit models of teacher development and high levels of teacher support. In 2004, Mc Guinness was seconded to the CCEA to advise on the development of a thinking skills framework which was to be included as part of the statutory arrangements for the revised Northern Ireland curriculum which came into force in September 2007.

From 2000-2004, CCEA undertook a series of consultations with key stakeholders across the region to inform decisions about how the curriculum should be structured for the future. Factored into this process were findings emerging from a range of studies, both national and international, which were considered as part of the scope. One of the reports by CBI/Pearson (2005) presented the outcomes of a survey which reported that NI employers, teachers, and parents had stressed the need for young people to leave school with a range of cross-disciplinary skills and dispositions such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and basic computations. The responses also pointed to the need for schools to provide opportunities for students to engage in teamwork and collaboration, as well as laying the groundwork for a skilled and creative workforce to support economic growth and global competitiveness in the future. It should be noted that CBI, who commissioned the research, are industry-focused and represent the interests of the UK business sector. On this basis it could be argued that a degree of scepticism may need to be applied to the survey findings due to the possibility that the methods used to design and conduct the survey may have been influenced by this agenda. The responses also aligned with the objectives of the first Programme for Government for NI (2008-2011) which had the growing of a 'dynamic and innovative economy' as one of its key priority areas for development.

> Building a strong economy requires a healthy, well-educated and highly skilled population… our workforce needs to be better qualified and more flexible, our companies must become more innovative and invest more in research and development, and a culture of enterprise and business growth has to be encouraged. (Programme for Government for NI, 2008-2011: 4-5)

This objective, and education's role in achieving it, was part of a broader global narrative in which a deepening entanglement between schooling and the economy emerged. As highlighted by the CBI/Pearson survey, this approach required schools to cultivate particular sets of 21st century skills in their students to equip them to respond to rapidly changing markets and uncertain future contexts. Over the past decade a wealth of evidence, both nationally and internationally, has been accumulated which views education as playing a pivotal role in providing solutions

to societies' diverse and complex challenges. As stated in the OECD's recent report on the future of education (2017), from early childhood through to adult life, education and training systems are increasingly viewed as the mechanism for equipping all learners with the skills needed for the future. This role is set out in the report in the following terms.

> More than an end in itself, education is a means to deliver our vision of tomorrow, it is the foundation for promoting development, reducing economic disparities and creating a society of inclusiveness. (OECD, 2017:14)

From this perspective, education for the 21st century should be designed to mirror the conditions of the economy so that individuals can develop and transfer a specific set of thinking and learning skills across contexts. These include the ability to problem-solve, adapt, work with others, and innovate in order to support functioning in a multi-faceted and shifting social and economic matrix (Vassallo, 2014). The role of education in cultivating the relationship between the economy and schools was signaled in the outcomes from the 'Definition and Selection of Key Competencies' (DeSeCo) Project (OECD, 2005) which set out to identify the skills and competencies necessary for success in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. The report states that new times call for new ways of thinking and working and the findings signaled the need for countries and their policy makers to note that, 'in these contexts, the competencies that individuals need to meet their goals have become more complex and require more than the mastery of certain narrowly defined sets of skills' (OECD, 2005:11). The competencies identified by the project as being essential in the new global context fell into three broad categories: the ability to use language, symbols, text and information creatively and interactively; the ability to relate, cooperate, manage and resolve conflicts effectively and the ability to form and conduct life plans and personal projects and to assert rights, interests, limits and needs. The competencies highlighted also signaled the need for education systems to remain broad enough to facilitate learners' agency and freedom to make life plans of their own. However, the focus on the acquisition of 'skills for life', a theme that has been consolidated and built upon in subsequent OECD publications (2014, 2016), remains to the fore. This focus was also highlighted more recently in The Future of Education and Skills

Report 2030 (OECD, 2018) which highlights the skills and competencies that 'future-ready' students will require due to the uncertainty that accelerating globalisation brings.

> Students will need to apply their knowledge in unknown and evolving circumstances. For this, they will need a broad range of skills, including cognitive and meta-cognitive skills (e.g. critical thinking, creative thinking, learning to learn and self-regulation); social and emotional skills (e.g. empathy, self-efficacy and collaboration); and practical and physical skills (e.g. using new information and communication technology devices).
>
> (OECD, 2018:5)

The sets of skills highlighted in these global reports are strikingly similar to the content of the five strands in the TSPC. On this basis it could be argued that their inclusion in the Revised NI Curriculum arrangements back in 2007 confirmed the Department of Education's endorsement of the central role of thinking skills and dispositions in enhancing NI's economic development. This focus is also reflected in the resources produced to support the implementation of the TSPC, specifically the rationale provided for including thinking skills and personal capabilities in the revised curriculum arrangements.

> Changing patterns of employment affect young people's future careers. To manage these changes, young people need to leave education with the skills to adapt and continue their lifelong learning … A thinking classroom gives pupils opportunities to practise their skills, to reflect on their achievements, and to recognise their strengths and achievements.
>
> (CCEA, 2008)

More recently, the current Draft Programme for Government (2016-2021) confirmed government's continuing endorsement of teaching methods and classroom structures that actively facilitate the development of thinking skills and the dispositions that support them as part of its economic strategy.

Whilst a commitment to cultivate thinking and learning skills is an attractive approach that can satisfy a vision of schooling that is relational and humanistic, the focus on 'skills for life' highlighted in the documents cited above points to a major

concern. Writers such as Ball (2008, 2013) and Vassallo (2014) argue that this focus entails a narrowing of the curriculum to satisfy the requirements of the market rather than the needs and aspirations of learners. It is also argued that acquiring these skills has come to define essential features of a neoliberal consciousness, which is implicated in shaping individuals in ways that are radically individualistic, amenable to corporate interests, productive, and economically useful (Apple, 2006; Briscoe, 2012; Lakes & Carter, 2011; Vassallo, 2014). There is also a danger that endorsing these skills can be associated with the creation of self-managing and responsibilized people who can adapt to shifting situational demands for personal gain, corporate sustainability, efficiency, and productivity. Responsibilization refers to the process whereby people are held individually responsible for functions and risks that were previously the responsibility of the state with causes of failure seen as being located within the individual. Grey (1997:719) contends that the process of responsibilization is about rendering people 'trustworthy by virtue of their beliefs and behaviours'. This position was cautioned against by Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland, in his address to the Young Philosophers of Ireland Convention in the epigraph to this chapter. In his address, President Higgins speaks of 'policy-lobbyists' who have perhaps 'unthinkingly or unknowingly' adopted a narrow, utilitarian view of education which leads to a great loss of the capacity 'to critically evaluate, question, and challenge' and an inability to explore 'the riches that lie in the interstices between subjects*'* (The Irish Times, May 2019).

From this perspective, the development of thinking skills cannot be viewed as unequivocally empowering and aligned with more autonomous and democratic purposes of schooling. The good thinker and learner becomes the good worker for the 21st century and the question then becomes more about the kinds of teachers needed to create these future-ready students and what kinds of systems and structures are needed to shape classrooms to cultivate these kinds of people, a subject to which I now turn.

3.4 Thinking classrooms for new times - the why and the how

Giddens, as far back as 1996, contended that globalisation is not just an 'out there' phenomenon but one that leads to changes in the texture of everyday life for everyone (1996: 367). Education, he argued, was particularly implicated in the discourses and processes of globalisation through reforms that impact the very texture of everyday life. He contends that these processes change the way people view themselves, how they experience the world, their consciousness, and how they speak about themselves and others. Vassallo (2014:148) also maintains that the appropriation of such processes into education ensures that schools continue to be transformed to reflect neoliberal values, purposes, and commitments. He also argues that a product of this transformation is the deep entanglement between schooling and the economy which sees the purpose of schooling as the accumulation of human capital. If education for the 21st century is required to mirror these changes so that individuals can develop and transfer a specific set of thinking and learning skills for life, then it follows that these skills need to be clearly defined and teachers and schools need to reformulate their approaches to teaching and learning to facilitate them in specific ways. This shift in focus was facilitated in Northern Ireland by the development and introduction of the TSPC Framework as a formal requirement of the revised curriculum, a step which secured its position and profile in policy and in practice. According to Marzano & Heflebower (2012:86) what is now cast as being more didactic teaching methods are no longer deemed fit for purpose and must be replaced by more learner-centred approaches that develop both cognitive (thinking) and conative (relational) skills. In these classrooms teachers facilitate the learning and students are given choice, control, and opportunities for self-regulated learning so that they can continuously evaluate themselves in ways that support strategic aims and add to personal learning goals. To achieve this aim, Marzano and Heflebower (2012:102) suggest that teachers must work with students to produce 'inner dialogues' that enhance attention, persistence, and goal attainment. Teaching strategies are now 'problem-oriented' or 'problem-based', as explained by Barell (2010).

> Problem-based learning goes well beyond short term instructional instances or simple questions. It encompasses a re-thinking of the entire curriculum so that teachers design whole units around complex 'ill-structured' problematic scenarios… realistic, authentic problems that are so complex, messy and intriguing that they do not lend themselves to a right or wrong answer.
>
> (Barell, 2010:178)

This strategy is described in similar terms by Halpern (1998:452) as being about 'understanding how cause is determined, recognising and critically evaluating assumptions and giving reasons to support a conclusion'. The modern economy is believed to require such skills and individuals must be flexible, strategic, problem solvers who must be self- aware and self-regulating if they are to succeed and thrive. However, the comments by Halpern and Barell are indicative of a commonly held assumption that the majority of teachers do not already teach their students in ways that engage them in skillful thinking and problem-based learning. If this is so then the question must surely be why this is the case and whether or not teachers have been equipped with the skills and knowledge to do so if it is deemed to be such an important aspect of their practice. A further assumption is that the introduction of specific programmes and frameworks into the curriculum to facilitate this will necessarily guarantee that student's thinking will take place more effectively. Also, as Vassallo (2014:153) points out, the current policy emphases on projects, autonomy, choice, self-regulated learning, and self-evaluation are not neutral but are organised around a commitment to cultivate thinking and learning skills for 21st century economic rather than social contexts. This view is reinforced by Wolters' (2010) review of the conceptual commonalities between 21st century skills and self-regulated learning skills. He concluded that the heightened emphases on self-direction, acquisition of personal goals, adaptation, and interpersonal management inherent in the policy rhetoric on thinking skills effectively bridge these discourses. The question then for teachers becomes one of purpose. By teaching thinking skills and dispositions using specific programmes and frameworks what are we really seeking to achieve and what kinds of people do we want to create? I explored this aspect in the section below.

3.5 Implementing the TSPC - self-regulated learners or neoliberal subjects?

According to Apple (2006), neoliberalism only works if individuals are constituted in neoliberal ways and he argues that schools play a major role in developing particular versions of selfhood that either align with or challenge this conception. I suggest that this position still pertains today. Neoliberal logic requires a type of self that is organised around neoliberal assumptions and values and thinking skills can also be associated with this logic. As discussed in the sections above, both self-regulated learning and 21st century skills align closely with the characteristics and conditions of neoliberal consciousness and the assumptions that underpin it. This association is problematic because it privileges versions of self that are highly individualised, responsibilized and committed to self-improvement to enhance personal gain rather than furthering civic or democratic values. The characteristics of the 'neoliberal self' are described by Vassallo (2014:154) in the following terms:

1. The formulation of self as human capital;
2. The treatment of life as a project to be efficiently and productively managed;
3. The constant drive for improvement;
4. The pursuit of happiness, success, and personal fulfilment;
5. The consumption of material and immaterial products for personal goal attainment;
6. Value for the maximisation of choice; and,
7. The instrumental use of others to achieve goals.

As posited by Vassallo (2014).

> Although risk-taking, self-regulation, goal-setting, social interactions, flexibility, and responsibility all seem like attractive thinking and learning skills, it is difficult to ignore the neoliberal undertones to this discourse.
> (Vassallo, 2014:156)

According to Gillies (2015:1), neoliberal thinking and its realisation through Human Capital Theory has become one of the most powerful underpinnings of education policy discourse world-wide, exerting considerable influence at both

supranational level and within national education systems. Put simply, the theory asserts that the more, and better, education people possess, the better their financial return and the more the national economy flourishes (Becker, 1995). In this Dissertation I take the position that the TSPC is also influenced by these discourses with adverse implications for teachers and learners. From a neoliberal perspective, the treatment of people as capital revolves around the development of workforce skills that enhance the flexibility of the employment market and its ability to navigate fluctuating economic demands more readily. Thinking skills are also a form of capital, and the production of workers who can adapt to shifting contextual demands and self-regulate their learning in line with these changes is fundamental to the maintenance of human capital production through its connection to the knowledge economy. Ball (2011) describes the knowledge economy as an elusive concept derived from the idea that knowledge and education can be treated as a business product. This perspective is critiqued below.

3.6 Human Capital Theory and the Knowledge Economy

Lightfoot-Rueda and Peach (2015), hold that the central concept of human capital theory can be reduced to a unifying trope: education is an 'investment' that should be judged on the same basis as other financial investments, through the financial lens of profit and loss. They also argue that the language of human capital has come to dominate public discourse in education to the extent that it has become almost invisible (Lightfoot-Rueda and Peach, 2015:3). As Rizvi and Lingard, writing on the subject as far back as 2000, explain.

> An almost universal shift from social democratic to neoliberal orientations in thinking about educational purposes and governance has resulted in policies of corporatisation, privatisation and commercialisation on the one hand, and on a greater demand for accountability on the other … at the same time, educational purposes have been re-defined in terms of a narrower set of concerns about human capital development, and the role education must play to meet the needs of the global economy and to ensure the competitiveness of the national economy. (Ritzvi and Lingard, 2000:10)

From this perspective, education is no longer viewed as a public good, but is seen as an investment by individuals in themselves, a shoring up of skills and competencies to enhance their position in the employability stakes. As posited by Luke (1997).

> At HCT's heart lies the possibility of 'perfecting the human' as individuals seek to optimise his or her own 'profit' by accumulating those behaviours and skills that make them more desirable on the market. (Luke, 1997:10)

The growth of the concept of the Knowledge Economy in the last twenty years has elevated HCT's position and influence in education policymaking and discourse to new heights due to the connections that it makes between education, training, and economic development. Gillies (2015:1) argues that HCT promotes state education systems 'as subservient to the vaunted knowledge economy' and as the theory places a high premium on educational achievement as the means by which individuals secure competitive advantage, education is actively promoted as playing a pivotal role in enhancing economic growth and prosperity. Whilst HCT has thrust education into the economic and political spotlight, it is cast in one particular sense only, and its continued importance relies almost entirely on its capacity to continue to be seen as economically vital (Gillies, 2015:3).

HCT is, of course, and as already suggested, not without its critics who express concern at education being viewed in such narrow, economic, terms. From this perspective, it is argued that the broader aims of education are diminished with individuals reduced to human capital, viewed merely as economic potential to be exploited, and omitting much of what it means to be a person. Ball (2008, 2014), Coffield (2006), and Reay (2017) also argue that the model takes little cognisance of individual circumstances and the structural barriers that people face in converting opportunities into the kinds of advantage required for success in this challenging and increasingly competitive context. Inequalities in terms of outcomes are attributed to individuals' lack of effort and poor choices rather than the impact of the social, political, and economic systems that surround them. In the HCT model learning holds no intrinsic value beyond providing individual return on investment and contributing to economic stability for the region. Also, the view that economic issues can be addressed by refocusing the education system poses a number of

challenges for the sector (Gillies, 2015:4). For example, in times of financial austerity where resources are severely limited, disciplines with no clear connection to economic activity such as the arts, humanities, and social sciences are placed in jeopardy because they are not perceived as adding value to the economy. This fear has been confirmed over the past twenty years, as changes to the content and structure of the UK curriculum exposes a shift in emphasis from disciplinary knowledge to transferable skills and a narrowing of the curriculum to skills for work rather than on the promotion of any fuller conception of what it means to be educated. Moreover, in casting teachers as key figures with a pivotal role in developing the human capital necessary for economic growth, the model has driven the major focus of the OECD and others on 'teacher quality' and the development of an effective and high-performing teacher workforce. Many argue that this has led to a widespread loss of morale and motivation across the profession as the curriculum becomes increasingly more prescribed in an effort to ensure that the skills and competencies considered important for work are focused on and developed as a priority.

It is clear from even a cursory glance at government policy across the world that education has a highly elevated status, and is now seen as a crucial factor in ensuring economic productivity and competition in the context of informational capitalism. Education policy is now increasingly thought of and made at local level in the context of the pressures and requirements of globalisation, and the development and enactment of the TSPC in the context of the NI curriculum has not escaped its impact, a subject to which I now turn in the following section.

3.7 Policy-making in education

Ball (2008), in his discussion on the risks associated with the transfer of global policy into local contexts over a decade ago, described the process in the following terms.

> The process is inevitably one of bricolage: of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere, drawing upon and amending tried and tested

> approaches from local contexts … and flailing around for anything at all that looks as if it might work. (Ball, 2008:125)

This observation remains relevant today as common conceptions of policy-making as a straightforward linear process remain limited. For example, such a conception belies the dynamic, and often contentious nature of the process, which is shaped by multiple and competing factors which must be taken into account during its development. These include the conflicting views among those who make and enact policy as to what the important policy issues really are; the multiple, and often contradictory, interpretations of these issues; and the complexities involved in putting policy descriptions designed to address them into practice on the ground. Bleiklie (2000), also highlighted this complexity when he stated that, 'policy is rarely the mechanical application of means in order to realise given ends' (2000:54), a view shared by Ball in his depiction of policy as a multifaceted and dynamic process.

> Policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always incomplete insofar as they relate to or map on to, the 'wild profusion' of local practice. (Ball, 1994:10)

As highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, the authors of the TSPC drew upon a number of sources, including those that privileged global discourses that focused on the importance of thinking skills as a cornerstone of social and economic development. These were also used as the basis on which its inclusion in the revised NI curriculum was justified. Using Ball's analogy, it could be argued that the TSPC itself was developed through a process of 'bricolage', which combined conventional theories on thinking and models of learning with more contemporary, global, policy trends that collocate thinking with skills in discourses of effectiveness, capital acquisition, and enterprise. Trowler (2003:98) notes that often policy documents are laden with multiple agendas, attitudes, values and sets of meaning which adds a further layer of complexity to the interpretive process. According to both Ball and Trowler, the process of encoding policy is always a complex one, fraught with tensions and developed through a process of negotiation, compromise, meaning-making, and the exercise of power. It is in a similarly

complex and contested space that foundation stage teachers in Northern Ireland interpret and enact the TSPC. As Trowler suggests, policy-making in education is not a straightforward process but is replete with agendas and discourses that shape teachers' sense-making and present challenges to existing ways of seeing, being, and doing in practice, a subject that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

This view of policy as discourse aligns with Ball's (2008) contention that collections of related policies exercise power through a production of truth and knowledge that dictates what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where, and with what authority. Thus, certain possibilities for thinking about a subject are constructed in particular ways in policy texts, and other combinations are displaced or excluded. This view aligns with that of Fairclough (1998, 2003, 2015) who contends that policy is understood not just as a textual intervention but as a form of social practice, specifically a practice of power. On this view, policy texts are seen as 'governing' texts, with the purpose of binding people to their mandates through processes that order and reorder behaviour (Levinson et al, 2009:767). Thus, the process of interpreting policy involves looking beyond the text. The reader must also be able to analyse the practices that produce, embed, extend, contextualise, and, in some cases, transform it, to illuminate the ways in which it reproduces existing structures of power, position, and inequity. A more extensive discussion of this critical approach to policy analysis and its application to policy texts and documents that relate to education in NI, and the TSPC Framework more specifically, is presented in Chapter Seven but below I discuss the influence of the concept of the knowledge economy, and its effects on policy-making in education.

3.8 Policy-making in the Knowledge Economy

Education, like many areas of social policy, has become subject to unprecedented levels of policy overload (Coffield, 2009). The concept of the Knowledge Economy derives from the idea that knowledge can be treated as a commodity, education and skills can be traded as 'human capital', and innovation can be marketed for a high value return. Critics of the concept and its relationship to educational policy

making argue that it constructs a narrow and instrumental approach to education, and intellectual culture in general. It is also argued that a conception of education as an 'economy' reinforces inequalities and economic and social polarisation between countries, many of whom are unable to participate in a knowledge economy due to lack of basic funding and resources. This point is reinforced by the conclusions drawn from the OECD (2014:29) study into trends in income inequality and its impact on economic growth. The paper argues that the main mechanism through which inequalities affect growth, is by undermining opportunities for children from poor socio-economic backgrounds, lowering social mobility, and hampering skills development. Ball (2008), argues that concepts such as the knowledge economy and learning society are potent policy drivers in the global education reform agenda, symbolising and serving the increasing colonisation of education policy by economic imperatives and the approaches to reform that they engender in practice (2008:123). These approaches are described by Ball (2003:216) as 'the new technologies of reform' due to the transformative role that they play in aligning public sector organisations with the methods, culture, and ethical system of the private sector. These technologies, and their effects on policy interpretation and practice in schools, are explored further in the following section on the premise that they continue to influence policy-making in education in important, and often negative, ways.

3.9 The new technologies of reform: performativity, managerialism & the market

According to Ball (2003, 2008, 2015) a number of influences run through the reform consensus in education. Neoliberalism is viewed as the primary theoretical model underpinning policy-making in education at the global level. This approach is described by Yeatman (1994:111) as 'a principle of governance which establishes strictly functional relations between a state and its inside and outside environments'. These approaches are driven by ideologies of the market and the insertion of management theory into public sector institutions which require new forms of governance and control. Managing in this environment now involves a combination of devolution, targets, and incentives to bring about institutional change based on

concepts such as 'the self-managing school' and school improvement agendas in place of more bureaucratic and professional technologies of the past. The new culture of performativity is described by Ball as a steering mechanism, 'a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons, and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change' (Ball, 2003:216).

In his later writing, Ball contends that these policy technologies are now generic in that they are part of a global convergence in reform strategies deployed across the public sector as a whole, as he explains below.

> They interrelate and complement each other, work on individual practitioner's work groups and with organisations to reconstitute social relations, forms of value, sense of purpose, and notions of best practice and excellence.
>
> (Ball, 2011:49)

A key aspect of this reform movement in education, and perhaps one of the most damaging, is that it not only engages in debates about the kinds of knowledge and skills that count in education, but that it also involves making judgements about people, and who is deemed valuable and worthy of being educated. Through these new constructions and their rationales particular social goals and human qualities are privileged. Within these constructions little cognisance is given to the impact of social disadvantage and the structural barriers faced by many students in their efforts to access an education on the same terms as their more affluent peers. As highlighted earlier by Giddens (2015), the processes of globalisation impact the very texture of everyday life, they change the way people view themselves, how they experience the world, their consciousness, and how they speak about themselves and others. In 2003, Ball argued that these technologies of education reform were not simply vehicles for creating structural change at an organisational level, but were also mechanisms for reforming teachers, for changing what it means to be a teacher, a position that remains relevant today.

In his early critique of policies of lifelong learning and its future directions, Ball contended that if policies are to deliver on their stated ambition, 'lifelong learning needs to start at 3 and not at 16' (1999:33). The clear implication here is that from

the moment that children enter school, the learning environment that they find themselves in is instrumental in shaping and influencing not only what they learn, but their views and beliefs about themselves as learners and their perceptions of their place in the world. As in the field of early years education, the concept of lifelong learning is also a contested space with concerns raised by practitioners and researchers about its purpose, motivations, and values-base. Policy-making in both of these interrelated areas, the discourses that they privilege and their effects, impact on foundation stage teachers' interpretation of the TSPC and the choices that they make about how best to implement it in the 21st century classroom.

As one of the primary aims of this study is to understand the factors that both enable and constrain foundation stage teachers' ability to integrate the TSPC into their practice, it is important to consider how these technologies of reform exert power and influence in this context today. This includes understanding both the wider system pressures that impact on this critical phase of education as well as the range of policy discourses and debates from which teachers' interpretations and practice choices emerge.

3.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, the background to the development of the TSPC Framework in Northern Ireland was presented and critiqued from the perspective of Human Capital Theory, as the primary lens through which education policy and discourse is interpreted in these 'new times' (Taylor, 1997:1). The ways in which these global policy discourses that drive education policy directions have influenced its development and implementation by foundation stage teachers in the classroom was also explored. The chapter concluded with a discussion of globalisation, its definitions and associated concepts, and the influential role that it has in shaping policy-making in education worldwide and its effects.

In the following chapter, two foundational concepts on which the TSPC is based, namely autonomy and critical thinking, will be explored from a range of perspectives. These concepts have been selected as a focus due to the fundamental role that theorists such as Dearden (1975) and Papastephanou (2007) argue they

need to play in shaping the diverse range of thinking skills and dispositions that education systems need to provide for all students beyond those required for 21st century working life alone. In this chapter I have presented a wide range of international reports that highlighted the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for success in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, for example, the DeSeCo report (2005), as well as those that identify the kinds of dispositions that young people need in order to be able to navigate their way effectively in often unknown and evolving circumstances (OECD, 2015, 2017, 2018). At the forefront of these debates has been the voice of employers and industry-facing institutions such as CBI/Pearson who have an increasingly influential effect on both the content and design of education systems in global and national contexts. By highlighting the deficits in the young people that they interviewed and then articulating the kinds of skills and dispositions that they deem to be desirable in the workplace, both now and in the future, the OECD and local industry-facing institutions such as the CBI exert significant influence and control on education policy-making. What all of these reports emphasise is that from early childhood through to adult life, education and training systems are increasingly to be viewed as the mechanism for equipping learners with particular 21st century skills. Moreover, what also presents as a common theme through most of the debates and discourses on the importance of thinking skills and dispositions in these reports is the need for these to be developed in spaces that are flexible and fit for purpose, that are inclusive, that promote autonomy and provide opportunities for learners to work independently, and to collaborate and network when the task requires it. As Papastephanou (2007) argues, such environments are the engine-rooms that sharpen learners' critical proneness and facilitate the kind of dialogue and problem-based approaches to thinking that generate innovative and creative solutions to the challenges of the day, and those yet to come. Thus, the purpose of the following analysis is to examine how both autonomy and critical thinking as foundational concepts are understood and positioned in current policy discourses on thinking skills from which the development of the Northern Ireland TSPC Framework emerged. I argue that these understandings, and the discourses that shape them, have particular effects on teachers' ways of 'seeing and doing' thinking with their students in the foundation stage classroom.

Chapter 4: The Thinking Skills & Personal Capabilities Framework - Underpinning Theories

> Often it's like a leap of faith, you don't really know why you're doing it - it feels right so you do it anyway – but that really needs to change.
>
> **Participant 1C, primary one teacher, 25 yrs of experience**

4.1 Introduction

The comment above was made by a foundation stage teacher during my interview with them and relates to their experience of integrating the TSPC into their classroom practice. From their perspective, although the approach works well in practice, there is an insufficient focus on the underpinning theories and principles on which the TSPC is based in professional learning programmes designed to enhance teachers' knowledge and skills in this area. Linked to this discussion, in this chapter, the outcomes from a review of the literature on early child development with a specific focus on findings from cognitive science on how the brain develops at this critical stage is presented. The discussion includes an analysis of the learning theories and teaching approaches viewed as being beneficial to the development of young children's cognitive development and thinking skills and the actions that foundation stage teachers can implement in practice to enhance these skills to best effect. Following this, the role of teacher agency in the interpretation of policy reforms into practice is considered using Spillane et al's (2002) sense-making theory as a guiding framework. In the remainder of the chapter the founding principles of personal autonomy and critical thinking on which the TSPC Framework is based are then explored from a range of theoretical perspectives. The discussion will also examine the extent to which particular conceptions of thinking as a skill and a form of 'investment' and 'capital' promoted in wider policy discourses is reflected in Northern Ireland's TSPC approach. The analysis will consider how the different kinds of thinking promoted by the TSPC and their purpose align with these founding theories that require that all pupils

should be taught to think in ways that enhance their freedom to question and develop more independent and critical approaches to thinking, learning, and life.

4.2. Cognitive development from birth to seven years

As posited by Scoffham (2003:49), 'the brain is the seat of our consciousness and the prime organ of learning' with research carried out over the past three decades having much to offer to early years educators in the foundation stage of the Primary School. For example, Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (1998) posits that the brain is divided into both working memory and long-term memory, both of which perform different functions with important implications for teaching and learning in the foundation stage of the Primary School. In addition to this, cognitive psychologists such as Rosenshine (2012), Willingham (2012) and Firth (2018) highlight the importance of early years teachers' understanding and application of concepts relating to memory, motivation and attention in the thinking process during this critical period of schooling. Key areas of interest for these early years teachers also concern how the brain changes with age, the nature of learning, and the importance of early childhood experiences. The outcomes of this body of research suggest that there are grounds for questioning the training that early years teachers receive, the balance of content in the early years of the primary school curriculum, and the way that the education system for young children is currently organised and delivered (Nutbrown, 2005, 2012; Walsh, 2007, 2009; Sproule, 2019).

Theories about aspects of children's cognitive development differ in the relative importance that they attach to maturation and innate factors on the one hand, and to experience and learning on the other hand, as suggested by researchers such as Oates and Grayson (2006). For example, whilst Fodor (1993) argued from a nativist perspective that cognitive constructs are innately specified and develop as the child matures, researchers such as Nutbrown (2005) and Karmiloff-Smith (1992) argued from a more constructivist perspective that the development of cognitive structures are triggered by children's interactions with the richness and complexity of their immediate environment.

Early research conducted by MacLean (1995) argued that each part of the brain has a different agenda and behaves in its own way and that it is the interplay between different areas of the brain that accounts for some of the complexities and contradictions of human behaviour. MacLean suggested that the brain can be viewed as three separate areas. The brain stem, which is the oldest part of the brain, is responsible for survival, motor functions and role behaviour; the mid-brain or limbic system which generates our emotions and is also responsible for our eating and sleeping cycles, sexuality and is also the site for our long-term memory; and, the upper brain or neo-cortex which is the 'thinking' part of the brain. The neo-cortex, according to MacLean, is divided into four lobes that deal with vision, movement, sound and speech, and problem-solving and planning. Later findings from cognitive and behavioural psychology modified MaLean's thinking (Goleman, 1996; Carter 1999; Sweller 1998, 2019; Jahangir, 2020) and posited, for example, that the limbic system, one of the most complicated structures in the brain, plays a much bigger part in functions such as memory, spatial navigation, emotional intelligence and information processing than was previously thought. Similarly, research undertaken over the past three decades into how the brain processes information and how this impacts on learning has proliferated. For example, Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (1988, 1998, 2019) holds that human memory can be divided into working memory and long-term memory. Information is stored in the long-term memory in the form of schemas, defined as clusters of interrelated ideas in which new knowledge is assimilated, and processing new information results in 'cognitive load' on working memory which can affect learning outcomes. The theory posits that as working memory can only manage a certain amount of information at one time, instructional methods should avoid overloading it with additional activities that do not directly contribute to learning. Thus, working memory and long-term memory, although interrelated, perform distinctive functions. According to Firth (2018), working memory abilities vary between individuals and improve throughout childhood and its development is particularly critical at a young age as it sets up a young learner for thinking tasks throughout the rest of their education. Shimamura (2011), in his research on motivation, also

argues that more is now known about the influence of motivation and engagement in cognitive development, particularly for young children. From his perspective, it is vitally important that all early years teachers understand and engage with theory on, for example, attention and recognition, working and long term memory and executive processes such as metacognition and problem-solving, and skillfully apply this knowledge in their practice. However, it is also acknowledged that MacLean's initial ideas continue to be helpful because they provide a functional metaphor for the mechanism of the brain and how it develops and evolves over time, a process which is discussed in more detail below.

4.3. Key stages of brain development from birth to seven years

We now know that there are critical or sensitive periods for the development of particular functions of the brain. At these times the brain is most receptive to sensory input and best able to develop more advanced neural systems. Most of these critical periods are thought to be over or waning by the age of seven in aspects of brain development such as language, peer social skills, habitual ways of responding to stimuli, and emotional control (Geake, 2004:69). In the prenatal development of the brain, changes can be summarised in terms of the three stages that take place in the development of neurons, a process explained by Oates and Grayson (2006) below.

> Neurons are nerve cells that receive information and pass it on to other nerve cells in the form of electrochemical impulses and are the basic building blocks of the brain. First, neutrons are born through the process of cell division. Second, they migrate from the place of their birth to their final locations in the brain. Third, they differentiate, or take up their final form. (Oates and Grayson, 2006:120)

In line with the constructivist views of researchers such as Nutbrown (2005), Siraj-Blatchford (2002, 2004) and Karmiloff-Smith (1992), a prolonged period of postnatal development in human beings maximises the possibilities for interaction between the young developing brain and the rich environment in which the infant child grows from birth to two years of age. During the postnatal period from birth to two there is also a corresponding increase in the number of synapses, defined as

small gaps at the end of a neuron that allow a signal to pass from one neuron to the next, which indicates that the number of neural connections in the brain is rapidly increasing and this also occurs particularly between the ages of two and seven.

Plasticity, described by Oates and Grayson (2006:127) as 'an inherent property of the brain', is also an important property of the developing brain. At birth, and in the early years of life, the brain appears to be highly adaptable or 'plastic' and this state of plasticity represents the state of yet not having achieved specialisation at some level, defined as the process through which brain cells and tissue acquire a specific structure and functioning as development progresses. Geake (2004) argues that one of the advantages of this plasticity is that young children's brains can be moulded in accordance with their environment and circumstances. He also argues that what matters is not simply the quality of stimulation that a young child receives at home and in school, but that feedback is also essential in confirming a child's early attempts to make sense of an experience and teachers and carers can reinforce these first, weaker, connections in a new neural network. Conversely, a lack of attention and feedback from an adult can leave the child feeling insecure and uncertain about their responses and the newly formed links remain tentative and may even be undermined (Geake, 2004:67). In addition, research undertaken by Giedd et al (1999) strongly suggests that a second period of neural growth takes place between the ages of nine and adolescence with peaks generally occurring a year earlier in girls than boys suggesting that development in humans also varies between areas of the brain.

Sriram (2020) argues that this first critical period of brain development, that begins around age two and concludes around age seven, provides a prime opportunity to lay the foundation for a holistic education for children as early childhood experiences have a crucial role to play in promoting neural development and setting the pattern for later life. As these connections between brain cells are where learning occurs, rapid increases in the number of synapses enable the brain to learn faster at this time than at any other time of life. Hence children's early experiences during this critical phase of education have lasting effects on their future

development. Sriram (2020:2), also identifies four ways in which these neural connections can be maximized by adults during this critical period which include: encouraging a love of learning, focusing on breadth instead of depth, paying attention to emotional intelligence, and not treating young children's education as merely a precursor to more formal learning.

In conclusion, while we appear to be still in the early days of applying research findings from neuroscience to education and while there is a degree of contestation about such findings, the evidence to date suggests practices in early years education that are particularly beneficial to learners. These include approaches to teaching and learning that emphasise depth over breadth through a contextualised, spiral, curriculum which strengthens connections across different areas of the brain. In addition, the research suggests that teachers need to acknowledge and understand individual differences in brain development through a more child-centred approach to the planning and delivery of learning experiences and the implementation of formative approaches to assessment and evaluation. According to Geake (2004: 72), the key concept for early years educators to understand is cerebral inter-connectedness, that is, 'that thinking requires the synchronous interconnected parallel processing of many functional modules throughout the brain, most of which is unconscious'. In other words, from an educational point of view, it is important to acknowledge that learning is not a single activity but takes a variety of forms. This notion was developed further by Gardner (1993) in his theory of multiple intelligences which highlighted the need for teachers to recognise different modes such as musical, spatial, and emotional intelligence so that each one can be understood and developed to its full potential. These insights into how early years teachers should structure their practice to maximise the development of thinking skills in young children aligns with the views of McGuinness and colleagues (1999, 2004, 2014) expressed during the development of the TSPC and as it evolved. McGuinness et al, also contended that the role of the teacher is central to cognitive development and that if teachers are to develop long-term changes in learners, supporting them to pay attention and retain information, to develop their understanding and skills and their effective transfer across contexts, then teachers need to engage with the theory and consistently and skillfully apply it. On this

point, Rosenshine (2012) and Willingham (2017) add that, as well as understanding the theory of cognition, teachers must be provided with training and support that equips them with strategies that provide cognitive support to young learners such as modelling, scaffolding and guided practice as they move along the thinking skills continuum from novice to expert. This suggests that teachers must acquire a thorough and comprehensive grasp of cognitive theory as well as an understanding of how this connects to learning theories that will support its development and an appreciation of how these are then translated into practice, a subject to which I now turn.

4.4 Learning theories and approaches that support cognitive development in the early years

According to McGuinness (2004), when teachers begin the process of implementing a thinking curriculum in their classrooms it is essential for them to understand what thinking skills actually are and the kinds of environments that support children to activate and develop them successfully. As discussed in the sections above, this includes acquiring a firm foundation in relevant cognitive theory, its relationship with learning theory and how this translates into teaching and learning in the early years.

There are many contrasting theories about both how young children develop cognitively and the teaching and learning approaches that support the development of their thinking skills effectively. For example, Piaget (1951) held a view of cognition and knowledge as something that emerges from self-initiated discovery and that is actively constructed by individual learners based on their existing cognitive structures. Piaget proposed that children go through four major stages of cognitive development at different ages (sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operational, formal operational) and that they are unable to effectively process and learn information which is beyond their current state of readiness. The theory is characterised in practice by developmentally appropriate teaching approaches, the suggestion being that if teachers know and understand the sequence of stages in the theory, and when they occur, they can plan their lesson content in line with how

young children will and be able to learn. Therefore, for stage-theorists like Piaget, the development of children's thinking is relative to their stage of cognitive development and cannot move beyond that. Despite data from the past three decades that suggests that development is more continuous than stage-like, Piaget's four stage theory of cognitive development remains one of the most pervasive in educational thought and practice today with its presence felt in early years classrooms where learning content is curated to match the age and stage of the children.

In contrast, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning is based on the assumption that culture and social interaction play a major role in the development of young children's cognition and he believed strongly that community plays a central role in meaning-making and the co-construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Fisher (2005:103), building on Vygotsky's ideas, suggests that thinking is the primary process of human life for there is no doing without thinking. This approach highlights the need to support children at an early stage to help them think and make sense of the world through teaching and learning processes that lead a child's cognitive development rather than following it. Vygotsky places considerable emphasis on emergent cognitive functions conceptualised through the framework of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This is an important concept that relates to the difference between the learning that a child can achieve independently and what they can achieve with carefully gauged guidance and support from a more knowledgeable other such as a peer or teacher. The space between both activities delineates the area where the child's cognitive potential is located and where sensitive and skilled interactions will scaffold the learner and have the most effect. The concept of scaffolding was first introduced by Bruner (1978) as described below and is very similar to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development concept.

> The steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some task so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill they are in the process of acquiring (Bruner, 1978:19).

Bruner also opposed Piaget's notion of cognitive readiness and argued that schools have wasted a great deal of time by delaying the teaching of complex areas of

thinking and learning because they are deemed as being too difficult as summed-up below.

> We begin with the hypothesis that that any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form, to any child, at any stage of development (Bruner, 1960:33).

Both Bruner and Vygotsky emphasise the importance of a young child's social environment as a key factor in cognitive development and both attach great importance to language development as a means of symbolising the world and supporting self-regulation and problem-solving. Vygotsky (1986) considered that, for a child under two years of age, thought was non-verbal but, by the age of two, language and thought become connected and from that point on, intellectual development would be determined by language. For Vygotsky (1986) language skills and new concepts develop as a child speaks, listens and plays in social situations. In line with this view, Palmer and Doyle (2004) explain that the structures of a child's thought processes emerge from the speech structures which they have acquired. Therefore, a young child's linguistic skills affect the development of their thinking processes (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002, 2004; Neuman & Wright, 2014; Nutbrown, 2012) and a number of studies also highlight the strong link between children's vocabulary and their economic background (Quigley, 2018; Fernauld et al, 2013; Snow, 2013), all of which carry important implications for early years teachers. The development of language is strongly interdependent with, and supports, a child's brain development and cognitive development and studies have shown that acquiring an extensive vocabulary increases creativity and helps children to develop new ideas in collaboration with adults and peers (McGuinness, 2004, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, 2002, 2004; Nutbrown, 2012; Walsh et al, 2017). In the knowledge that children think in different ways, as suggested by Robson (2012).

> The creation of an atmosphere in which talking about thinking happens and in which children are encouraged to reflect on their thinking, may be most important. (Robson, 2012:31)

For both Vygotsky and Bruner, the main goal of early years education is the development of learners who, through acquisition of reflective and metacognitive

skills, become agents of their own thinking and learning, able to distinguish between elements that they can learn themselves and those when they need the support of more knowledgeable others. This idea is supported by Salmon and Lucas (2011:373) who also suggest that practitioners' attitudes to thinking are important due to the significant links between the pedagogy of thinking skills and language acquisition. This highlights the need for foundation stage teachers to be equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills that allow them to connect cognitive development to other areas of child development such as language acquisition, fine and gross motor skills, and social and emotional development. Rich experiences for young children from play to the arts and relationships fundamentally shape a young child's development in important ways and develop what Siraj-Blatchford et al (2008) term sustained shared thinking (SST) defined as follows.

> An episode in which two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend the understanding (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2008:8).

According to Purdon (2016), the SST approach asks questions about the role of the teacher in early years settings, the nature of thinking skills in this critical phase of learning, the pedagogy of thinking skills including links with language development, the role of the environment, and the role of the adult, including links with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In line with Vygotsky's approach, the acquisition of language relates closely to SST as sharing the thinking and articulating it with others through language helps to promote thinking skills with children in the early years of school. This premise is supported by the outcomes from the 2004 Effective Provision of Preschool Education Project (EPPE) which tested the following view.

> Children whose thinking skills have been nurtured in the company of supportive adults will do better than children whose thinking has developed alone or in the company of their peers' (Sylva et al. 2004:121).

The EPPE project evidenced clear links between positive learning outcomes and effective cognitive support offered by adults through language (Sylva et al. 2004). In an earlier study entitled Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years

(REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002), effective settings were found to be those balancing learning opportunities from teacher-directed interactions with opportunities for freely chosen play activities. In settings considered effective, practitioners guided children into thinking in deeper ways by challenging their thinking. This was usually initiated by the child but then sustained through skillful interactions facilitated by practitioners, again highlighting the need for early years teachers to experience high quality input on the knowledge and skills required to develop young children's thinking in initial teacher education and as part of their ongoing professional learning. How the foundation stage teachers who took part in this study viewed their current level of knowledge and expertise in relation to thinking skills and the relationship with cognitive theory, and the strategies that they drew upon to translate this understanding into practice, is explored in detail in Chapters Six and Seven of the Dissertation. In the section below, the role of interpretation is explored in the context of teachers' sense-making, and implementation, of policy reforms in the foundation stage classroom.

4.5 The role of teacher agency and interpretation in policy implementation - Spillane's sense-making theory

Priestley et al (2015), in their paper entitled 'Teacher agency: what is it and why does it matter?', argue that powerful discourses driving global education policy have emphasised the role of teachers as the most significant within-school influence on school improvement and curricula reform. However, they also argue that agency as a concept remains an inexact and poorly conceptualised construct in much of the literature. It is often not clear what the term refers to or how it should be developed to the benefit of all learners. Questions about the degree of agency that teachers have to interpret and implement the TSPC approach in practice relate to both my research questions one and two which seek to identify the factors that either enable or constrain effective implementation. The influence of key discourses that underpin education policy on foundation stage teachers' agency and sense-making when interpreting policy reforms such as the TSPC also form part of this analysis, including my attention to autonomy.

A review of the literature on the role of teacher sense-making in the implementation of new policy reforms highlighted the importance of understanding policy implementation from a more cognitive perspective than an exclusively human capital view that sees the role of the individual in policy implementation in a limited and passive way (Coleman, 1990; Spillane, 2002; Coburn and Russell, 2001, 2005). In their sense-making theory, Spillane and colleagues (2002) highlight the complexity of the processes involved as teachers make sense of a new policy and make decisions that affect its implementation in important ways. From their perspective, sense-making is not a simple decoding of the policy message. Differences in interpretation or in acting on understandings are therefore a necessary aspect of human understanding and are also fraught with ambiguity and difficulty. Spillane and colleagues (2002) argue that to explain these influences on implementation, it is necessary to explore the mechanisms by which teachers understand policy and attempt to connect understanding with practice. Their sense-making theory argues that the formation of such decisions is the product of an individual's prior experiences and that teacher sense-making is an integrated process rooted in three specific domains: individual cognition, the situation or context, and policy signals. Spillane et al (2002) argue that individuals are by their nature natural sense-makers as they develop interpretations about policy based on the complex interplay between their prior knowledge, beliefs and experiences. The process of sense-making is defined by Spillane and colleagues as 'an active attempt to bring one's past organisation of knowledge and beliefs to bear in the construction of meaning' (Spillane et al, 2002: 395). In Chapter Eight, Spillane's theory is applied to the outcomes from interviews with foundation stage teachers to evaluate the extent to which they engage with these three specific domains to make sense of the TSPC policy and to enact it effectively in their planning and practice in the classroom. In the sections below the founding principles on which the TSPC is based, namely autonomy and critical thinking, are now explored and discussed in detail.

4.6 Autonomy as an Educational Aim

Both Dewey (1938) and Dearden (1972) contended that education should be primarily about the development of free thinking', autonomous, individuals who are able to think critically and make wise and informed choices about their lives. Therefore, it is clear that this view is not new, and is not confined to the field of education. Debates on the importance of education as a mechanism for the development of critical thinking, and the adverse and unjust consequences for those who are not provided with the opportunity to develop these skills fully, are also clearly evident in the literature. For example, authors such as Reay (2017), Ball (2008), and Coffield (1999, 2008) focus on the dangers of using human capital theory as a model for education and they consider such an approach to be flawed both empirically and theoretically. This is due to its failure to acknowledge the impact of structural barriers such as poverty, social class, and inequality on marginalised students' levels of engagement and academic achievement in school. Authors such as Nussbaum (2011), Evans (2008, 2017), and Rees and Bartlett (1997) also consider the link between education and economic prosperity to be oversimplified, deterministic and unjust and they call for an approach to education based on a personal development model, which argues for an increase in capacities to achieve individual self-fulfillment in all spheres of life, not just in economic activities' (Rees & Bartlett, 1999:21).

However, the notion that autonomy should be accepted unquestioningly as the central aim of education is contested. Across the literature, writers ask questions about whether autonomy is learnable or even desirable; the kinds of conditions necessary for its development and exercise; the relationship between autonomy and other concepts such as freedom, independence and reason; and whether personal autonomy should be cast as an educational aim at all. In the following sections I will explore the range of understandings of autonomy, the the conflicting views on its purpose and intentions in education, and the extent to which the development of personal autonomy is reflected as an educational aim in the TSPC Framework in Northern Ireland.

4.7 Autonomy - In Search of a Definition

There are a number of definitions of autonomy in the literature and finding a core meaning which encompasses all of its various uses proved challenging. The expansive nature of the term is captured by Dworkin in his survey of the literature on autonomy in which it is described by him as a 'term of art', often used interchangeably with other concepts such as freedom and independence, equated with dignity, integrity, individuality and self-knowledge and identified with qualities such as critical reflection, self-assertion, and knowledge of one's strengths, limitations and interests (Dworkin, 2015:8). This multitude of meanings for a single term led Dworkin to conclude that 'about the only features held constant from one author to another are that autonomy is a feature of persons and that it is a desirable quality to have' (2015:9). On this view, making sense of the concept of autonomy in all of its various uses, and then applying it in a consistent and coherent way in practice, is a complex task, as posited by Dearden.

> If autonomy is an educational aim then it cannot be allowed to develop by default, for to promote such an ideal requires a knowledge of the methods, curricula, and patterns of organisation which will promote it.
>
> (Dearden, 1972:455)

From this perspective, the development of autonomy in educational policy is not something that can be left to chance, nor can it be hand-crafted by teachers to suit the needs of individual contexts. What precisely teachers are working toward must be clearly set out and understood to ensure that all parties are clear on what it is that they are working toward, the steps required to successfully get there, and their role in the process.

For Dearden (1972), 'a person is autonomous to the degree that what he thinks and does cannot be explained without reference to his own activity of mind' (Dearden, 1972:453). In other words, why an individual thinks and acts in the way that they do must include an explanation of their own choices, reasonings, deliberations, decisions, judgements, or reflections. On this view, autonomy is clearly identifiable as an aim in the TSPC mainly due to its emphasis on teaching methods and

strategies that infuse thinking skills into all areas of learning in a planned and explicit way. The approach adopted by the TSPC is also commensurate with the constructivist view of learners as active participants in the learning process. Active learners employ a range of thinking skills effectively to complete different tasks and develop positive dispositions for thinking in collaboration with others, in environments that are designed to support independent and autonomous learning.

However, as Hand (2007) argues, and as I outline below, this broad conception of autonomy presupposes that all individuals are in a position to think and act in ways that they themselves determine, unconstrained by the influence of context and circumstance, and that doing so on every occasion is necessarily always a good thing to do.

4.8 An Alternative View of Autonomy - Michael Hand

In his critique of Dearden's view that autonomy should be the central aim of education, Hand (2007:539) categorises autonomy into what he terms as, 'two ordinary senses used in the English language', namely circumstantial autonomy and dispositional autonomy. The former pertains to the social conditions in which a person lives, which can either enable or constrain their ability to think and act in ways that they determine for themselves. Hand argues that while increasing circumstantial autonomy is a desirable thing to do, it is a political rather than an educational aim which can only be achieved through structural changes to the social conditions in which people live and work. Dispositional autonomy, refers to inclinations and character traits such as relying on your own judgement, being independent-minded, free-spirited and doing things your own way. In this sense, it could be argued that autonomy is very much the remit of education as it is the kind of thing that teachers can teach and children can learn. However, Hand questions whether, as a quality of character, autonomy is always desirable in every situation. Instead, he advocates for children to be educated in such a way that they are neither averse to authority nor to independence of mind, a kind of practical 'halfway-house' between always doing things our own way and always submitting to the direction of others.

Hand's conception of personal autonomy highlights the complex interplay between contextual factors and critical, reasoned, self-directed thinking; the kind of thinking that is characterised by a high degree of reflexivity, metacognitive knowledge, and the confidence to traverse the messiness of individual contexts and circumstances to achieve personal goals. His attention to context is not entirely incompatible with Dearden's view that 'freedom is always exercised against a background of context and not in some absolute sense … relevant freedoms are a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for autonomy' (1972:335). For example, in the context of the classroom, if children are to be encouraged to exercise autonomy then certain freedoms must be permitted: freedom to choose, to move around, and to access resources and materials independently of the teacher. If teachers are to be able to act autonomously then they must also be entitled to certain freedoms: freedom to make choices and decisions about how best to educate their students, freedom to develop curriculum plans and implement them, to review and reflect on outcomes, to be involved in decisions that affect their work, and to make changes to their practice based on reflection on their experiences. Whilst both Dearden and Hand hold opposing views on whether the development of autonomy should be education's central aim, both seem to be in agreement that teaching children in ways that develops their autonomy, in settings that are designed to facilitate it, is a desirable and worthwhile objective for schools and policy-makers to undertake.

At face value, Northern Ireland's revised curriculum (2007) would appear to have wholeheartedly embraced the concept of autonomy as an educational aim. This is evidenced by the need to develop independent, autonomous, learners who can think critically and creatively across contexts as one of its primary objectives. This is reinforced further by the new curriculum arrangements which also include the introduction of the TSPC on a statutory basis. However, one of the central aims of this study is to understand the systems and discourses that shape the approach and how these align or conflict with its underpinning theoretical principles to produce particular effects on teachers' interpretations and practice. This process involves exploring how autonomy is interpreted, constructed and conveyed in the policy documents that support its implementation and that provide the warrant for its

inclusion as a key principle in the approach. In Chapter Three I argued that the approaches to thinking skills promoted through these policies were based on human capital conceptions of education that have particular effects in practice. On this subject, Apple states the following.

> This commitment to thinking involves radically changing how we think of ourselves…the educational task is to change people's understanding of themselves as members of collective groups. Instead, to support a market economy we need to encourage everyone to think of themselves as individuals who always act in ways that maximize their own interests. (Apple, 2006:23)

From a neoliberal perspective, the purpose of teaching students to think critically, to problem-solve, and to be self-directed in their thinking is to enable them to pursue their own personal goals rather than those based on social and democratic values. As Corcoran (2009, 2012) contends, the teaching of thinking skills should be about ensuring that pedagogical and curricula aims are not implicated in this narrow and instrumental conception of education that places limits on pupil autonomy. Rather than liberating personal freedoms in the sense defined by Dearden and Hand, neoliberalism imposes limitations on the possibilities for creating different kinds of selves. An alternative to this would be the application of approaches to the teaching of thinking that focus on the more relational aspects of learning and that value and validate the importance of connection and the collective, independently of the workings of power.

This view is shared by Vassallo (2014), in his observation that whilst there is now a greater emphasis in current policy and discourse on thinking skills in the development of learners as active, self-regulating, autonomous makers of meaning, this rhetoric can act as a smokescreen for a neoliberal agenda. In a neoliberal model, the development of thinking skills and dispositions is viewed in more narrow, instrumental, terms to be acquired as a form of 'capital' to enhance personal value in the 21st century workplace. In the following section the extent to which this neoliberal agenda is reflected in the TSPC Framework as Northern Ireland's chosen approach to the development of thinking skills in schools is explored.

4.9 Autonomy and the TSPC Framework

As illustrated in Chapter Three, the five strands of the TSPC Framework are interrelated, both conceptually and in practice. They are underpinned by theories of education which value the affective and social and emotional dimensions of learning such as motivation, confidence, and positive self-concept as well as the cognitive tools needed for effective thinking and learning. The language of the Framework documents across all phases emphasises the need for students to develop as 'critical', 'autonomous' 'self-directed' learners and details a range of strategies that teachers should apply to create the kind of learning environments that facilitate and develop these capacities in their students. From this perspective, it does appear that the TSPC Framework's purpose and intentions align broadly with the principles of personal autonomy as outlined by Dearden and Hand, in the dispositional sense, as an approach that aims to develop active rather than passive learners who are reflective, self-directed, motivated, and able to think and draw conclusions for themselves.

The TSPC Framework is based on the work of Swartz (1994) in the USA, and employs an infusion method of instruction, defined by Swartz as, 'the integration of direct instruction in specific thinking skills into content area lessons'. According to Swartz, lessons that implement this more integrated approach improve student thinking and enhance content learning (Swartz, 1998:1). However, as Swartz points out, this is certainly not a straightforward task as, 'teaching skillful thinking means teaching deliberately, explicitly and directly, what these procedures, behaviours and metacognitive moves are' (1998:28). To do so effectively, teachers need to know what these strategies entail and their purpose, and engage regularly in quality education and training to sustain and develop their professional skills. Swartz contends that the teaching of skillful thinking is not about encouraging children to 'think harder', (2018:29) or providing opportunities for them to practice different types of thinking on a regular basis, nor is it the development of thinking skills achieved through discovery and working with others, but requires a high degree of structure, effort, and skill by both teachers and learners. Swartz argues

that without infusing teaching in skillful thinking effectively into standard areas of learning, we will only focus on outcomes rather than processes and see one dimension of children's learning, 'learning simply to pass tests, but not learning to enhance the quality of life' (1998:16).

From this perspective, it follows that how effectively foundation stage teachers are able to integrate the teaching of thinking skillfully into their practice is largely dependent on the quality and consistency of the education and professional learning with which they engage. How this is constructed and presented, and the provisions for follow-up and support in the classroom over time, is also important. For many teachers, developing their students' thinking and learning skills in this way will demand additional time and effort, sustained by a core belief in the transformational power of thinking in ways that enhance the quality of life in communal ways, with benefits beyond the individual. If autonomy cannot be allowed to develop by default, then it must be actively developed in teaching approaches and curricula that empower learners to critically question what they see and hear. Siegel (1990) views the development of critical thinking as playing a key role in fulfilling the educational aim of preparing young people for autonomy and creating the conditions for its exercise. In the following section the connection between critical thinking and autonomy is explored from a range of theoretical perspectives. The analysis also examines the particular version of critical thinking that is promoted in the TSPC Framework and suggests reasons why this is the case.

4.10 The role of critical thinking in the development of autonomy

The paradigm shift from learning to thinking that has taken place over the past three decades has led writers such as Papastephanou and Angeli (2007) and Masschelein (2004) to question the underlying purpose and intention of this agenda. Their motivations in doing so lie specifically in questioning whether learning to think skillfully is the same as learning to think critically, the relationship between these terms, and what this means for teachers and learners in practice. In the following sections I will explore these questions from a range of competing theoretical

perspectives. Definitions of critical thinking used most commonly in the literature, coupled with an analysis of the current debates on how critical thinking and its purpose is perceived in policy-making in education, currently, will be considered. Finally, a discussion of the particular version of critical thinking and personal autonomy that is reflected in the revised NI curriculum will be explored, with particular reference to the role of the TSPC Framework and its potential to either enable or challenge this interpretation and its effects when enacted in 21st century Foundation Stage classrooms and beyond.

4.11 Different theoretical perspectives on critical thinking

Various theories on what it means to think critically are present in the literature, each emphasising a particular feature that is defended as being the most important aspect of critical thinking. In some cases, critical thinking is constituted by particular skills, such as the ability to assess reasons, evaluate evidence, and make informed choices and elsewhere it is characterised by a critical attitude or disposition, a tendency to ask probing questions and examine the circumstances of a situation. For writers such as McPeck (1981) it is characterised by a deep and wide knowledge of a particular discipline and for Martin (1997) critical thinking is constituted by dispositional knowledge in the sense of a moral perspective or set of values motivating that thinking. From a similar perspective, Paul (1982:3) emphasises the skills and processes associated with critical thinking and distinguishes critical thinking in the 'weak' sense from critical thinking in the 'strong sense'. In the weak sense it implies the ability to think critically about positions other than your own; and in the strong sense, the ability to think critically about your own position, arguments, assumptions, and worldview. For Paul, critical thinking includes a deep knowledge of oneself, and the ability to understand the bigger picture from a range of different perspectives. The above gives a flavour of the different perspectives on the meaning and purpose of critical thinking to illustrate the ways in which it could be given expression in pedagogical approaches and curricula design. For Siegel (1990), a strong connection between critical thinking and rationality is emphasised. Siegel's conception of critical thinking

defends both a skills component, that is, an ability to assess reasons and their ability to justify beliefs, claims, and actions properly, and an attitude component, viewed as a certain type of character as well as skills (Siegel, 1990:39).

Ennis (1996) defends a conception of critical thinking based primarily on particular skills such as observing, inferring, generalizing, reasoning and evaluating. However, for Martin (1992), critical thinking is about more than the ability to assess reasons and the ability to evaluate situations effectively. Even though a course of action has been thoughtfully considered and evaluated it may still not be a correct path to follow. Thus, for Martin, the purpose of critical thinking is morally grounded and should be motivated by a concern for a more humane, equitable and just world (Martin,1992). From a broader perspective, Mason (2007) advocates for a more integrated conception of critical thinking, one that can be constituted by all of these components: the skills of critical reasoning; a critical attitude; a moral orientation; knowledge of the concepts of critical reasoning; and knowledge of a particular discipline. If these are accepted as the necessary conditions for a more integrated form of critical thinking, then a critical thinker is one who is willing to consider multiple perspectives, is reasonable, ethical, sceptical, and autonomous to the extent that they are able to reflect critically upon their preferences, desires, and wishes, and either accept or change them in the light of all of these factors. In the following section the particular conception of critical thinking that is promoted by current discourses in education is explored and the alternatives that might be considered if Mason's more integrated version is to be realised are also considered.

4.12 Critical thinking as an educational aim

Papastephanou and Angeli (2007) contend that the current dominant conception of critical thinking in education, is as a 'skill' that can be taught and applied to learning tasks, and they argue that this definition is reductive and insufficient to cover the broad range of what is 'critical about critical thinking' (2007:605-606). They refer to the existence of a 'skills paradigm' in education which focuses on evaluating the learner's ability to competently perform tasks and employ skills and strategies effectively to achieve outcomes based on a rationality that is purposive

and oriented toward narrow conceptions of success. In their view, what this 'skilling framework' (Papastephanou and Angeli, 2007:606-608) misses is the crucial role that goal revision plays in the critical thinking process, that is, learners' ability to critique the task itself and to take a reflective stance on their own involvement in it. Whilst the renewed focus on the development of thinking skills and dispositions in schools is viewed by Papastephanou and Angeli as a positive development, they contend that simply acquiring the skills and dispositions to critique the means for achieving an outcome does not automatically lead learners to critique the ends, the value of the outcome itself, or the broader systems that frame our goals. In their view, a questioning stance toward the bigger picture, of which our individual actions and ideas are just a small part, can help to mitigate what Masschelein refers to as the 'trivialisation and domestication of critique' (Masschelein, 2004: 355). In his analysis, Masschelein condemns how critique has become the 'general social programme' of education based on the premise that 'autonomy and critique can no longer be brought to bear against the existing social order and power, but have become part of that order and power.' In this sense, decisions about the ways in which critical thinking skills are understood and developed are made in institutional frameworks that have their own interests and agendas. The interests to be protected are the very ones that critique is designed ultimately to examine which leads to the development of particular versions of critical thinking that do not question the power structures of which they are a part. Cammarano (2018), in writing about her experience of current approaches to developing critical thinking in higher education, contends that these 'immunise' students from engaging in the kind of critique that envisions other ways for these structures to be and their belief that they can play an active role in changing them. She writes that 'critique has been made functional to the system' (Cammarano, 218:635) and, although her observations relate to higher education, the outcomes from this study would suggest that this is the position across all stages of education.

Smith (2001) presents a different perspective through the distinction that he makes between 'effective' thinking and 'critical' thinking. He contends that much of what the discourse on skill deals with is a kind of specialised, 'higher-order' thinking, that is important to the dominant socio-economic system but not compatible with a

critical vision or outlook. Papastephanou (2007) takes this distinction between effective thinking and critical thinking further by suggesting that the qualities and dispositions pertaining to critical thinking may be categorised as generic and more comprehensive, whereas skills belonging to effective thinking may be chiefly domain specific and less transferable. Papastephanou makes the following point on this subject.

> Educationally, it is more important to empower pupils by encouraging them to become reflective subjects rather than simply equip them with skills for successful process-following or decision-making.
>
> (Papastephanou & Angeli, 2007:611)

In the section below, the particular conception of critical thinking that is reflected in the TSPC Framework will be explored with this in mind.

4.13 Critical thinking and the TSPC Framework

An analysis of the language used in the documents to describe both the TSPC's overarching purpose and approach strongly suggests that it aligns more closely with Smith's conception of 'effective' thinking, both conceptually and in practice, rather than 'critical' thinking' as posited by Papastephanou & Angeli. This is evidenced by the language used in the rationale document for the revised NI curriculum which describes the purpose of the TSPC as 'emphasising the development of pupils' skills and capabilities for lifelong learning and participating in society' (CCEA, 2007:intro). It is further evidenced in the rationale document where the TSPC is presented as a mechanism for 'providing a structure to help pupils think more skillfully' (CCEA, 2007:24). To create a thinking classroom environment teachers are encouraged to develop a skills-integrated curriculum supported by a thinking vocabulary that will help pupils identify the different types of thinking that are 'useful and effective in different activities' (CCEA, 2007:25). Whilst the guidance on the TSPC in Key Stage 1 and 2 (CCEA, 2008:9) states that 'developing thinking skills and personal capabilities requires an approach to teaching that extends beyond traditional didactic methods', the collocation of 'effectiveness' with 'thinking' throughout the document could influence teachers' approaches to implementing the

TSPC in more instrumental ways. Such an approach would be based on the view that thinking skills can be treated as a technical process with clearly defined stages that belie the complexity of the process and the knowledge and skills that teachers require to integrate them into all areas of learning. This focus on effectiveness and approaches to the development of thinking and metacognitive development as an instrumental and linear process is further evidence of the influence of a neoliberal approach to the teaching of thinking skills in the classroom. This is further confirmed by the language used in an additional online resource for teachers on assessment rubrics that was added to the online toolkit by CCEA in 2018. This resource contains multiple references to 'expected standards', 'benchmarking', 'defining quality' and 'what counts as success' dispersed throughout the texts, terms that are commensurate with more neoliberal approaches to education. Whilst there is reference made in the online resource to the need for teachers to develop their classroom practice in more learner-centred ways using a range of 'active strategies', my assessment is that the TSPC Framework, and the approaches that it promotes for the development of thinking skills, is entangled in a neoliberal logic that privileges a particular version of critical thinking for particular, individually-motivated, purposes.

Following Cammarano (2018), the 21st century workplace requires individuals who can adapt and comply with the structures that it creates rather than those who question or seek to transform these conditions. From a similar perspective, Bailin (2002) also argues that discourses that privilege particular skills and characteristics adopt a limited notion of knowledge and that becoming proficient at critical thinking involves a far more complex conception of what counts as knowledge. As stated previously by Mason (2007), approaches that develop critical thinking must also nurture in students the kind of selves who are open to multiple views and perspectives on the world. On this point, Mason (2007) argues that whilst the goals of critical thinking and lifelong learning appear consistently in the rhetoric of current educational reform, it is the discourses that produce these aims, and the values associated with them, that should be considered and questioned more closely (2007:339). On this basis, one of the key aims of this study is to understand the extent to which current approaches to the implementation of the TSPC by

foundation stage teachers, either challenges or reproduces this limited and instrumental view of the purpose of teaching thinking and what it means to be an autonomous thinker in today's society.

4.14 Conclusion

Bailin (2002), in her critique of current conceptions of critical thinking in schools holds the following view on how it is taught.

> Critical thinking is too frequently conceptualised in terms of processes or skills. Much educational literature refers to cognitive or thinking skills, and equates critical thinking with certain mental processes, or procedural moves, which can be improved through practice. (Bailin, 2002:362)

On analysis, and from the literature it would appear that Northern Ireland's approach to the development of thinking skills through the TSPC Framework aligns more readily with Bailin's description above, an approach that she denounces as being overly dependent on the following of mechanistic and repetitive routines (Bailin, 2002: 363). However, if Vassallo's (2014:214) assertion that 'depictions of the 21st century are neoliberal' is accepted as true, then perhaps the policy rhetoric calling for the development of thinking and learning skills is not an honest reflection of what employers really want from their workers. Perhaps what they want is people to be able to think and learn insofar as such skills are directed at a shared mandate, as defined by a corporate agenda and which is typically void of ethical and democratic concerns, a subject that is explored more comprehensively in Chapter Seven.

However, despite the views expressed by Papastephanou and Angeli (2007) and others, that the current dominant conception of critical thinking in education is as a skill rather than an approach that engenders critical proneness in students, the fact that the development of thinking skills and personal capabilities was included as part of NI's revised curriculum arrangements remains an important step in the right direction. There is, however, still much work to be done, and I would argue that there is sufficient scope within the TSPC for foundation stage teachers to exercise

their own autonomy in the classroom in relation to how thinking skills are understood and taught, a subject discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven.

In this chapter the key concepts of autonomy and critical thinking that underpin the TSPC Framework were explored. How these concepts are understood and reflected in current approaches to policy-making in education more generally, and in the TSPC Framework specifically, was also considered. The following chapter details the methodology and research design that guided my study in which I sought to explore understandings of the range of factors that influence foundation stage teachers' approaches to interpreting and implementing the TSPC Framework in their everyday practice.

Chapter 5: Research Methodology

You need numbers for research, where are your numbers?

Colleague and PhD student in clinical psychology

5.1 Introduction

In this Chapter I will outline the methods employed to explore the views and perceptions of fourteen participants who took part in the study as well as the approach used to undertake policy analysis of three key documents that play an influential role in shaping how teachers interpret and implement the TSPC Framework in practice. In section 5.2, I introduce my fourteen research participants and explain the selection process for both the participants and the individual schools that took part in the study. In section 5.5 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model, and how this was applied in this particular study, is presented and explained. In section 5.6, my rationale for selecting an interpretive paradigm in which to locate the study is outlined and discussed. The ethical implications of the study are considered in sections 5.4 - 5.7, and includes a discussion of the potential risks that might emerge during the research and the plans put in place to address them. In sections 5.8 my relationship with my participants and the collaborative approach that I adopted to conduct the research is outlined and in section 5.9 the processes undertaken to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the findings are considered. In sections 5.10 - 5.13, the methods used to conduct the study, namely, Template Analysis (Brooks et al, 2015) as an organising framework for the analysis of the interview data, and policy analysis using an approach based on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis, are presented and discussed.

5.2 Research participants

The fourteen participants who took part in the study were a diverse group, held a number of different roles and were from a range of educational contexts. These included, four practising foundation stage teachers, both experienced and newly qualified; an experienced key stage one primary school teacher (covering primary three and four); a primary school nurture teacher; an experienced Teaching

Assistant who had worked with teachers to embed the TSPC in the classroom; two retired Head Teachers who had been strong advocates for the thinking skills agenda in Northern Ireland; Three Curriculum Advisory and Support Service Staff; a senior university academic, and a lecturer from one of the main Initial Teacher Training providers in Northern Ireland. Information on the participants' professional roles and their years of experience is presented in Table 4 below. A code was also assigned to each participant to ensure that any comments or insights used directly in the Dissertation, particularly in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, were attributed accurately to them.

Table 4 - Summary of Research Participants

Participant	Role/Experience	Signifier
FS Teacher	30+ yrs experience	1A
Fs Teacher	NQT	1B
FS Teacher	25+ yrs experience	1C
FS Teacher	3 yrs experience	1D
School Principal	Retired 40 yrs experience	1E
School Principal	Retired 42 yrs experience	1F
Academic	University Professor - 30 yrs experience	1G
Academic	Senior Lecturer ITE - 20+ yrs experience	1H
Curriculum Advisor 1	Retired - 35 yrs experience in schools as a secondary teacher and Advisor	1K
Curriculum Advisor 2	Retired - 30 yrs experience in primary education and as an Advisor	1L
Curriculum Advisor 3	In post - 30 yrs experience as a teacher and Advisor	1M
Classroom Teaching Assistant	Retired - 10 yrs experience	1N
Primary School Teacher	Retired - 25 yrs primary teaching experience	1P

Participant	Role/Experience	Signifier
Nurture Class Teacher	In post - trained primary teacher 8 yrs experience - teaching a nurture class for 3 years as part of the nurture schools initiative.	1Q

The schools that took part in the study were purposively selected on the basis that they were recognised in the NI context as being centres of excellence in the implementation of the TSPC Framework by both the Education and Training Inspectorate for NI (ETINI) and Primary Curriculum Advisors across the region, as well as by their professional colleagues and peers. According to Lavrakes (2008), a purposive sample, also referred to in the literature as a 'judgemental' or 'expert' sample, is a type of non-probability sample. The main objective of this approach is to produce a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the population which is achieved by applying expert knowledge of the population to select, in a non-random manner, a sample of elements that represents a cross-section of the population. This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about, or have experience in, the subject of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience Bernard (2002) notes the importance of participants' availability and willingness to participate and their ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner.

While I was not seeking representability in order to make generalizations in this small-scale study, I approached these schools to take part as they had been identified in NI as leaders in the implementation of the thinking school's agenda. I also considered that, because they had selected the development of thinking skills as a whole school approach over a significant period of time, they would be willing to share their experiences to support other schools to engage with the TSPC and to promote the benefits of doing so for all learners from a practice perspective. I was also interested in working with them because although they had encountered the same challenges in terms of funding, resources, and provision of professional

learning as other schools, they had nonetheless managed to implement the TSPC from the Foundation Stage to Primary Seven very effectively and to maintain a clear focus on the development of thinking skills over time with positive outcomes evidenced for all learners. On this basis, I also considered that the staff in these schools would be willing to take part in the study due to their interest in the subject and from a strong position from which to identify the strengths and challenges of implementing the approach and to advise on strategies for overcoming potential barriers, particularly in the foundation stage. In line with Cresswell and Plano Clark's (2011) view that it is important to seek a range of views from those who are knowledgeable and who have experience of the subject being researched, the participants who did not work directly in schools were selected because they engaged with the thinking skills agenda in Northern Ireland in different ways as part of their professional roles from a much broader perspective and beyond the primary school setting and could therefore likely provide views and opinions on the TSPC Framework, and why teachers in NI interpret and implement it differently or fail to implement it at all.

As outlined in Chapter One the study is located in an interpretive paradigm and a qualitative approach was adopted to the research using interviews as the primary research tool. The issues considered in the selection of this paradigm, and the methods used to investigate the research questions that framed the study are discussed in detail later in the chapter. These methods were used to investigate the following overarching question: In the current educational context in Northern Ireland, what are the range of factors that influence how Foundation Stage teachers interpret and implement the TSPC approach in the classroom?

This key research question was explored through three sub-questions:

1. What are the factors that enable or constrain teachers' ability to interpret and implement the TSPC effectively and consistently in practice?

2. What are the dominant discourses in the key documents and policy texts that influence the interpretation and enactment of the TSPC? what questions do

they raise and how do they connect with teachers' experiences in the classroom?

3. What changes are required at policy, school, and teacher level to ensure the effective and consistent implementation of the TSPC Framework across all primary schools in Northern Ireland?

These questions provided a guiding framework for the study to explore, from a cross-sector perspective, the reasons why, despite the many benefits that the TSPC approach has shown to bring to students' attainment and experience, it had failed to embed in any meaningful across all schools in Northern Ireland. As outlined in Chapter One, outcomes from the interviews and policy analysis were explored through the dual lenses of Human Capital Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model of Human Development (1979) to understand the factors influencing foundation stage teachers' approaches to implementing the TSPC approach in the classroom. According to Bronfenbrenner, adopting an ecological approach to research captures the embedded and holistic nature of human development, and recognises that individuals are embedded in, and affected by, different levels of context at any given time. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (1979), and how it relates to this research, was mapped out in the introductory chapter at section 1.8 and is discussed further in the section below.

5.3 The TSPC - an ecological perspective

According to Bronfenbrenner, individual behaviour is described as 'a function of the interaction of the person's traits and abilities with the environment' (White & Klein, 2008:258). He contends that to understand why individuals behave in the way that they do the researcher must take account of the actual environments and systems in which people live and learn, the relationships between these individuals and these systems, and the relationships between the systems themselves.

Bronfenbrenner used the term 'ecological' to capture the embedded and holistic nature of human development. As individuals develop they are not only influenced by their unique characteristics but also by their family, school, community, and the

wider social system in which individuals are nested (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This dynamic and integrated environment forms the ecosystem, which, in this version of the ecological model, consists of four distinct but overlapping levels: the microsystem, mesosytem, exosystem and macrosystem. I found Bronfenbrenner's model helpful in clarifying my approach to the research in that it provided a guiding framework in which to represent and articulate the integrated nature of the TSPC that might help explain why a consistent approach to its implementation across all schools had not been achieved. By mapping the four different levels to the TSPC in the context of the primary school its connections to, and reliance on, other systems and processes clearly emerged. For example, the TSPC is interpreted and enacted by an individual teacher in the microsystem of the classroom and individual school. These processes are influenced by a number of variables such as the teacher's personal and professional background, attitudes and beliefs and level of experience. The mesosystem refers to the communications, interactions and relationships between these microsystems which includes pupils, parents, carers and community settings. Again, influences such as school location, pupil numbers, and the school's culture and ethos will have a shaping effect on the level of importance attached to thinking skills and how this is communicated across the school community. The third dimension of the ecological model, the exosystem, refers to more distant influences, factors external to the teacher and the school but impacting on their practice nonetheless such as education policy, curriculum design and support, and monitoring and inspection processes. These influences, whilst more distant, have a significant impact on how teachers interpret and implement policy reforms since they create the conditions in which choices are made and constraints are navigated and negotiated. The macrosystem represents even more distant factors and represents the greater cultural context of the other three systems, this includes influential cross-system policies in education, and other public policy arenas that affect teachers, pupils and families, as well as wider cultural perceptions of race, gender, socio-economic status and religious affiliation. Again, these factors have a significant influence on teachers' sense-making and practice through the discourses, agendas and values that they privilege and promote.

However, as discussed previously, the model is not without its critics including those who argue that it does not pay sufficient attention to the ability of the individual to influence their own success (Christensen, 2016), and others who advocate for a more updated model that recognises the impact of local and global environmental sustainability factors on children's development (Elliott & Davis, 2018). However, for the purposes of this study, the model provided a useful lens for exploring the many influences that shape foundation stage teachers' interpretation and enactment of the TSPC approach. Also, understanding policy approaches and effects in a wider socio-cultural context that positions teachers and pupils as active participants offers a more dynamic, integrated, and holistic view of the interpretation and enactment process. According to O' Toole et al (2017:11) 'It is a model with sufficient detail to allow attention to all the complex systems of early educational experience whilst, at the same time, highlighting the reality, dynamism and complexity of everyday life'.

However, prior to engaging in this study it was necessary to ensure that the conceptual and methodological approaches adopted aligned with the context and reason for the research undertaken (Weaver and Olson, 2006) which required the identification of an appropriate framework, often referred to as a paradigm, a subject to which I now turn.

5.4 Positioning the research

From the literature it is obvious that researchers undertake their work in many different ways. As illustrated by the comment from my colleague in the epigraph to this chapter, approaches to research vary and may be based on a single paradigm, or contain elements of others, depending on the kind of research being undertaken and the discipline in which it is located. Paradigms are defined in various ways throughout the literature depending on the type of research being undertaken and the tradition in which the researcher is working. However, despite these theoretical differences, there is broad agreement that the researcher's choice of paradigm lays out and informs the intent and expectations of the research and that, without this foundation, there is no basis for subsequent choices regarding methodology,

methods, literature or research design (MacKenzie and Knipe, 2006). Silverman (2011) and Somekh and Lewin (2005, 2011) refer to paradigms as 'models' which provide an overall unifying framework for how we look at reality. These models reflect our beliefs about the world that we live in and want to live in (Lather 1986:259). In other words, to refer to the use of a paradigm in your research implies that you have thought about and applied a structure and framework to the scientific or academic ideas in your study and that the process is underpinned by a philosophical orientation and a system of values, beliefs and assumptions (Olsen, Lodwick and Dunlop, 1992:16).

From the review of the literature it became clear that in the field of research there are two main paradigms: positivism and interpretivism, with ongoing debates in each in relation to the rigour, trustworthiness and transferability of their findings. According to Henning et al (2004:17) positivism is concerned with uncovering truth and presenting it by empirical means and researchers in this tradition hold observation and reason to be the best means of understanding human behaviour and that true knowledge can only be obtained by measurement and experiment. In contrast to positivist approaches to research, interpretive researchers contend that reality consists of individuals' subjective experiences of the world; hence they may adopt an inter-subjective view of knowledge, and the ontological belief that reality is situated and socially constructed. Gephart (2004) argued that interpretivists assume that knowledge and meaning are acts of interpretation and so there is no objective knowledge which is independent of thinking, reasoning, human beings. The interpretive paradigm is underpinned by observation and interpretation; to observe is to gather information about events, while to interpret is to attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them (Deetz,1996). As this study seeks to explore the experiences and perspectives of teachers in a specific time and context it did not rely on empirical observations and neither did it seek to establish causal relationships. Rather, following Holloway and Wheeler (2013), I sought to explore different experiences and perceptions of foundation stage teachers in relation to the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework to illuminate how these understandings created meaning for them and how this was reflected in their everyday practice.

Terreblanche and Durrheim (1999), contend that the research process has three major dimensions: ontology; epistemology, and methodology, and that each paradigm takes a different stance on these dimensions. These relate to a person's world view, the nature of the knowledge pursued, and the different means by which knowledge is produced and evaluated. For Terreblanche and Durrheim (1999), the term paradigm denotes an all-encompassing system of interrelated practice and thinking that defines the nature of inquiry along these three dimensions. Hence the process must be underpinned by a basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator in their particular research project, 'not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011:105). Accordingly, in order to identify an appropriate paradigm for this study, it was necessary to consider its purpose and structure at each of these three levels. As well as helping me to frame the theories and principles of the research, engaging in this process also prompted me to be conscious of my own assumptions about the study at this early stage, to remain open to new ways of seeing things (Levi-Strauss, 1966:19), and to be mindful of the impact that these assumptions could have on the research decisions taken at every stage of the process.

As the purpose of the research was to explore research participants' views and perspectives on a particular educational approach, ontologically I assumed that the individual views expressed by them would not identify one universally agreed 'truth'. This was based on the assumption that their responses would all be very different, that they would be influenced by a range of factors, and would reflect participants' subjective experiences, motives, meanings, and contexts. As explained by Crotty below.

> The researcher enters a social world which people have already constructed, which they reproduce through their continuing activities and that they are constantly involved in interpreting. (Crotty, 1998:52)

In other words, no-one, including me as the researcher, comes to the study with a clean slate; the social world was already interpreted, and in the process of being re-interpreted, by participants long before I arrived. For example, the beliefs that

teachers held in relation to the teaching of thinking in the primary classroom generally, would be framed by their contexts and individual experiences. These included the kinds of thinking processes that they engaged in themselves, their views on the aims and purpose of education, and their background and training. Hence, the meanings that they attached to these experiences would determine truths for them, and them alone. On an epistemological level, I assumed that findings would emerge through dialogue in which conflicting understandings and interpretations between myself and participants could be negotiated and at least partly understood. In this sense, knowledge would be constructed through my interactions and discussions with participants which would illuminate their perspectives and interpretations of the TSPC and the implications for how it would, and could, be implemented in practice. From this perspective, meanings or truths cannot be described as being simply subjective or objective. As highlighted by Guba and Lincoln (2011:347), we do not create meaning, we already have something to work with, 'as everyday realities are actively constructed in and through forms of social action'.

From these considerations, the ontology and epistemology of the research were identified as I concluded that no universally agreed viewpoint would be reached or sought, but rather, following Guba (1990), I would seek 'a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood' (Guba, 1990:33). I also acknowledged that a diverse set of participants would provide a rich and diverse set of data, and, following Somekh and Lewin (2005), my axiological position held that the participants' experiences would always be valued and that any presentation of their perspectives or experiences would be authentically reported in order to provide a fair and accurate representation of what was said. From this perspective, the study is situated in an interpretive paradigm, which acknowledges that the meanings and interpretations given by the participants, and by me as the researcher, are subjective and take place in specific contexts which are time and context bound (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). A similar study, adopting the same paradigm, methods and subject, would not necessarily yield the same findings due to the unique and complex nature of individual participants' experiences and the meanings that they attach to them. Rather, the study aims to represent the perceptions, opinions, and experience of the

participants authentically and claims neither representativeness nor generalisability. This approach conforms to the ethical considerations of this study, which are discussed below.

5.5 Ethics

The ethical review process at the University of Glasgow states that ethical approval must be granted before any research is undertaken involving human participants, human data or human material. This is a robust and comprehensive process which involves the completion of an ethics application form requiring the researcher to detail the nature and structure of their proposed research and to identify any ethical implications and how these will be addressed. As part of the process the researcher is also required to provide copies of a Plain Language Statement and Consent Form and a draft of the questions or themes that will be used during focus groups or interviews with participants. However, as will be demonstrated in the following sections, an ethical approach to research is about much more than form-filling and compliance but refers to, 'a wide variety of values, norms, and institutional arrangements that help constitute and regulate research activities' (Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics, 2016). In line with the requirements of the University, ethical approval for this study was applied for via the above process and was granted in October 2018. In the following section the ethical implications of my particular study will be explored and assessed using a framework suggested by Bryan and Burstow (2018) and followed by a discussion on the concept of trustworthiness and validity in qualitative research and how this aspect has been considered in the context of this study.

5.6 Ethical considerations

As this study is located in an interpretive paradigm it uses methods appropriate to exploring and understanding participants' views and experiences and the meanings that they make from them. In the context of education, Bryan and Burstow (2018) contend that ethical practice and school-based research are characterised by a number of competing demands that lie at the heart of the research process:

- The need to ensure quality and rigour;
- The need to situate the work in a participative and democratic framework;
- The concept that the research takes place in a system of morality;
- The challenge of objectivity; and,
- Access and informed consent in the workplace balanced with the desire to improve educational outcomes. (Bryan and Burstow, 2018:110).

These demands, the authors argue, frame the ways in which research is designed and conducted, reported, disseminated and acted upon. In the sections below, an assessment of the ethical considerations applied to this particular study was undertaken based on the following criteria:

- Compliance with ethical protocols and procedures;
- Collaboration and interaction with research participants;
- The trustworthiness and validity of the data presented;
- Benefits to the community of practice and beyond.

Adapted from Bryan and Burstow (2018:110)

5.7 Compliance with ethical protocols

Many of the ethical questions in relation to the conduct of this study centre on integrity and the importance of honesty and transparency between myself and my participants. In order to ensure that this principle was adhered to throughout the research process every effort was made to ensure that participants were advised upfront on the rationale for the research, clearly and explicitly, including: its purpose and the benefits that it hopes to provide; the risks and opportunities; the structure of the research, including an outline of the methods used and the proposals for data storage, sharing and access to their information. In line with the requirements of the University, an ethical application form was completed which detailed how the study would be undertaken, including how consent would be gained from participants, an assessment of the potential risks and how these would be addressed, and assurances on how the data would be stored and shared to protect participants' confidentiality. In order to ensure that participants understood these

aspects and their own role in the process, a Plain Language Statement (PLS) was developed and provided to each participant and to the Head Teacher of each of the schools involved.

In addition, an initial discussion with individual participants took place before interviews were conducted. This was a useful exercise in that it provided a space for both of us to review the PLS together, to discuss the methods used to gather data for the study and to ask questions, and to be clear on how the information would be recorded, shared and accessed. Issues of anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent were also discussed and agreed at this initial meeting and participants were advised to reflect on what had been said and to come back to me with any further questions or concerns that they might have before proceeding. The PLS also advised participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, or not to take part at all, and they were invited to sign a consent form confirming that they were taking part on a voluntary and informed basis. A copy of the PLS is attached at Appendix One. Managing the early meetings with participants in this way was an effective means of ensuring that I was compliant with the ethical requirement to be open, honest and transparent in relation to all aspects of the study. This approach also helped to build trust with the participants, a subject to which I now turn.

5.8 Relationship with participants

Initiating the research process in this way helped to build rapport with participants. It also afforded me the opportunity to demonstrate a shared knowledge and understanding of their context as I had taught and managed in the Foundation Stage in Northern Ireland for many years previously. From this perspective I was able to enter the field as an 'insider' in a credible way, as discussed in Chapter One section 5.1 on positionality. This was especially important at times during the interviews when views and opinions on certain issues were very different. Due to this shared understanding and experience we were able to acknowledge and respect each other's point of view without feeling that we needed to always accept or agree with it but were open to challenge and change. When the interview data was transcribed I

also returned the documents to a sample of the participants to review. This provided them with the opportunity to elaborate on some of the points or scenarios discussed during the interview, if they felt that this was necessary, or if certain aspects needed further clarification. Working with participants in this way ensured that I was true to my intention of working in ways that are democratic and collaborative, one which respected participants' individual views and experiences and sought to represent them in an authentic and honest way. In the section below, considerations with regard to ensuring the trustworthiness and validity of the research are presented.

5.9 Quality, trustworthiness, and validity

Denscombe (2014) argues that all research, irrespective of its disciplinary background or tradition, must be able to justify its methods and conclusions. Such justification, he argues, cannot be 'assertion or an act of faith' but must demonstrate to the reader the nature of the decisions taken during the research and the grounds on which the decisions can be seen as 'reasonable' (Denscombe, 1998:212). How this will be done, Denscombe argues, will be influenced by a number of factors, not least of all the research tradition and framework in which the study is being conducted and whether this aligns itself with the interpretive or positivist paradigm.

According to Morrow (2005:250), qualitative research, ensuing from a variety of disciplines, paradigms, and epistemologies, embraces multiple standards of quality, known as validity, credibility, rigour, or trustworthiness. In addition, the 'goodness' of qualitative inquiry is assessed on the basis of the paradigmatic underpinnings of the research and the standards of the discipline and varies accordingly. Oakley (2000) highlights that the question of assessing the trustworthiness and worth of research in an interpretive paradigm is a contested area and that flawed research, irrespective of the tradition, often exhibits the same problems. Morrow (2005) suggests that these criticisms can be overcome by adopting standards of inquiry that elaborate on more internal 'scientific' benchmarks of rigour based on Guba and Lincoln's (2000) notion of 'parallel criteria' (credibility, transferability, reliability and confirmability) which are

intended to loosely achieve the same purposes as traditional scientific research criteria. According to Lincoln and Guba (2000), and in line with Gasson (2004), credibility refers to the idea of internal consistency where the core issue is fundamentally about 'how we ensure rigour in the research process and how we communicate to others that we have done so' (Gasson, 2004: 95). In this study, the credibility and reliability of the findings was a key consideration throughout the data gathering and analytical process. Reliability of the findings was achieved by keeping a detailed audit trail of all research activities and processes. This included copies of the developmental stages of the template analysis undertaken and emerging themes, as well as contemporaneous notes that recorded decision-making on the merging or development of key themes and observations as the research progressed. Credibility of the findings was further strengthened by the adoption of a consistent approach to the research process by ensuring, for example, that the interview questions followed broadly the same format for all participants, that they were clearly linked to the research questions, and that the interviews were transcribed, themed and analysed by me and then returned to a sample of the participants for review. This approach conforms to another of Gasson's (2004:94) core criteria that 'the way in which a study is conducted should be consistent across time, researchers, and analysis techniques.' In recognising and applying these criteria I believe that the reliability and credibility of the research findings was further enhanced.

According to Cresswell and Miller (2000), the notion of 'truth' in qualitative research equates to how accurately an account represents participants' realities of social phenomena. In this study, this was undertaken by ensuring that a broad sample of participants were given the opportunity and sufficient time to review and agree the outcomes of the analysis and the tentative findings derived from this. This was combined with a thorough description of source data and the inclusion of 'thick descriptions' where possible (Martin, 1993). These accounts presented richer, more detailed descriptions of participants' perspectives and experiences and the contexts in which they occurred. Following Morrow (2005:252), these descriptions relate to the 'multiple layers of culture and context in which the experiences are embedded' and developing this aspect of personal experience with

participants I hoped would further support the credibility and quality of the research findings. In relation to the transferability of the findings from the study, I assumed that due to the relatively small participant group and the diverse range of meanings that would emerge from the interactions, that the findings would not be generalisable or transferable across a broad range of contexts. Rather, I hoped that aspects of the narrative or 'story' that emerged would resonate with others' experiences and on that basis, I endeavoured to provide context-rich descriptions of participants' views and experiences as much as possible to facilitate this.

In the following sections, I will discuss the methods adopted to undertake the research which were consistent with the interpretive belief that meanings can be changed or modified and are open to reinterpretation and negotiation through interaction and conversation (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Following Mertens (2005:7), 'a researcher's theoretical orientation also has implications for every decision made in the research process, including the choice of methods', and it is to this aspect of the study that I now turn.

5.10 Methods

5.10.1 Qualitative Interviews as a research method

Following Seidman (2013:7-8), interviews create a window for the researcher to understand participants' lived experience, also referred to by Schultz as their 'subjective understanding' (Schultz, cited in Costelloe, 1996:249). Through the interviewing process people tell their stories, they select details of their experience, reflect on them and in doing so make meaning from them. According to Seidman (2013), and Guba and Lincoln (2011), interviewing as a research method is well suited to the exploration of attitudes, values, beliefs, and motives and is therefore in keeping with the interpretive paradigm. In relation to methods of interviewing, Bryman (2004:312) holds that the labels 'unstructured' and 'semi-structured' refer to 'extremes', and that in practice a wide range of interviews with differing degrees of structure lie between these extremes. As the purpose of this study was to explore participants' perspectives and opinions on a specific aspect of the revised NI

curriculum, the use of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with between 10-15 participants was selected as the primary method of investigation, primarily because it combined a flexible, supportive structure for me as a novice researcher with the scope to explore particular themes or responses further with participants during the interviews, should the opportunity arise.

As each participants' context and experience of the TSPC would be different, I assumed that conducting the interviews would not simply be a case of following a straightforward, linear check-list of curated questions, and recording the answers to them verbatim to arrive at the data I sought. In reality, I understood that participants' individual perceptions and experiences would shape their own personal stories and I acknowledged that the real skill would lie in having the confidence as a researcher to actively listen to what was being said and to 'think on my feet' in order to manage the unpredictability of the process. To achieve this effectively, I decided that a relatively open and flexible approach to conducting the interviews would be essential, one where the tone and pace of the questioning was conducive to an honest and reflective conversation about the issues discussed. While each interview protocol had a number of *a priori* questions, these were open-ended and connected to each of the research questions. Following Seidman (2013:422), this approach reduces the risk of what they term as being 'socially desirable answers' and ensures that the focus of the research is not lost. Additionally, I assumed that this more flexible approach to the interviews would allow for the careful use of prompts and follow-up questions which would add depth to the responses, open up a rich seam of personal views, and introduce a broader range of themes into the discussion. In other words, using questions flexibly to clarify, re-visit, and question more deeply would safeguard against a situation where the participant tells the researcher what he or she thinks they want to hear. The approach also meets one of Kvale's (1996) success criteria for a qualitative interview: the need to interpret, clarify and extend meanings of participants' statements, but without imposing meanings on them.

Five overarching themes emerged from the interviews undertaken with the fourteen participants who took part in the study. These themes were developed by

implementing a structured approach to organising and analysing the interview data known as Template Analysis (Brooks et al, 2015) which is discussed in detail later in the chapter. Essentially, the process involved highlighting recurring words or phrases in the interview transcripts related to each of the research questions and assigning a code to them. These codes were then reviewed, collated and categorised and were developed into a series of sub-themes which were further developed and organised into the five overarching themes.

However, I also acknowledged that not all researchers in the field of qualitative research view interviews as a flexible, reciprocal and empowering mode of conversation. Authors such as Kvale (2006) and Tanggaard (2007) raise questions about the concept of qualitative research interviews as warm and inclusive dialogues by highlighting power asymmetries in interview relationships and the ethical issues that may arise as a result of this. These concerns aligned with Merriam's (2002) three key themes regarding the researcher's positionality that were discussed in the introductory chapter at section 1.6. These pertained to the insider/outsider debate and the need to consider positionality, power, and representation when conducting research. I considered these aspects when developing the interview protocols and before and after I conducted the interviews. In order to mitigate against some of the points raised by Kvale and Tanggaard, I took the following actions:

1. I confirmed at the start of each interview that participants had given informed consent and were fully aware of what the study was about and why they had been asked to take part.
2. I ensured that the interview questions were open-ended, based around the broad themes that I wanted to investigate and that I did not lead the discussion in any specific direction; and,
3. I ensured that participants were given time and opportunity, both during and after the interview, to ask questions, express concerns, disagree, pause, and return to previous responses to clarify or amend their comments.

I considered that taking these actions would ensure that the interviews were conducted sensitively and on a much more equal footing, and would safeguard against what Kvale (1996:481) describes as, a one-way dialogue - 'a hierarchical and instrumental form of conversation' - a conversation with a purpose. Whilst the interviews with participants did have a purpose, implementing the three steps outlined above, would, I hoped, help mitigate the risk that I would be viewed by participants as taking the lead in the conversation and steering the interviews in a particular direction to achieve the outcomes that I sought.

Tanggaard (2007:161) also presents a conception of the research interview as a setting in which discourses 'cross swords', as the differing views and assumptions of the researcher and participants 'cross, touch, ignore, and exclude each other'. In selecting this approach to the interview process I expected that questions would be posed by the participants, and that an element of challenge might emerge in some of the exchanges as alternative viewpoints were confronted, negotiated, and worked through. As a further safeguard, after the interviews, transcriptions were forwarded to a sample of participants to review to ensure that what had been recorded was an authentic and accurate representation of what had been said. Participants were also invited to forward any further views or comments and to provide additional information on any of the issues discussed if they felt that what had been recorded was in any way unclear. This conforms with the ethical requirements of the study, particularly the need for honesty, openness and transparency between the researcher and participants. In the following sections the interview process, including the methods used to organise and analyse the interview data, is presented.

5.10.2 Interview protocols

As the participants' roles and contexts within the education sector in Northern Ireland were different, it was important to ensure that the interview questions were open-ended in nature in order to elicit responses from participants' own perspectives. As a novice researcher I felt that it was important for me to remain close to the data and on this basis, I transcribed each of the recorded interviews myself. This involved listening to the recordings multiple times, an approach that

whilst time-consuming, ensured that I was familiar with the content and the areas of commonality and difference on some of the issues discussed across the fourteen interviews. As the transcription process progressed, I noted that even though the same interview protocol was used with all participants the questions yielded a broad range of responses to the issues raised. This was particularly evident in the interviews conducted with teachers in respect of issues relating to the TSPC policy and approaches to practice that were common across the sector. On reflection, this may have been influenced by my management of the process which developed and improved as the interviews progressed and I became more confident in my approach. These might include aspects such as the timing and structure of the interviews; the ordering of the questions and how participants' responses were managed; the quality of the engagement between myself and the participants; and the participants' level of knowledge and experience in relation to the main research topic. Following the advice of Brooks and King (2014), immediately after each interview I recorded a brief reflection on my thoughts about, for example, the general climate of the interview, the degree of rapport between myself and the participant, the extent to which the conversation remained focused or went off on a tangent, and any points of contention or challenge about specific issues that arose during the discussion. These reflections, particularly those relating to the early interviews, highlighted areas that I needed to focus on and refine further which then informed my approach to subsequent interviews to positive effect.

After transcribing the interviews, I was left with over 400 pages of raw data. In order to organise and analyse the volume of information gathered from the interviews so that an analysis could be undertaken, I applied a particular style of thematic analysis known as Template Analysis, as recommended by Brooks et al (2015). This approach, and how it was applied in this study, is presented below.

5.11 Template Analysis as an organising framework for analysis

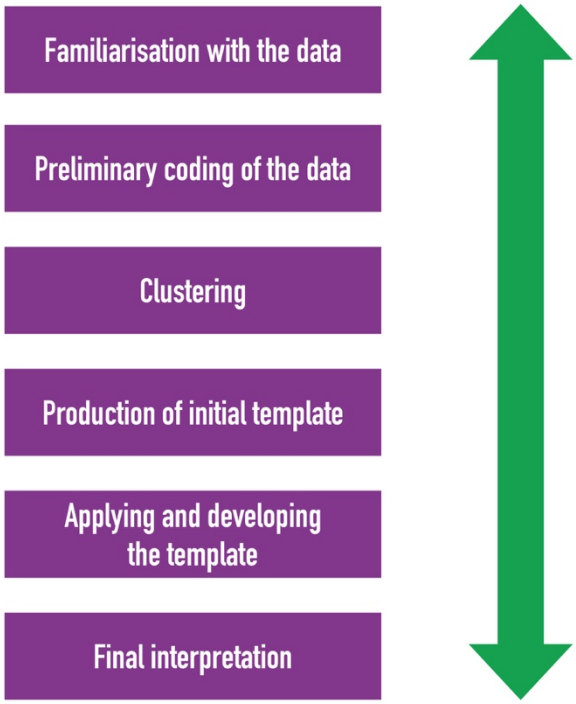
Brooks et al (2015) define Template Analysis as a qualitative research method which is in keeping with the interpretive paradigm and its underpinning

philosophical approach. I selected this particular method for my study primarily because of its clarity and flexibility and because there is no set sequence for coding the data. Rather, the process emphasises the use of hierarchical coding and the development of a coding template, usually on the basis of a subset of data. This initial version of the template is then applied to a further set of data, revised, refined and tested, before arriving at a final version of the template which suits the overall purpose of the research. In the sections below the key components of the Template Analysis process and how it was applied in this particular study are explained.

5.11.1 The process

Brooks et al, (2015:26) organise the process of Template Analysis around a sequence of steps as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: King and Brooks (2017:203-204) Typical Steps in Template Analysis



Brooks stresses that whilst the stages follow a set sequence it is not unusual for researchers to move flexibly between the stages as the analysis of the data develops. This was indeed the case for me and in the following sections I will discuss how I applied each of the stages in the process of coding and thematic analysis of the data from the interviews with my participants.

Steps one and two of the Template Analysis process relate to familiarisation with the data and the process of preliminary coding. Revisiting the interview recordings and transcribing them manually was an onerous and time-consuming process. However, remaining close to the data ensured that I was familiar with the content of the interviews and participants' responses to the issues discussed. By the end of the transcription process, I had an awareness and understanding of each participants' perspectives on these issues and a sense of the key areas of commonality and difference between them which left me well placed to begin the preliminary coding process. As recommended by Brooks et al, I began the process by developing three *a priori* codes with a brief description included for each individual code. Brooks et al suggested that this approach affords a 'way in' to the process of analysis acting as a scaffold through which key themes could be identified and developed from the interview data. These three initial codes, and the areas that they broadly related to at this early stage of the process, are presented below.

1. **Beliefs about teachers' current level of knowledge and skill in relation to the TSPC framework** - (effectiveness of ITE training and preparation, opportunities in school for collaboration/ observation/ sharing of practice, opportunities for professional learning and development, school cultured ethos)
2. **Beliefs about the place of thinking skills and personal capabilities in the curriculum -** (Views on the aims and purpose of education, reasons why the TSPC should be included as part of the NI curriculum (or not), in the primary school? foundation stage?, views on the aims and purpose of education, enablers and affordances within the current system).
3. **Beliefs about what is needed to ensure that the TSPC is embedded in all schools consistently -** (Changes required to current policy and approaches to practice in schools across different levels and systems, additional resources required, recommendations for teacher education and professional learning).

Brooks et al (2015:29) describe these as 'soft' codes, 'more loosely defined and often broader, representing potential aspects of the data'. The addition of descriptions is recommended by Brooks and King (2014:71) to overcome what they

term as a ‘blinkering effect’, where labels are applied to data by researchers at the outset of the process with insufficient attention paid to what they actually mean. These three initial codes were developed into a coding template which is attached at Appendix 5. In the first iteration of the process I applied the coding template to a small sub-set of four transcripts. As I read through each of the four transcripts I highlighted any recurring key words and phrases and assigned a signifier to each highlighted area in the margin from the coding template. When the initial coding was completed on each of the four transcripts the coded sections were reviewed and collated hierarchically under each of the three codes outlined above and any emerging gaps in the coding were noted. These initial codes aligned with the main research questions and specific sub-questions presented at section 5.1 above. For example, Code 1 signifiers were applied to responses that referred to the content and quality of thinking skills programmes undertaken as part of initial teacher training programmes or professional learning where this was viewed as being either an enabler or barrier to effective implementation of the TSPC by participants. This aligned with research question one which sought to understand the factors that enable or constrain teachers’ ability to effectively implement the TSPC Framework in the classroom. This process is described by King and Brooks (2017:33) as ‘clustering’, where, on the basis of the preliminary analysis, emerging and *a priori* themes are clustered into meaningful groups and ordered hierarchically with broader themes encompassing one or more levels of narrowly clustered themes, as explained in more detail below.

After the initial coding of the first four transcripts was completed, the next step in the process was to begin identifying potential themes emerging from the coding categories. King and Horrocks (2015) contend that what constitutes a theme is not clearly defined in the literature, and it was now necessary to think about and identify my own particular understanding of what I understood a theme to be, one which aligned with what I was trying to achieve through the research and my approach to it. I adopted King and Horrock’s definition of themes as it best fitted the task in hand and the overall purpose of the study.

> Recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question. (King and Horrocks, 2015:33)

Whilst some of the titles for themes and sub-themes suggested themselves readily, for example, 'Enablers', 'Leadership', or 'Classroom Management', others were less visible, such as those that related to the more relational or emotional aspects of participants' experience of continuous system change and I needed to work out exactly what a theme or sub-theme encompassed before applying any kind of label to it. As predicted by Brooks et al, the development of the initial version of the template did not progress in a lock-step fashion as I moved back and forth between these developing themes, and the previous steps in the process, to ensure that relevant aspects of the responses that pertained to the research questions were coded appropriately and that any gaps in the coding were identified. This was not time wasted as it helped to further clarify and refine my thinking and interpretation of the data as I worked through it to develop an initial version of the template, as described below.

The outcome of working through the first three stages of the Template Analysis process produced an initial version of the coding template which is attached at Appendix 6. At this stage, four high-level themes and a number of sub-themes were generated from the coding and clustering process: Implementing the TSPC Framework; The Purpose of the TSPC Framework; Characteristics of a Thinking School, and The Way Forward. This initial coding template was then applied to the remainder of the transcripts and a number of coding gaps emerged. From an early stage it became clear that the high-level themes and sub-themes contained within the initial version of the template were not expansive enough to capture the range of additional themes that were now emerging from the interview data. To accommodate this a number of additional themes were developed and a number of the existing themes and sub-themes were extended and re-structured. An example of how the template was extended in relation to one particular sub-theme, namely, the factors that enable the TSPC to be effectively implemented in practice, is attached

at Appendix 7, and the final version of the template that was applied to all fourteen transcripts and used as the basis for the analysis is attached at Appendix 8.

In summary, Template Analysis offered a clear, systematic, and yet flexible approach to data analysis and using it to organise the interview data enabled me to effectively develop key themes and sub-themes in a manageable and structured way. Having worked through each step, albeit not in a strictly linear fashion, I arrived at a final version of the template that I was satisfied sufficiently captured all of the key themes from the interviews that related to the research questions. From this final version of the template, I now had a structure from which to begin my analysis and interpretation of these themes and the issues that they raised which is presented in detail in Chapter Six.

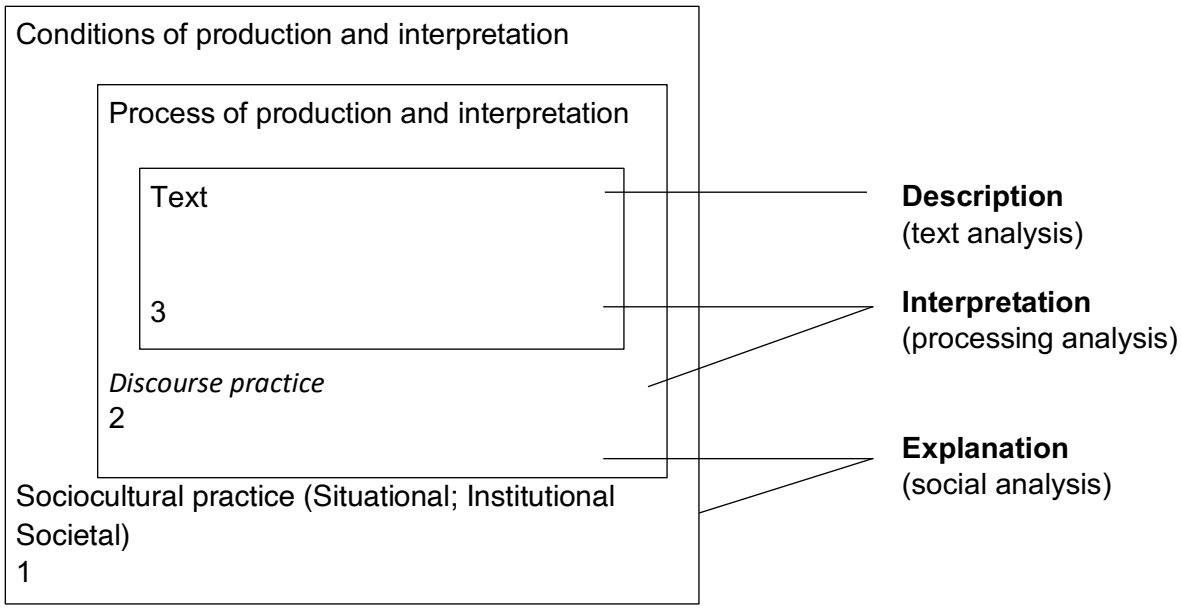
In the following section, my approach to the analysis of three key policy texts that have a strong influence how teachers in Northern Ireland interpret and enact the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework in their practice is presented. In section 5.16 below my approach to policy analysis, which is guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis (1995), and how this was applied to this particular study, is explained. This is followed by an outline of my rationale for selecting these particular texts for analysis which is presented at section 5.17.

5.12 Fairclough's three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis (CDA).

My approach to policy analysis is based on Fairclough's version of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is defined by Rogers (2011:5) as, 'a broad framework that brings critical social theories into dialogue with theories of language' to investigate the connection between policy language and the social practice of teaching and learning. Fairclough's three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis (1995) was selected as a guiding framework for the study, and is described by Jorgensen (2012:19) as 'an analytical framework for empirical research on communication and society'. To conduct discourse analysis using this method all three dimensions of the framework are focused on: the linguistic features

of the text (text), processes relating to the production and consumption of the text (discursive practice); and the wider social practice to which the text belongs (social practice). In this study, policy analysis was undertaken with the aim of understanding how the language and discourses used in educational policies in the primary school sector in Northern Ireland shape and influence the meanings that teachers make and how this in turn impacts on their approach to delivering the TSPC Framework in practice. This process is illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Fairclough's three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995:98).



Janks (1997), argues that what makes the approach so powerful is that it provides multiple points of analytic entry. It does not matter which kind of analysis the researcher begins with, as long as they are all included and are shown to be mutually explanatory, as, she contends, 'it is in the interconnections that the analyst finds interesting patterns and disjunctions that need to be described, interpreted and explained' (Janks,1997:329). This view is echoed by Phillips and Hardy (2004:636) who hold that discursive activity does not occur in a vacuum; 'discourses are shared and social, with meanings that come from social interactions between groups, embedded in complex social structures'.

From this perspective, the analysis of any communicative event using Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis should include:

- Analysis of the discourses and genres which are articulated in the production and the consumption of the policy text (the level of discursive practice);
- Analysis of the linguistic structure (the level of the text); and
- Considerations about whether the discursive practice reproduces or, instead, restructures the existing order of discourse and about what consequences this has for the broader social practice (the level of social practice).

In Chapter Seven, a detailed description of how a version of this analytical framework was applied to extracts from three selected policy texts and documents is outlined and discussed. In relation to the selection of policies for analysis Jorgensen (2012:16) contends that the choice of research material for critical discourse analysis depends on several aspects: the research questions, the researcher's knowledge as to the relevant material within the social domain or institution of interest, and whether, and how, it can be accessed. As I had already conducted a number of qualitative interviews with teachers and other key staff to explore their views on the implementation of the TSPC Framework, interview transcripts were readily available for analysis. All policy documents selected are in the public domain and are easily accessible. As a former primary school teacher in Northern Ireland I am aware of the range of policy documents that impact directly on teachers' practice and determine the conditions in which they work and how to access them. The first document for analysis is the Programme for Government Draft Framework (2016-2021) which was selected due to its position as the overarching driver for the reform agenda across all sectors and services in Northern Ireland. This is followed by an analysis of the Every School a Good School policy (hereafter, often ESaGS), which is viewed as one of the key mechanisms for the instillation of the Programme for Government's approach to reform into the field of education. Finally, the most recent Chief Inspector's Biennial Report (2016-2018) at the time of writing was selected as it draws together the outcomes from inspection activity in all schools and training institutions across Northern Ireland over a two-year period with key recommendations. As stated in Chapter One, the

purpose of analysing these three specific texts is due to the significant influence and power that they possess in shaping the conditions, expectations, and agency of teachers in practice, and it is the connection between these texts and their material effects in practice, that this approach to analysis seeks to explore and understand more fully.

5.13 The way forward

In the next two chapters, the findings from the analysis of the interview data and policy analysis will be presented and discussed, allowing tentative conclusions to be drawn. The process will not only identify themes or establish that patterns exist in the data collected, but will also make links to theory and demonstrate that the conclusions reached emerge from findings in the context of other research and literature in order to make useful recommendations for future policy and practice.

Chapter 6: Qualitative Interviews

Just like that, we forgot that the vision was ours.

From The Mud Vision, The Haw Lantern, Seamus Heaney, 1987:50

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter key insights and recurring themes gleaned from the analysis of the interview data are presented and discussed. How these themes were developed from the data was discussed in the Methodology Chapter and a snapshot of the process in action is provided in Appendix Six. According to Biesta and Tedder, (2006) analysis of teachers' talk has been shown to create a window into their view of agency and the extent to which these perceptions give direction to teachers' everyday practices and the decisions they make about what to do in the here and now. Emirbayer and Mische (1998:963) also understand the notion of agency as a dynamic interplay between teachers' practice, purpose, and judgement and how this varies in different structural contexts of action. This relationship between teacher knowledge, practice and context lies at the heart of my analysis of the interview data. Following Bronfenbrenner (1979), the analysis is based on the assumption that teachers' everyday practices are not just the outcome of their judgements and professional experience but must also take into account the wider contexts and discourses that shape the ways in which they make sense of their work. This view emerged not just from responses from the foundation teachers interviewed but by responses from across the participant group.

Following Biesta (2017), the key themes that emerged from the interview data created a lens through which teachers' perceptions of the degree of agency that they have in relation to the implementation of the TSPC could be explored. In addition, the analysis also revealed the extent to which these perceptions and experiences are created and shaped by the structures in which teachers work. The participants interviewed as part of this study, particularly those working in schools, were guided by an unshakeable vision about the fundamental purpose of education and the value that a thinking curriculum could bring to all students, irrespective of their

background. Rather than conforming to the demands of the system, from this strong collective belief, these schools were able to navigate the barriers and challenges that the system created and regain their professional terrain. As the poet Seamus Heaney reminds us in the epigraph to this chapter, maintaining clarity of purpose and the courage of one's convictions in the midst of great challenge is a difficult thing to do. As the responses from all fourteen participants highlighted, the value and purpose of the TSPC as a key mechanism within the curriculum for ensuring access and equity across the education system has never wavered despite the challenges, and the vision remains theirs.

In the sections below, the five key themes that emerged from the interview data are presented and connections to the literature reviewed and to the research questions are highlighted and discussed. The first theme relates to the unique NI context, with a specific focus on how political, social, and cultural influences impact on educational policy-making and how this in turn affects the implementation of approaches such as the TSPC in schools. This is followed by a second key theme which explores the notion of what is commonly understood as being the characteristics of a thinking school, as presented in the literature and also by the participants interviewed. The third theme relates to what participants view as being the core purpose of the TSPC and how this connects to what they believe to be the fundamental aims of education and what it means to be educated in 21st century classrooms. The fourth theme presents teachers' experiences of implementing the TSPC in the foundation stage classroom and explores their perceptions and experiences of the factors that either enable or constrain their interpretation and practice. The final theme presents recurring elements that emerged from the conversations with all of the participants, including those who do not work in schools, about how the TSPC should be taken forward and a number of recommendations that might helpfully inform future policy and practice are presented for consideration. These themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data using Template Analysis as an organising framework as explained in Chapter Five at section 5.10. The research questions presented in the introduction to the Dissertation, and restated again in Chapter Five at section 5.1, guided the structure of the interview schedule. The schedule was designed with the intention

of capturing all of the participants' views and perceptions on the key areas that I wanted to investigate but with sufficient flexibility so that any issues that emerged from the conversations that participants wished to elaborate on, or clarify, could be facilitated.

6.2 Theme 1: The NI context

An over-arching, recurring theme that presented throughout the fourteen interviews with participants was the impact of the social, political, cultural, and economic context in NI on the development of the TSPC and on teachers' ability to enact it effectively in the classroom. From school-based participants' perspectives there was no escaping the influence of the constellation of systems that surround the implementation of reforms in education in NI. These influences are cross-system and shape the aims and purpose of policy interventions, create the resources to enable it, and dictate how it will be implemented and evaluated in practice. In the following sections participants' views and experiences of how NI's political and social context has influenced the effective and consistent implementation of the TSPC in foundation stage classrooms are explored.

6.2.1 NI: The political and social context and its effects on education

As detailed in Chapter Two, the political situation in NI has historically been volatile, characterised by decades of sectarian violence and conflict in what is commonly referred to as 'the troubles'. Whilst the region has experienced a relatively sustained period of peace since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, this perception of harmony on the surface often conceals ongoing divisions between its communities that are deeply entrenched.

It is against this backdrop that interviews were conducted with fourteen participants from a diverse range of roles in education in Northern Ireland as part of this study in 2018 and 2019/20. Not all of the participants worked directly in schools but all expressed concern about the unstable political situation and the negative impact that this continues to have on education provision system-wide. Four of the teachers

interviewed spoke of the unpredictability that the widespread media coverage conveys accompanied by the perception that education is, as described by participant 1G, in a '*directionless void*'. Concerns centred on the fact that, due to political wrangling for almost three years, the draft Programme for Government for 2016 - 2021 had still not yet been agreed. Three of the fourteen participants also commented on the impact of Brexit and the instability and anxiety that this had created, particularly in relation to employment and the economy. A more general concern amongst all participants interviewed was the impact of budget cuts to public services which impact on the most vulnerable. As described by one teacher, participant 1P, schools are expected *to 'pick up the pieces'* for children who are impoverished due to their personal circumstances within a context of increasingly shrinking budgets and dwindling resource. The more experienced teachers interviewed spoke powerfully about the feelings of guilt and helplessness that they experienced because they were unable to provide the ongoing support that they knew children needed to thrive academically. These teachers did not seek to blame families for this nor did they feel that it was due to a lack of ambition on the part of the children. Rather their perception was that they were prevented from thriving due to the effects of structural barriers such as poverty, poor health, trauma, and neglect which were outside of the school's control. The general feeling amongst all fourteen participants was that these issues were increasing and adversely affecting the lives of children living in marginalised communities and their ability to develop and learn in line with their more affluent peers. This position has been borne out in the data relating to GCSE outcomes (DENI, 2018) which highlights ongoing disparities based on socioeconomic factors. The conflict between the policy rhetoric of publications such as Every School a Good School (ESaGS) and the reality in the classroom was articulated by one experienced foundation stage teacher in the following terms.

> It's one thing to say, you know, this is the content that needs to be covered and here are the targets for the next six weeks, term, end of the year, but the reality is that schools are dealing with children and families, it's a whole system thing. (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30yrs of experience)

Another sub-theme that emerged from the interview data was the divisive effect of the current education system which segregates children on the basis of religion and via academic selection at age eleven. Participants viewed this as a major obstacle to fully achieving the fundamental objectives of the TSPC and fully embracing the principles of equality and respect for difference which are central to its message. Ten of the participants interviewed expressed strong views on the negative impact of segregation, feeling that it only serves to compound distrust and disharmony from a young age. Participant (1L), a former Curriculum Advisor, observed that schools are '*mini-cultures'* of the wider society, that sub-consciously promote negative views and opinions about people perceived as being '*the other'* and different because they are politically affiliated to a particular group. Ten of the fourteen participants talked about the long-term effects of the system on social mobility, pointing to the segregated teacher training system as an example of how individual choices are channelled toward maintaining the status quo at every stage of the system. This point was also highlighted by a senior university academic with research interests that seek to explore the connection between the segregated nature of the education system in NI, including how teachers are trained, and the divisive and damaging impact of this culture on teachers and students at every level of the system.

> Well, initial teacher education in Northern Ireland is a mess. We train twice as many teachers as we need. We train people in four different places, and we only need one. We should also be engaging with school partnerships. So school placements should be inter-partnerships, rather than with individual schools so that the students get to see shared education happening in practice. This is the only way that we will create tolerant and peaceful communities, it starts here. (Participant 1G, University Professor, 25+ yrs of experience)

The fact that the two main ITE institutions are also segregated was viewed by this participant as perpetuating this negative cycle since teachers trained in one institution will inevitably take up posts in schools of that religious denomination. This highlighted the cyclical nature of the segregated education system in NI and how these divisions are compounded by political systems that enable them to continue whilst at the same time questioning their purpose and worth.

The issue of academic selection (more commonly known as the eleven plus transfer test) was critiqued in detail in Chapter Two and was raised by ten of the fourteen participants as a significant barrier to social mobility, equality, and pupil wellbeing. Its continued effect on primary school education is described by one participant below.

> No matter what anyone says, the eleven plus has not gone away, it's a rose by any other name… the tests are still administered and schools are still judged by how many of their pupils get into the grammar school and teachers continue to teach to the test - that's the sad reality.
>
> (Participant 1P, primary school teacher (retired), 25yrs of experience)

Seven of the ten participants viewed academic selection as a political issue since previous efforts to abolish it completely from the system had failed. Concerns were also expressed that the test compounded inequalities and the much cited 'long tail of underachievement' that characterises NI society. An experience was recalled by one participant below.

> The effects are enduring and pupils that I taught often tell me when I meet them, that despite going on to university and obtaining a degree they never forgot the day that they opened the letter to say that they had failed the eleven plus. (Participant 1F, Primary Head Teacher (retired), 42 yrs of experience)

All participants interviewed referred to the deepening inequalities in NI society and seven participants referred directly to the effects of austerity in terms of a visceral increase in pupil need, including the impact of poverty and lack of family resources on the most vulnerable. Depleted levels of classroom support have also rendered the situation more desperate as teachers struggle to provide care as well as education, as described by one participant.

> For many families just getting the children through the door in the morning is an achievement in itself. These are the things that ETI don't see but they are the real barriers to learning … we do our best but don't have the skills or resources to do much more, is that good enough? I don't think so.
>
> (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+ yrs of experience)

Both teachers and head teachers interviewed expressed the view that the situation is compounded by an increase in more complex communication and mental health difficulties in young children on arrival into school. The perception was that support services have also experienced a battery of savage cuts resulting in lengthy waiting times for assessment, diagnosis, and allocation of resources. Whilst all fourteen participants voiced universal support for initiatives such as Nurture Schools and the focus on trauma-informed approaches to classroom practice, there was also an acknowledgement that the resources were concentrated in a small group of schools with no plans for roll-out due to the current economic climate. While teachers reported a high level of interest in the responses to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the impact of social and emotional neglect on children's development, they highlighted inconsistent levels of awareness and practice in relation to these issues in schools. They pointed to the need for more interagency working and pooling of skills to help resolve issues for children and families that single agencies alone cannot address in isolation. Issues in relation to housing, criminal justice and policing, family breakdown and isolation were referred to as well as availability of counselling and bereavement services to support families through times of stress and distress. As articulated by one Head Teacher.

> The crux of the issue is that the solution is complex and needs a mindset that is open and honest about the poor decisions and years of political wrangling that have left so many people without the basic services that they need to provide a decent standard of care for themselves and their children, I often ask myself, where is the outrage?
>
> (Participant 1F, Primary Head Teacher (retired), 42 yrs of experience)

In terms of the policy context, the TSPC Framework was introduced at a time when the education system in Northern Ireland was undergoing unprecedented levels of structural change. The purpose of the review of the education system in NI back in 2006 was to create a more unified approach to the management of education, with the five previous Education and Library Boards now subsumed into one single entity. However, the demise of the Boards led to the loss of the local support systems and curriculum services that schools were used to and a fracturing of the relationships that they had built up over many years with Curriculum Advisory and

Support (CASS) colleagues. Teachers and Head Teachers and Curriculum Advisors interviewed saw this as a huge loss since the local resource was removed at a time when schools needed it the most. The responsibility for staff training and education was now shifted significantly onto schools against a backdrop of dwindling budgets and lack of resource. Despite the challenges, the teachers and Head Teachers interviewed were enthusiastic about the TSPC approach and reported that the pupils enjoyed working in this way and using the resources. However, eleven of the fifteen participants suggested that implementation of the revised curriculum more widely continues to be constrained by the demands of academic selection. The lack of resource available to develop teachers' knowledge and practice in relation to TSPC and to create the conditions in the classroom for the framework to become more culturally embedded in schools was also highlighted.

Another key factor noted across thirteen of the fourteen interviews was the negative impact of the inspection process on teachers' ability to implement the framework effectively, particularly in the Foundation Stage. These participants reported a major disconnect between what they knew to be effective practice in the classroom and what inspectors are looking for. This was highlighted as a major challenge and one that shapes their approach to the revised curriculum and to the delivery of the TSPC in particular, as expressed by one experienced teacher below.

> But then ETI, they come into your school with evaluation processes and they write their report based on that - and it goes on the website and everyone can read it. It also goes out to the wider community and it can be either a great success or devastate you - and that's the frightening bit.
>
> (Participant 1C, Foundation Stage teacher, 25 yrs of experience)

The combination of both the academic selection test results and published reports from ETINI were cited as a major fear factor that drives teachers' implementation of the curriculum and the enactment of approaches such as the TSPC in the classroom, as explained by one teacher.

> Well, it's a delicate balance, you know, between doing what you know is right by the wee ones and ensuring that you meet the external demands - there's no escape from that … that's the reality.

(Participant 1P, primary school teacher, (retired) 25 yrs of experience)

The policy context for education was also perceived as being characterised by a culture of small-scale pilots and initiatives which receive seed funding to get started but with no provision for follow-up. At the moment the only two initiatives that have continued to gain any kind of traction and attract funding are the Shared Education Programme and the Nurture Schools Initiative. However, sustainability of both projects is a concern and the sense of frustration is captured in the comment from one former Advisor here.

> Pilots, pilots, pilots, all -. you know, the last 10, 15 years has just been full of pilots without anything actually going anywhere.
>
> (Participant 1L, Curriculum Advisor (retired), 30yrs of experience)

In the analysis it was noted that the responses from more experienced teachers and Head Teachers was a lot more critical than those who were newly qualified or who had been teaching for less than five years. These participants had worked through a number of policy-practice cycles and were more questioning of the purpose and value of new initiatives and reforms than their less experienced peers. All spoke of the danger of change for change's sake and the instability that this creates in the system, particularly for schools struggling to manage the needs of more disadvantaged learners. For this group of teachers the current policy discourse that views the purpose of education as skills development and learning for life is in conflict with their values and their experience. For them, it is a constant and additional battle to mitigate the effects of such discourses in their thinking and practice even if that means being viewed as 'a trouble-maker'. From their perspective, integration of the TSPC promotes essential life skills. As one teacher described it, '*it's about not accepting things the ways they are, but challenging them it's about being informed and wise to the agendas of those roundabout them*' (Participant 1C). This is in contrast to the responses from less experienced teachers who tended to rely more on wider discourses to explain their views on the purpose of education. These teachers tended to be less critical and often referred to the teaching of thinking as '*a life skill*' (Participant 1B) that '*prepares children for jobs that don't yet exist*' (Participant 1D). One Newly Qualified Teacher's response

when asked what they thought the TSPC was trying to achieve revealed the influence of globalisation on initial teacher education and the neoliberal logic on which it is based.

> Well, being able to think creatively, innovate and problem-solve are the skills that employers are looking for… having these skills and being able to apply them across a range of different contexts and situations will connect them to more global opportunities for travel and work, for moving more flexibly between jobs. (Participant 1D, NQT, 3yrs of experience)

It is important to note that the need for young people to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to gain employment and sustain their lives was not disputed by any of the participants interviewed. However, what the analysis did reveal was the contested space between experienced educators and policy-makers in relation to the purpose of education, the values and principles underpinning this conception, and the implications for teaching and learning. This position is important to note since it is within the confines of this space that the TSPC is interpreted and implemented by teachers. In the following section participants' views on the building blocks necessary to create and sustain a thinking curriculum in schools through implementation of the TSPC, as a key theme emerging from the analysis, is explored.

6.3 Theme 2: The characteristics of a thinking school

One of the key themes that emerged from the interview data related to what participants considered the core characteristics of a 'Thinking School' to be and the building blocks that needed to be in place to create the conditions for thinking skills to flourish. All fourteen participants highlighted the importance of knowledgeable, stable, and committed leadership as being central to the development and sustainability of a thinking curriculum in schools. They referred to the need for leadership teams to be resilient with recurring use of key words such as '*courage*' and '*backbone*' (Participants 1A, 1C, 1K, 1L, 1P) used to define the desirable personal characteristics of their senior colleagues. Responses also highlighted the view that Head Teachers constantly needed to defend and justify their decisions to

governors and inspectors in order to commit to longer term objectives. All participants acknowledged that implementation of the TSPC was a long-term project, requiring sustained ongoing commitment and support across a seven-year cycle, as described by one experienced Curriculum Advisor below.

> All change takes time to embed and become part of the culture of the school … it's not a two-minute job this you know.
>
> (Participant 1K, Curriculum Advisor (retired), 30yrs of experience)

In schools where implementation was effective, decision-making was perceived by participants as being visible, collaborative and respectful of teachers' experience and professional judgement. In these schools, all of the staff interviewed stated that they were aware of the over-arching purpose of the TSPC and the potential benefits to students, had an opportunity to debate and discuss their anxieties and concerns, and were clear about their roles and responsibilities and received training commensurate with their role. Sharing of ideas and best practice was viewed as being common in these schools as reflected in the comment from one Head Teacher below.

> A Thinking School is a learning school, and that means everyone, pupils, teachers, senior staff, non-teaching staff, parents and the wider community too, it's about listening and constantly taking the temperature of your school and then developing things from there.
>
> (Participant 1E, Head Teacher (retired), 40yrs of experience)

In summary, the ethos of the school was deemed as being central to the successful development of a thinking curriculum in schools, particularly by the school-based staff and Curriculum Advisors interviewed. A person-centred approach to the development of the TSPC by the Head Teacher and senior staff supported by well-embedded opportunities for mentoring and coaching as well as collaborative approaches to professional learning was also viewed as a crucial building block for successful implementation.

Another characteristic identified by twelve of the fourteen participants related to the kinds of teaching approaches used to implement the TSPC. A whole school

approach was viewed as being the most successful, with agreed, time bound objectives, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and a shared language for thinking embedded across the school community. Thinking skills and dispositions are infused into all aspects of learning in a highly visible and structured way and had become a natural part of learning and teaching practice, particularly in the early years. The less experienced teachers interviewed expressed their reliance on more experienced counterparts and the value of seeing the teaching and learning '*in action*', as expressed by the Newly Qualified Teacher during interview.

> I had no experience of TSPC before I came to teach here, I had great support from the teacher who was leaving and a thorough induction from the principal. I have read a lot but… you know… you really need to be able to see it to fully understand it. (Participant 1D, NQT, 3 yrs of experience)

The ability to cede control and to afford pupils the freedom to think and work independently of the teacher, as advocated by Dearden, and Papastephanou and Angeli in Chapter Four, was not always easy for some teachers and was reported by four of the school-based staff as being something of a culture shock, as observed by one teacher here.

> Teacher expectations of the wee ones had to change… it's not that they couldn't do it, they could, but as a teacher you have got to step back and provide the opportunities for them to try and fail and then pick it up again.
>
> (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+yrs of experience)

This shift in control in the foundation stage classroom from a teacher-led to a more child-led approach to teaching and learning requires a shift in culture which was acknowledged by teachers and Curriculum Advisors as being more complex than it sounds. Making this shift requires a whole-school approach and is strongly linked to the leadership model in place and the degree of autonomy that is afforded to teachers to engage in trial and error and to explore alternative, more creative approaches to the teaching of thinking skills. The teachers interviewed highlighted the need for time and space to explore and, as described by Participant IC, to '*dabble around with*' strategies and approaches to implementing the TSPC. Teachers also highlighted the need to work with colleagues to plan these

experiences in an organic way which requires support and input from senior colleagues. All fourteen participants interviewed agreed that if the TSPC is to work effectively across all schools in NI then courageous leadership is key, capacity building and professional learning is possible if structured well, and if assessment of learning and teaching is a supportive and collaborative enterprise, as described by one experienced teacher.

> The right culture is the glue that holds everything and everyone together… change is relational first and foremost, when the climate is right and staff feel safe to take the risk and know that the leadership are behind them, that's what leads to success, not policies or checklists, relationships based on trust, that's the key. (Foundation Stage teacher, 35yrs of experience)

From the perspective of the fourteen participants, in this kind of environment an authentic learning community develops, capacity building happens through processes of trial and error, safe and supportive relationships and committed leadership that is distributed and encouraged at every level. The approach is underpinned by a clearly understood and agreed purpose for developing thinking skills, a subject to which I now turn in the section below.

6.4 Theme 3: The overarching purpose of the TSPC Framework

A further theme that emerged from the interview data related to the purpose of teaching thinking and the value that this approach adds to the learners' experience. This theme of purpose was referred to by all participants in various ways and linked to beliefs about the purpose and intentions of education more generally. Thirteen of the fourteen participants referred to the importance of '*positive teacher attitudes*' and '*expectations*' for all learners and to holistic approaches to education that include wellbeing, enrichment, pleasurable experiences and self-belief. From this perspective, teaching effective thinking needs to be underpinned by a particular set of values and beliefs that inform and shape teaching approaches. For learners, such a curriculum is more flexible and inclusive than more traditional approaches to teaching and learning characteristic of earlier models. Whilst it was acknowledged by school-based staff and Curriculum Advisors that these more traditional models

are also outcome-focused, these were viewed by these participants as being often subject-based, overly prescribed and generalised with little account taken of individual progress. As the TSPC encourages thinking skills to be integrated into all aspects of the taught curriculum, teachers reported that they had made changes to their practice as a result of working with it. Their teaching now had a sharper focus on more problem-based approaches to learning that enhanced students' ability to think critically and independently and to apply a structure to their thinking across contexts. In addition, teachers reported that this kind of approach afforded more opportunities for pupils to work autonomously, to make decisions about the resources that they needed to complete a task and who they needed to work with to achieve the desired outcome. There was acknowledgement that enacting the TSPC takes time but that this was time well spent since it brought benefits for both staff and students. For students, the TSPC provides a safe space to reflect on issues that affect them and to discuss and explore problem situations and alternative ways of thinking about them. Twelve of the fourteen participants pointed to the affordances that a consistent implementation of the TSPC could provide in terms of facilitating young people to think about personal issues, emotions, choices, and important life-decisions from a range of perspectives. Used effectively, the TSPC could also be used to open up discussion on alternative ways of communicating and resolving tensions and dilemmas that are a natural part of daily life. Again, the lack of resource and access to specialist services for children and families, and the adverse impact that this has on the person and on the school community as a whole was highlighted as an area requiring urgent attention and a coordinated approach from all agencies. This position is eloquently captured by one experienced teacher below.

> Education can't do it alone but it does have an important part to play… it's just that as teachers we know that children's lives are the sum of all their parts and all these parts need care and attention because it's all interconnected, an empty sack won't stand and that's the truth of it.
>
> (Participant 1P, Primary school teacher (retired), 25yrs of experience)

The teachers interviewed also highlighted the benefits to implementing the TSPC from a professional perspective. For two of the teachers this presented an

opportunity to re-visit learning theories that they had not engaged with since their Initial Teacher Education days in the new context of insights from cognitive science and how this is implemented in the classroom. Teachers and Head Teachers interviewed also referred to feeling increased levels of motivation and interest which was driven by seeing small, but noticeable, incremental gains in the pupils' attitudes and confidence. Collaboration and school-to-school networking was viewed as a motivational factor and a key driver in sustaining the development of the TSPC, providing a structure and level of stability and resilience for the programme during periods of transition and staff turnover. Whilst participants lauded the benefits of the training that they had received, many referred back to the challenging economic climate and limited opportunities for ongoing professional learning and networking which, in their view, would have an adverse impact on their ability to develop and sustain delivery of the TSPC effectively.

For all fourteen participants, effective and consistent implementation of a thinking curriculum across all NI schools also has many benefits beyond building children's metacognitive capacity and independence. This includes its role as a drive for positive change in communities in NI. As detailed in Chapter Two, NI society is still affected by the legacy of the troubles, living under the shadow of political instability and the constant threat of a return to violence. This point was driven home by the findings from recent research undertaken by Taylor et al (2020) which suggested that by late childhood, children in Northern Ireland can readily identify and associate symbols with their social contexts. These findings also echo the outcomes from earlier research undertaken by Connolly et al in 2002, which found that children as young as three were able to recognise symbols as being linked to either loyalist or republican communities. From this perspective the TSPC performs an important purpose by creating spaces where young people gain exposure to different ideas. These spaces facilitate thinking and reflection in a more positive and structured way from an early age to develop a more tolerant society which respects and accommodates difference and where creative approaches to conflict can be achieved. This point was reflected on by one senior university academic below.

> Yeah. Well, there's a conceit in this place that young people aren't as tied up in the sectarianism and don't care about it as much as the older generation. And there's a certain amount of truth in that, but that fails to recognise what was always true, that young people are socialised into it … it's something that you've got to win not just once but win over and over again.
>
> (Participant 1G, University Professor, 25+ yrs of experience)

6.5 Theme 4: Foundation Stage teachers' experiences of implementing the TSPC Framework

As explained in the introduction to the Dissertation, participants were selected for interview due to their ongoing interest and commitment to promoting a thinking curriculum in NI schools, albeit from different perspectives. The school staff that took part in the study experienced the same challenges as every other primary school in NI and yet they still managed to retain a strong focus on TSPC. They were also acknowledged as performing exceptionally well across all areas of teaching and learning observed during inspections. On this basis, I considered that the participants in these schools were well placed to provide insights into the key drivers that support and enable effective implementation of the TSPC in the classroom as well as the challenges that they experienced and how these were overcome. The key themes from the interviews with the fourteen participants on what they perceived as being the factors that enabled or created barriers to implementing the TSPC as a reform effectively across all schools in NI are presented in the sections below.

6.5.1 Factors that enable implementation of the TSPC Framework

As expected, there was a high level of overlap between the enabling factors highlighted by participants and the characteristics of a thinking classroom that they had identified in the preceding section. Factors such as strong leadership, a whole school approach to implementing the TSPC, and the need for a positive and nurturing school culture emerged as key drivers for success. Thirteen of the fourteen participants interviewed referred to the commitment and vision of the senior leadership in their schools as being an essential driver for the effective implementation of the policy across schools. The teachers interviewed reported a

high degree of autonomy to experiment with different methods and approaches and that flexibility and creativity was encouraged in an atmosphere of collaboration and respect. Teachers also reported that the senior teams in their schools were keen to get involved at classroom level and that this approach to working with staff was viewed favourably and strengthened the professional relationships. One of the Head Teachers interviewed stated that getting into the classroom to test proposed changes was a learning opportunity for them also.

> No point at all in bringing something new into the school if you are not prepared to walk the walk alongside the teachers who are delivering it in the classroom… if you can't make it work how can they? every day's a school day for all of us.
>
> (Participant 1E, Primary Head Teacher (retired), 40 yrs of experience)

On a more practical level, resources to ensure that gains in the implementation of the TSPC were sustained and developed were factored into whole school planning and approved by school governors. These included resources for ongoing education and training to ensure that coordinators and teachers were equipped to deliver the programme effectively.

In terms of leadership style, the Head Teachers in these schools were viewed as being person-centred in their approach. They were able to manage people and expectations in ways that developed a culture of professional dialogue and safety. There was a collective view among the majority of the participants that the development of a community of inquiry is needed now more than ever due to the lack of opportunity or funding for professional learning and support. This approach to development of the TSPC by the Head Teacher was described by one teacher below.

> 'Let's just try it and see where we go' was his mantra.
>
> (Participant 1C, Foundation Stage teacher, 25+ yrs of experience)

In short, the school leadership in these schools was perceived to be grounded in reality and practically connected to the challenges in the classroom. They acted in a boundary role between the policy-makers and practice environment, were

passionate about the work, solution-driven and trustworthy and demonstrated the thinking skills and personal capabilities themselves in their everyday decision-making and interactions.

All fourteen participants referred consistently to the need for a planned and structured approach to staff development and training as an enabler to the effective implementation of any new curriculum development in schools. Whilst the majority of the participants acknowledged the quality of the training delivered as part of the initial roll-out of the TSPC, concerns were expressed at the impact of the current economic climate on school budgets and the limited opportunities to update knowledge and skills as noted above. These schools looked to themselves and their leadership for creative ways to enhance their knowledge and practice but there was a recognition that this might not be possible for all schools. Whilst the impact of budget cuts loomed large in the conversations, a creative spirit was also clearly evident.

> Everything here is now cut to the bone but there are still opportunities - in many ways you need to apply the TSPC to yourself to look at new and creative ways to share expertise and train staff, just because there's no money is no excuse, you can still change things if the mindset is right and what you're doing is right.
>
> (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+ yrs of experience)

Even during periods of transition and staff turnover, these schools counteracted potential instability by ensuring that programmes of mentoring and coaching were well embedded, led by senior, experienced staff and available to non-teaching staff, parents and all those involved in the life and work of the school. The success of the thinking schools approach was enthusiastically captured by the following observation from a teacher who had been trained in the implementation of the TSPC by staff in the school.

> This approach is a natural part of foundation stage teaching, how else would you do it? it's a natural part of how we do things here, embedded in our culture and it's up to us all both individually and as a staff to ensure that TSPC is sustained because it works for everyone, it really does, I can't imagine teaching any other way now.

(Participant 1D, Foundation Stage teacher, 3yrs of experience)

Whilst participants identified many factors that enabled effective implementation of the TSPC in their schools, the majority were in agreement that the process was not without its challenges, a subject discussed below.

6.5.2 Factors that create barriers to implementation of the TSPC Framework

A number of sub-themes emerged from interviews with participants which highlighted challenges to the implementation of the TSPC. These included the demands of the prescribed curriculum, school inspection processes, teacher attitudes and expectations, lack of a clear focus, and inconsistent access to training and education opportunities as common barriers.

A key theme from school-based staff and the Curriculum Advisors interviewed was that although the revised curriculum was less prescriptive than the previous arrangements there was still a lot of subject content to cover. In addition, it was argued that younger children require a period of time to settle into new classroom routines and progress at differing rates which are not always easy to capture. Whilst thirteen of the fourteen participants interviewed agreed that play-based learning is the most effective way to develop children's learning at foundation stage, it was also acknowledged that background knowledge and experience needs to be developed in order to begin building networks of connections as a basis for future learning. As explained by one experienced teacher below.

> We can't expect them to think if they have nothing to think about! It takes time to build up children's knowledge, language and experiences so that they begin to make connections and develop the confidence to experiment and ask questions.
>
> (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+ yrs of experience)

Rather than a criticism, these teachers acknowledged the place of subject content as providing the context for thinking skills rather than being the sole focus. On the subject of content, academic selection was also raised again as a barrier to effective

implementation of the TSPC since the test focuses on key areas of the curriculum (English, maths, science) and follows a set pattern. Although this issue has already been covered extensively in previous chapters, foundation stage teachers stressed that, despite their best efforts, they often felt pressure to begin '*teaching to the test*' (Participants 1A, 1C and 1P) as early as possible and how this impacts on the range of opportunities that they can offer and the style of teaching that is required to cover the core areas of literacy and numeracy. Parental expectations and the reputation of the school were highlighted by teachers and Head Teachers as reasons for the additional pressure as well as the perceived disconnect between the TSPC focus and ETI's expectations when they undertake inspections in the classroom and report on their findings.

This fear of criticism, and being labelled as a sub-standard or failing school, was very real for the school staff interviewed. This reinforces earlier comments about the need to ensure that the whole school community, including parents, inspectors, and external support staff, are fully engaged in the TSPC process and that a shared language for thinking and systems for sharing success are well embedded in the life of the school. The Head Teachers interviewed were clear that the development of thinking skills and personal capabilities, for both staff and students, enhances subject content and has the potential to improve outcomes in pupil performance and wellbeing in the longer term. The key role the the TSPC in enhancing pupil wellbeing was eloquently articulated by one experienced foundation stage teacher below.

> It's the constant need to defend what really needs no defence… this is the way to go for children … and I think it's resilience, confidence, self-esteem, self-belief, and they come away from school feeling that they can do what they want to do and be who they want to be - then you've done your job because everything else has a place to grow from that - without that where are they? who are they? (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+ yrs of experience)

The influence of the school inspection process on teachers' ability to optimise the TSPC to its fullest potential has been discussed in earlier sections of the Dissertation. Five of the fourteen participants referred to having received what they

termed as '*mixed messages*' from the inspectorate. For example, on the one hand teachers need to create spaces for independent learning, critical thinking and problem-solving, all of which takes time to develop. On the other hand, inspectors are still perceived by school-based staff and Curriculum Advisors as focusing extensively on literacy and numeracy and only commenting on implementation of the TSPC when they see it during inspections, and making no comment when they do not.

It was also noted by the majority of the participants that whilst the TSPC does feature in the new ETINI Self-Assessment Framework Document (2017) the outcomes were viewed by participants as being overly vague. Also, none of the teachers interviewed were aware of the document and had not used it as part of planning or CPD processes in their schools. Despite this, two of the more experienced teachers interviewed stated that they were fully engaged in effective processes of self-evaluation all the time and their view was that these were consistent and having a positive impact on children's learning. This point is captured by the following observation from an experienced foundation stage teacher below.

> Shiny publications from the Department don't necessarily mean that self-assessment is being done effectively in schools. I haven't seen this booklet but now that I have I can safely say that we as a school have been doing this and more … the staff and children have progressed in spite of it!
>
> (Participant 1C, Foundation Stage teacher, 25+ yrs of experience)

On the subject of assessment, twelve of the fourteen participants were of the view that processes were not consistently embedded across all schools in NI with varying levels of understanding about what is expected. Their view was that decreased levels of support at a local level compounded this position as more responsibility for staff development and professional learning is transferred to the Head Teacher, senior management team, and subject coordinators with limited access to external expertise. As one former Curriculum Advisor explained below.

> Where we are now in Northern Ireland is that we have thinking skills infused through our curriculum. What we're seeing in practice though, is different schools taking that forward in different ways …because of the reduced resource in the last 10 years because of how the system changed. So schools have had a lot more autonomy than in the past. I think if it had still been CASS-led, we would be in a very different place now.
>
> (Participant 1K, Curriculum Advisor (retired), 35yrs of experience)

One experienced teacher also referred to the paradox that it is only when schools are deemed as failing that any practical support is provided, as described by them below.

> There has to be a point where someone says - look let's put the proper CASS support back into schools when they're trying, and when the motivation and commitment of the staff is still there.
>
> Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+ yrs of experience)

A further challenge to implementation that emerged as a sub-theme from the data was teacher expectations and their attitudes and beliefs. On a practical level, this pertained to teachers' ability to cede control and facilitate learning opportunities that foster pupils' independence. Teachers' expectations of what young children are able to achieve in terms of their thinking was also referred to as a potential challenge that needed to be overcome, as expressed by one former Curriculum Advisor below.

> I think one of the problems we have with teachers of younger children is that they patronise them. You know, it's felt they couldn't do that. So, for example, one of the mental operations would be inferential thinking, to infer. Well, I have teachers who say, "Well, would we start that at primary four?'' I am astonished at that question because a two-year-old can infer.
>
> (Participant 1L, Curriculum Advisor (retired), 30yrs of experience)

This sub-theme also includes teacher attitudes toward the academic ability of low-income students and those with less support at home. Adopting the view that these students will never be able to achieve academically due to their home circumstances was viewed by the majority of participants as a challenge to effective implementation of the TSCP. To be effective teacher expectations need to change if

the approach is to work for all children, and participants argued that it is precisely such students who need these skills and dispositions the most to enhance their life chances and it is the role of the school to provide them, as observed by one senior university academic here.

> I disagree with the notion that qualifications and skills aren't important. But you shouldn't be fixated by them, however one of the problems in our system is that kids who are disadvantaged leave school with the least to show for it, and we should do something about that.
>
> (Participant 1G, University Professor, 30+ yrs of experience)

As highlighted in the above section, eleven of the fourteen participants also expressed the view that not all teachers are confident in the delivery of the TSPC. Interestingly it was not only the less experienced teachers that highlighted this, the point was made that all teachers, irrespective of the stage that they were at in their careers. However, a recurring concern amongst the more experienced teachers interviewed was that when questions were genuinely raised by the profession in relation to the implementation of curriculum reforms these were viewed in a decidedly negative light by policy-makers with teachers being cast as resistant to change when this was not necessarily the case, as described by one experienced teacher below.

> They (policy-makers) need to consult, but they need to actually spend time with teachers on the ground … you're trying to make it work. Even though I've been teaching for years, I'm not so set in my ways that I'm not willing to change; I will change anything if I am convinced that it will be better for the children … because I'm not going to blindly follow if experience tells me that it just isn't right. (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+ yrs of experience)

This comment, for me, encapsulates the value of hindsight, and this teacher's high level of experience and reflection on the policy-practice cycle. A number of school-based participants and Curriculum Advisors also referred to the '*policy bandwagon*' and the '*cottage industry'* of policy interventions that have no real lasting effect. This also highlights the need for policy-makers to find new and creative ways of engaging authentically with teachers and those who support them on the ground

about the rationale and approaches to curriculum reform beyond paper-based consultations and regional meetings. The lack of meaningful engagement and teacher voice in the development of policy reforms such as the TSPC was a recurring concern expressed in ten of the fourteen interviews. Participants argued that the timing of consultations (Mid-June for the TSPC which is an extremely busy time for teachers finishing up for the summer holidays) was often a significant barrier to effective engagement and implementation of any new initiative in education.

The majority of responses also highlighted the concern that the lack of a structured approach to implementation led to schools essentially doing their own thing which in turn leads to inconsistency in implementation of the TSPC and inequity in the system. Lack of a consistent approach, which is monitored and evaluated in the same way as the other areas of learning, was described by one Curriculum Advisor, Participant 1M, as '*blurring TSPC into discourses of effective teaching and best practice rather than seeing it as a core aspect of teaching and learning that requires its own focus, planned objectives, and tangible outcomes*'. As stated previously, the majority of school-based participants and Curriculum Advisors were of the view that schools without committed leadership and a clear, whole-school, focus would struggle to implement the framework consistently, and that a piece-meal approach such as that described above, would reduce its power to elicit real change in teacher and pupil learning and ultimately do more harm than good. Eleven of the fourteen participants highlighted that, as far as they were aware, there is no clear or consistent focus on the TSPC in the two main ITE institutions at either B.Ed or PGCE level. This was confirmed by Participant 1H, a lecturer from one of the two main ITE institution in NI and also by one of the Newly Qualified Teachers interviewed who stated that the first time that they had encountered the TSPC approach in practice was when they were appointed to their current schools.

> I hadn't heard anything about it, no, but everybody here knew what they were doing. I, well, sort of, joined in and got caught up in the vision … all of my professional learning has been developed here but I know other people that came out at the same time as me that work in other schools and don't teach this way at all. (Participant 1D, NQT, 3 yrs of experience)

This lack of structure and focus places added pressure on schools and also revealed that the TSPC is not explicitly offered in these Initial Teacher Education institutions in the same way as literacy and numeracy and is therefore not recognised as a core part of practice by Newly Qualified Teachers taking up post for the first time in schools. The suggestion by one teacher that the TSPC approach is '*caught rather than taught'* was not felt to be a secure enough basis for newly qualified teachers entering the profession in Northern Ireland. This also reinforces the need for schools to adopt a clear, whole-school, approach to implementation of the TSPC, with consistent programmes of training and development for all teachers from initial induction and through CPD opportunities. Thirteen of the fourteen participants argued powerfully that failure to do so results in low staff confidence and high levels of anxiety in newly qualified teachers. As expressed by one Head Teacher.

> Often thinking… well it's an automatic involuntary thing but with younger children it needs to be writ large across everything that you're doing … I would argue that it's the case with all students regardless of age or stage … and I wouldn't always have said that but I do now.
>
> (Participant 1E, Head Teacher (retired), 40 yrs of experience)

All fourteen participants argued that without proper programmes of training that cover the key principles of thinking, explore the tools and methodologies, and provide opportunities for networking and sharing of practice, consistent implementation of the TSPC in all schools will be extremely difficult to achieve. It was also argued that implementation would be enhanced by more formal opportunities for collaboration and professional working between ETI, ITEs, pilot schools and Universities to improve consistency of information and communication, the content of training programmes, and research-led approaches to planning and practice. As one former Curriculum Advisor reflected below.

> And somewhere, I think there is such a huge message about massive waste of resource. You know, the investment in Mickey Mouse projects that cost the public purse and that often are evaluated positively, but the resource was never going to be there to scale it up to be universal provision in the first place.

(Participant 1K, Curriculum Advisor (retired), 35 yrs of experience)

Despite the many challenges facing schools in their efforts to implement a thinking curriculum, all fourteen participants interviewed referred to the many positives already in place from which to build. These reflections have been developed into tentative proposals for policy and practice in the future and are presented for consideration below.

6.6 Theme 5: Proposals for the way forward

One very positive development in relation to the consistent implementation of the TSPC is that it has been adopted on a formal basis in NI which strengthens its position as an area of focus in the curriculum. One major benefit identified from the interviews was the number of schools that have adopted the TSPC as a whole-school priority over the past number of years with positive outcomes. Whilst small in number, these schools have embedded the development of thinking skills and personal capabilities into the culture and ethos of the school. Implementation is supported by well-structured programmes of training and development for staff at all levels, consistent approaches to planning and teaching, and whole-school strategies for assessment and progression. These schools are already sharing practice and professional learning with other schools and all participants were in agreement that there is huge potential for this to be developed in a more structured way with external expertise and support.

Following Bronfenbrenner (1979), all fourteen participants acknowledged that the challenges faced by schools are unique and multi-faceted and connect across a range of levels and systems. All participants referred to the impact of the external social context in which a school is located, the school culture, and teacher attitudes and expectations, that cannot be underestimated when implementing reforms. The teachers and Head Teachers interviewed also acknowledged that whilst specific contexts can pose significant challenges, effective implementation of the TSPC presents an important opportunity for pupils facing social barriers to their learning to be enabled and empowered. From their perspective, creating connections with families and professionals from other disciplines and working with them in ways

that support children to learn to think for themselves enhances their wellbeing and self-esteem. This is described by one specialist primary teacher below.

> I'm very lucky to get to be part of nurture group cluster meetings, so I meet regularly with other nurture practitioners within my region. At that, we get training but we also have our ed psych on board, so she brings ideas … so it's multi-agency support teams. They provide training on attachment, sensory processing, listening skills, attention and cognition. All of this supports children's thinking and development.
>
> (Participant 1Q, Primary Nurture Class teacher, 8yrs of experience)

The school-based staff acknowledged that whilst students presented with complex social and welfare issues that education alone cannot address, there is still much that schools can do to play their part. In this respect, three of the more experienced teachers spoke about empowering children to question rather than accept the social determinants that created these conditions in the first place. These more experienced teachers saw this as a fundamental aspect of their role and were able to articulate their reasons for this. For them, there is now a need to nurture criticality and confidence in pupils with a view to enabling them to think and act in ways that might change society for the better rather than accepting things as they are, as expressed by one experienced teacher below.

> I mean all this talk about preparing children in primary one for jobs that haven't been created yet, who started that? personally I think it's for the birds, who cares about twenty years' time and who can actually predict what it will be like. I was teaching twenty-five years ago and the same jobs are still here they just require different approaches. It's the person that you want them to become that needs nurturing now… who are they at their core? that's what stands the test of time. (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+ yrs of experience)

Participant's responses also highlighted a number of key actions that they believed needed to be implemented if the TSPC Framework was to be integrated into practice across all schools. These are presented below.

6.6.1 Next steps for embedding the TSPC in all NI schools

For the majority of participants, the reinstatement of the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) to provide expert advice to schools at a local level was deemed to be essential. They proposed that the service should be structured to include a team dedicated to the development of the TSPC and should provide a number of key functions, including: a clear and consistent framework for professional learning across all stages of a teacher's career, including ITE; support with assessment and progression; more planned opportunities for multi-agency training and working, and wider policy reforms that tackle the underlying structural barriers to learning. These proposals are summarised here.

In relation to the reinstatement of the CASS service, participants envisioned a model in which each area or Board would have its own TSPC team based on a hub and spoke approach with governance and reporting arrangements aligned to a regional service. Participants felt that this would ensure consistency of approach and sharing of best practice across all schools as well as ensuring equitable access to resources and support. They argued that this tighter focus would also help to facilitate a whole-school approach to the implementation of the TSPC as this dedicated advisor would be able to coordinate activity across the schools in their area and network across Boards regionally as appropriate.

In relation to the provision of professional learning and CPD, eleven of the fourteen participants commented on the changing style of training in TSPC that they had experienced over time. This ranged from a three-day course with follow-up over a six month and 12-month period supported by cluster groups, to a one-day course which involved the transmission and presentation of a great deal of new and often complex information with insufficient time for discussion and exploration of how this should be interpreted and translated into practice. This approach was viewed by teachers as providing an insufficient basis from which to integrate the TSPC into practice and the sense of frustration experienced is articulated by one teacher below.

> One or two day courses on this with no follow-up just doesn't cut it - it's reflective of how the job is viewed by policy-makers, if it's such an important area of focus well I just don't see it… where is the training and resource, it wouldn't happen in any other profession, in industry, if you didn't have the right level of training you wouldn't be allowed on the job, but with children it's ok. (Participant 1P, Primary School teacher (retired), 25 yrs of experience)

Teachers interviewed also expressed the view that the return to a local model of dedicated support would provide more opportunities for school-to-school networking and cascade of learning which would improve consistency of approach and motivate staff to continue to develop and sustain implementation. Teachers and Curriculum Advisors interviewed also argued that professional learning in relation to the TSPC should also be fully embedded into ITE training in line with the other core subjects. Six of the teachers and Head Teachers interviewed felt that this was essential since what was described by one teacher, participant 1A, as the current '*hit and miss*' approach to the TSPC in teacher training was not viewed as being effective. These participants argued strongly that the TSPC and its principles, methodology, and implementation in practice, should be embedded in a structured and coherent way into all programmes of initial teacher training. Clear links should also be made with philosophy, psychology, and sociology of education course components to ensure that students understood the connections and underpinning principles on which the teaching of thinking skills is based. This lack of focus was described by one experienced foundation stage teacher below.

> The laugh is, as teachers, they're telling us constantly in schools that we are preparing children for jobs that don't yet exist. But then we're still training teachers in the old ways. The training colleges are still teaching in the old ways, and they are not teaching the new teachers the importance of developing thinking skills and capabilities and how to do it through the framework … it's ludicrous, they should be coming out and telling us how it should be done!
>
> (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+ yrs of experience)

A more multidisciplinary and collaborative approach to initial teacher training was proposed as a way forward, with curriculum advisory support staff and ETI working together with pilot schools to provide training and practical workshops on TSPC at

specific times in the academic year, and when student teachers are in placement in schools. Foundation stage teachers and Curriculum Advisors interviewed were in agreement that multi-disciplinary working is the key to embedding the TSPC Framework into practice across all schools consistently.

As well as multi-agency involvement in ITE, the majority of participants also identified the need for more joined-up working between schools and services that work with children and families. From a policy perspective, foundation stage teachers felt that this would require a shift in focus from improvement and effectiveness, to broader, more collaborative approaches with shared agendas, objectives and funding. Teachers interviewed felt strongly that inter-agency training sessions on areas such as trauma responsive approaches to teaching and opportunities to understand nurture methodology would be beneficial to teachers who are engaged in implementing the TSPC, particularly in areas of social disadvantage. For them, this was the way forward for teaching rather than a silo approach to education that is no longer fit for purpose. Responses also focused on the role of inspection and the view from twelve of the fourteen participants was that more autonomy and control needs to be given to schools in the identification of their own successes and areas for development rather than depending on the outcomes from inspection processes to drive their priorities. Three of the foundation stage teachers reported that the current inspection regime had a disabling effect on them, decreased their motivation, and limited more creative approaches to developing TSPC practice. In their view, inspection teams and CASS staff should play a more visible and integrated role in the professional learning of teachers with development of practice included as a key part of their remit. Teachers argued that this would send a clear message to schools that everyone is working toward the same outcome and working collaboratively in the best interests of all children, schools, and communities. More use of case studies, pilot schools, and communities of practice to support the development of TSPC across all schools was also recommended by the majority of participants interviewed. This was viewed as a more positive way forward rather than short-term funding to support pockets of best practice in some schools that are rarely provided with the opportunity to scale up or spread their practice effectively.

Linked to the subject of professional learning was the area of assessment and progression in the TSPC approach. Twelve of the fourteen participants interviewed suggested that this was an area that required further focus and development if foundation stage teachers were to evaluate learners' progress effectively and forward plan on the basis of the outcomes. However, it was also acknowledged that whilst it would be desirable to have a clear progression across the five TSPC dimensions this would require a different approach to evaluation since many of these skills and dispositions develop over time and are not easily captured through the kinds of measurable, quantifiable, checklist-type methods commonly used in schools.

In relation to the role of wider policy reforms that influence education, twelve of the fourteen participants stated that there was a clear need to tackle the underlying social determinants of educational achievement. These include structural barriers such as poverty, inequality and discrimination that affect the whole person, socially, emotionally, and academically. Tackling this requires a shift in policy, from individual departmental agendas to more collaborative and participative approaches to planning and delivery that focus on the totality of systems that surround individuals, families, and communities. From this perspective, education is viewed as part of this system and is a key stakeholder in conversations around the social determinants of poor health, poverty, social justice and inequality and the risk factors inherent in structural barriers that impede educational achievement and positive outcomes in life. The majority of participants felt that such a strategy would require cross-government commitment, coordination and consistency if it was to have a lasting effect. In this way, it was argued, all students would benefit from the combined force of all agencies working together, sharing expertise and resources, with shared agendas and objectives that have human flourishing for those most in need at their heart. The need for such an approach has become ever more urgent as evidenced by the outcomes from The Marmot Review 10 Years On (Marmot et al, 2020) which states that austerity has taken its toll on the most disadvantaged, from child poverty, declining education funding, and increases in violent crime and precarious employment.

> The health of the population is not just a matter of how well the health service is funded and functions, important as that is. Health is closely linked to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age and inequities in power, money and resources – the social determinants of health.
>
> (The Marmot Review 10 years on, 2020:3)

As the Marmot Review 10 Years On (Marmot et al, 2020:5) states, '*If health has stopped improving then society has stopped improving*'. If that is the case then what greater call to arms for services that support children and families, including education, to come together can there be?

6.7 Conclusion

In this chapter the five key themes and associated sub-themes that emerged from the interview data were presented and discussed. Connections to the literature reviewed and to the research questions that framed the study were also highlighted. Findings from the interviews with participants presented a number of common themes on the factors that both enable and constrain the effective implementation of the TSPC in all schools. Strikingly, the power attributed to the social, political, cultural and economic context and its shaping influence on the development and enactment of education policy by teachers across the system highlighted that the TSPC does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, following the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and my adaption of his model in this study, it is implicated in a complex web of agendas, interests, and discourses that reflect local, regional, and global priorities. However, what the analysis also revealed was that from the perspective of the fourteen participants interviewed, and despite these challenges, enactment of the TSPC is possible and happening very effectively in a number of schools. The factors that enable this at school level pertained to the commitment of the leadership and its ability to navigate competing demands and maintain staff motivation over time. The provision of professional learning and opportunities for sharing good practice and the development of a culture of trust and collaboration was also viewed by foundation stage teachers as being key to the successful implementation of the TSPC as well as a whole school approach to its implementation which engages all members of the school community. Participants also proposed a number of

recommendations that would support implementation of the policy across all schools. These included the reinstatement of the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service locally to ensure equal access to support and expertise; a consistent framework for professional learning; more structured opportunities for multi-agency working, and wider policy reforms that protected the needs of the most vulnerable. The majority of the participants interviewed spoke repeatedly of the need to park outdated ways of working and thinking and raise expectations of what can be achieved with tenacity and ambition. From this perspective, these schools are themselves living examples of how system challenges and barriers can be collectively and creatively overcome and have much to offer to schools setting out on a similar journey.

However, it could be argued, that all of the challenges to implementation highlighted by participants are themselves part of much broader systems with political responses that are forged by a number of different agendas and the discourses that drive them. In the following chapter, using an approach based on Norman Fairclough's (1995) version of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), I will explore three key policy documents that exert a strong influence on education in NI and how the TSPC is implemented at school level. The purpose of the analysis is to identify and explore the wider discourses that inform these policies, and to examine how these relate to the challenges to implementation identified by interview participants that prevent the TSPC from being implemented consistently across all NI schools.

Chapter 7: Policy Analysis

> Changes in education here are like a game of snakes and ladders, one minute you're doing great and the next everything turns on its head - then five years later we are back to square one.
>
> **Participant 1A, Primary teacher, 30yrs of experience.**

7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, five key themes that emerged from interviews conducted with a range of participants from across the education sector in NI were presented. The comment from the experienced teacher in the epigraph to this chapter reflects the many changes in education that they have experienced throughout their long career as a primary teacher in NI and the cyclical nature of the reforms from their perspective. The conversations with participants highlighted the historical nature of what they perceived to be the main barriers to educational achievement for all young people in NI and successive government's systematic failure to address them. The contested space in which policy-making in NI takes place and the range of agendas and influences that shape educational reforms and their effects in practice was also evident in the discussions. One of the key themes highlighted was the adverse effects of current approaches to education policy-making in NI and its realisation through structures based on Human Capital Theory and its associated concepts. Throughout the interviews the key role that participants perceived policy texts, and the discourses that constitute them, play in influencing how teachers make sense of and implement curriculum change, in ways that are not always explicit was emphasised. This led to my decision to review three key policy documents that were referred to continuously and identified by participants as key drivers of teaching approaches to curriculum change, including the implementation of the TSPC in primary schools.

A detailed discussion of the framework that I used to structure the policy analysis was presented in Chapter Five. My approach was based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (1995) which sees language as a form of social practice with real effects on how individuals interpret and implement

the messages that policy texts convey. According to Fairclough, discourses 'word' or 'lexicalize' the world in particular ways (Fairclough, 2003:129) and he maintains that by undertaking a structured analysis of the linguistic characteristics of a text using particular tools, it is possible to cast light on how discourses are activated textually and how they arrive at, and provide backing for, particular interpretations.

In this chapter the outcomes from policy analysis of the following three policy documents are presented and discussed. These are, firstly, The Programme for Government Draft Framework (2016-2021) which sets the direction for key priorities across all areas of public life, including education, and the allocation of budgets and resources to support them. Secondly, The Every School a Good School: A Policy for School Improvement (Hereafter often ESaGS) (Department of Education for NI, 2009) was selected for analysis as it was implemented to support schools to raise standards and address barriers to learning through a more rigorous approach to evaluating and improving the quality of teaching and learning across every NI school. Finally, the most recent Chief Inspector's Report (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2016-2018) was selected for review as participants identified the Education and Training Inspectorate for Northern Ireland (ETINI) as playing a central role in the implementation of the ESaGS policy and in evaluating its impact and effectiveness across all schools and services within its remit. The outcomes from inspections are reported both at individual school/service level, and on a bi-annual basis through the publication of The Chief Inspector's Report. This is an important and highly influential document for schools which draws together key findings and insights from evaluations carried out across a two-year period including inspections, surveys, and district work across a range of sectors.
These policy texts were selected for analysis due to their impact on education at every level of the system, including the ways in which teachers interpret and implement policy reforms in the classroom, including the TSPC, as discussed in the previous chapter. A detailed summary of the content of each policy is presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Summary of the three policy texts analysed as part of the study

Policy Text	Author and Yr of Publication	Sections	Status
NI Programme for Government 2016 - 2021	Northern Ireland Executive (2016) 114 pages	1. Foreword Pg 5 2. Introduction Pg 7 3. Summary Pg 12 4. Section 1 – Outcomes Pg 17 5. Section 2 – Indicators Pg 46 6. Equality Screening Pg 144	Draft
Every School a Good School - a Policy for School Improvement	Department of Education for NI (2009) 39 pages	1. Introduction Pg 1 2. Key Principles for Policy Development Pg 5 3. The Case for Change Pg 7 4. Our Vision for Excellence in Our Schools Pg 15 5. Our Policy – A Strategic Approach Pg 17 6. Roles and Responsibilities Pg 24 7. Key Targets and Implementation Plan Pg 39	Statutory

Policy Text	Author and Yr of Publication	Sections	Status
Chief Inspector's Report 2016 - 2018	Education and Training Inspectorate for NI (2018) 118 pages	1. Foreword Pg 1 2. Commentary Pg 5 3. Pre-school education Pg 51 4. Primary education Pg 64 5. Post-primary education Pg 69 6. Special school education Pg 74 7. Education other than at school Pg 83 8. Youth Pg 89 9. Work-based learning Pg 94 10. European Social Fund Pg 108 11. Work for other commissioning departments Pg 114 - Inspections provided for Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland - Inspections provided for the Home Office	Final Report - Non-stautory

In the sections below each policy text will be analysed using a framework based on Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis (1995). This approach was illustrated in Chapter Five at section 5.11 and its purpose is to examine the genres and discourses used by the authors to convey the policy's vision and message in order to identify its underlying intentions and ideological cues. The outcomes of the analysis of each policy text are presented and discussed in the sections below and the chapter ends with a summary of the key themes from the analysis and a discussion on how they influence how teachers interpret and implement new policy reforms such as the TSCP Framework in the foundation stage classroom.

7.2 Northern Ireland Programme for Government (Draft) Framework (2016-2021)

The NI Programme for Government Draft Framework document (2016 - 2021) (hereafter, often PfG) presents a change in approach to the achievement of societal goals from that of previous administrations. Published by the NI Executive in December 2016 after a nine-week period of consultation the document sets a clear direction of travel for what it sees as being 'the essential components of societal wellbeing' (p.7). These broad aims touch on every aspect of government, including the attainment of good health and education, economic success, confident and peaceful communities, and improving the life chances of the most disadvantaged.

The PfG's vision for education is that all phases will work together toward the overarching aim of building a more cohesive, resilient, and economically successful society. It is clear from the language of the document that from the Executive's perspective this will be best achieved through a model of education that privileges particular sets of skills and qualifications that will enhance individuals' employability, this connection is illustrated on page 68 where it is stated that, 'Northern Ireland's capacity to become more successful in the rapidly changing global, innovation driven economy will be significantly influenced by the skills of its people'. This view of education as a key economic driver is not unique to the NI Executive and has become the dominant narrative of most modern governments in the 21st century. It is also perhaps understandable, given NI's fragile economic position and troubled history, that the Executive was keen to take it on board so readily. However, responses from participants interviewed as part of this study highlighted the disconnect between the government's policy narrative on education, the practice approaches that it drives, and the professional and ethical challenges that enacting it in the classroom presents. They were also doubtful that the approach as it stands has the power to achieve the social and welfare goals that it has set out in any meaningful way and were fearful that it may have the opposite effect and exacerbate inequalities more profoundly for the most vulnerable. This frustration is expressed by one experienced Curriculum Advisor in the following terms below.

> It mightn't be all that politically correct a thing to say but you know… but it's mostly civil servants or people who have never stood in a classroom that are writing this stuff… it wouldn't happen in any other profession.
>
> (Participant 1K, Curriculum Advisor (retired), 35yrs of experience)

In the following sections, the disconnect between the Executive's narrative and approach to education reform and teachers' experience of implementing it in practice will be explored. For the purposes of this study, Fairclough's version of the framework will be used to analyse the interplay between the language, textual features, and discourses drawn upon in the PfG. How these different components work together to legitimise and promote particular interpretations of policy interventions in education, and the extent to which these interpretations are either accepted and or challenged by teachers in their work will also be explored.

7.3 Genres and discourses in the Draft Programme for Government

According to Fairclough (1998:70), when analysing genres in texts it is important to ask 'what are people doing discoursally?'. This question suggests that authors select genres with a particular purpose in mind and that genres themselves are a performative rather than purely communicative tool. On analysis, the Programme for Government Draft Framework (2016-2021) is 'mixed' in terms of its genre combining both the textual and structural elements of conventional policy texts with a more contemporary, corporate communications approach. According to Cornelissen (2014) the inclusion of this genre in policy texts is used as a communicative tool to persuade individuals to 'buy into' a particular vision, proposal or approach. This purpose is illustrated in the style adopted in the PfG's vision statement below.

> This Framework sets out the ambition the Executive has for our society. They are intended to address the big issues facing our society and to make a difference in the things that matter most to people.
>
> (NI Programme for Government, 2016:5)

The key role that the PfG plays in delivering this ambition, and the importance that the Executive attaches to it, is conveyed by its positioning in the opening sentence, signaling its significance to the reader, a strategy described by Halliday 'as the peg on which the message is hung' (Halliday, 1980:255). Whilst the Executive is referred to in the third person it is clear that ownership of the proposals, and the agency for delivering them, lies with them. References to the 'big issues facing society' and 'making a difference in the things that matter most to people' speak to the reader on a personal level and are used as soundbites more commonly associated with a more conversational style of popular media than policy. This is another feature of the promotional style of the document and its apparent intention to connect across a broad range of audiences. A sense of unity and shared purpose is conveyed through repeated references to 'our' society underpinned by a common-sense logic and acceptance that there are 'big issues' to be addressed and that everyone is in agreement about what they actually are. This theme is continued in the next section which sets out what the Executive needs to have in place to achieve its ambition,

> We recognise that for this to work effectively, we need a cohesive Executive working to deliver for all. We also need a system of government that works across boundaries, organisations, groups and communities for the common good (Programme for Government, 2016:5)

Again, consensus around the aims of the PfG and how these should be achieved is assumed as the Executive continues to seemingly converse with itself about what needs to be in place if its proposals are to be effective. The structure of the sentences and how they are textured together in a repetitive rolling pattern - 'we recognise', 'we need', 'we also need' - conveys a sense of urgency and that these changes are inevitable and driven by forces beyond our, or their, control. While the changes may be irrevocable, the genre and language of the text work together to give a sense of unity and shared purpose in relation to the reforms that the Executive is promoting. This is further strengthened by continuously highlighting the failure of previous approaches to policy making, signaled by the fact that a new approach is now needed, one that is 'cohesive' and delivers 'for all' in a system that

works for ‘the common good’. This movement from the old to the new and from the past to the future aligns with the ‘problem - solution’ framing of the text that adds power to the justification for particular policy actions and solutions. This framing is another aspect of the promotional character of the document which is a good example of what Edwards and Nicoll (2004:3) describe as a ‘persuasive text’ as illustrated by the extracts below.

> This will require significant changes in approach and behaviour…
> Specific strategies and actions will feature with much more joined-up thinking and greater partner engagement than ever before.
>
> (Programme for Government, 2016:5)

As reported by the teachers interviewed as part of this study, the high-level strategies referred to in the PfG, and the approach to achieving them, were distilled into policy making in education in NI with profound effects. The journey from policy development to implementation is never a straightforward process and the clear message from participants interviewed highlights the disconnect between the approaches to education policy decided at a macro level and teachers’ perspectives on the appropriateness of these approaches in school settings. This includes the principles and values underpinning them, and their effects in practice. This disconnect was described by Participant 1A, one of the experienced teachers interviewed, as ‘*a forever problem*’ and they remained unpersuaded that engagement had taken place with them as partners in any authentic or meaningful way. The problem may have been simply stated by Tyack and Cuban (1995) when they said that good policies and sensible innovations `seem to die in contact with the institutional reality of the school' (Tyack and Cuban, 1995: 60). Whatever the cause, the outcomes from this study highlight the real need for more authentic and consistent opportunities for input into policy-making in education by teachers, academics, researchers, and those who support teachers in the classroom. Until then, who decides whether policies and innovations are either necessary or appropriate, and how this will be implemented, will remain a contested space. In the following section the discourses drawn upon in the PfG document and their effects on education policy-making and teachers’ approaches to practice is explored.

7.3.1 Management Discourse

From the foreword to the conclusion, the language of neoliberal thinking and its realisation through human capital approaches to education is dispersed throughout the PfG text. This is evidenced through use of particular words to denote new ways of implementing policy interventions, now defined as policy processes and systems, and is in contrast to previous approaches that relied more on professional judgement and expertise in phasing in new initiatives into schools. The document is replete with words and phrases that describe ways of evaluating policy interventions in more managerial terms, for example, 'governance and regulation', 'action planning', 'value-added', 'outcome focused planning' and 'performance indicators'. This shift in focus from more traditional approaches to policy implementation and evaluation is illustrated in the introduction to the Executive's newly devised approach to reform. This section refers directly to the implementation of policy by setting 'outcomes' and 'indicators' to evaluate its success with a clear focus on impact.

> The key elements of the approach are a focus on outcomes, indicators which show the change we want to bring about, measures that will let us know if we are succeeding, a focus on impact, an opportunity for the Executive to work with local government, the private sector and the voluntary and community sectors.
>
> (Programme for Government, 2016:7)

According to Ball (2008:59), this shift is reflective of a de-valuing of the broader professional and relational aspects of policy 'work' in favour of more technical and pragmatic forms of policy 'evaluation' based on quantitative measures, benchmarking and data. This is characteristic of the global shift from what is perceived as being older, more bureaucratic, ways of working to newer, and more efficient ways of delivering services under the banners of quality, accountability and choice.

Troyna (1994), writing over twenty years ago, argued that the inclusion of such terms in education act symbolically and metaphorically in policy texts as 'condensation symbols', defined as 'a name, word, phrase, or maxim which stirs vivid impressions involving the listener's most basic values and readies the listener

for action.' From this perspective, the infusion of management discourse and processes into education policy and practice signals the nature and structure of the reforms to come. This narrative has become increasingly dominant in policy making in education across the world as teachers' professional judgement and autonomy is displaced by more administrative and technical processes such as objective setting, school development planning, targets and impact assessments. This is eloquently expressed by one experienced foundation stage teacher here.

> It's like the strings that attach teachers to the children in front of them every day are being cut one by one and replaced with paperwork … the thing is that displays on the wall don't mean that children can think any better! this takes time and skill to develop and that isn't always appreciated.
>
> (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+ yrs of experience)

According to Burbules and Torres (2000), this neoliberal version of globalisation in education judges people by the stock of skills and qualifications that they can accumulate. This perspective on the purpose of education is in stark contrast to the views of teachers interviewed as part of this study who adopted a more holistic understanding of the relationship between the teacher, the student, and the many different contexts in which they live and learn. This disconnect between the macro level language of education policy used by Government and the language that teachers use in their daily practice was a recurring theme in the responses from the teachers and Head Teachers interviewed. School-based staff and Curriculum Advisors interviewed also referred to the welter of policy publications issued by the Department of Education, with one experienced Advisor, Participant 1K, describing this as a '*cottage industry*' and as '*a burden*' on schools - a meaningless form of '*government speak'* far removed from the dynamic and diverse contexts in which teaching and learning takes place. The lack of meaningful consultation with teachers on proposed changes to education was also an issue highlighted during the interviews and this is described by one experienced teacher below.

> They ask for your comments on policy proposals and plans and you provide what you think will give some insight into what might work or not work in the classroom. Then the policy comes out and it's exactly the same as it was first time round. It's like we are speaking a different language.

(Participant 1C, Foundation Stage teacher, 25+ yrs experience)

One of the more experienced teachers interviewed reflects on the effects of this top-down approach in their classroom here.

> It's like a conveyor belt all the time… churn them out, show us what they can do, except it's children we're dealing with not washing machines… and they feel failure, they really do, even at such a young age, and it's the system that's doing it, and that's the awful part.
>
> (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+ yrs experience)

This reflection is a powerful expression of the impact of high-level Government approaches to reform on teachers and children. Use of the *'conveyor belt'* metaphor to describe a system that '*churns'* out children clearly illustrates the frustration and powerlessness that this teacher feels in her efforts to navigate the terrain between Government directed approaches to education and what needs to be done from a professional perspective to support all children's learning. This description of the disconnect between the expectations of the system and the teachers who work in it highlights that views on the core purpose and structuring of education between policy makers and teachers are contested. This position suggests that further focus and input is required to improve communication and understanding of collective aims from each other's perspectives.

7.3.2 Globalisation, neoliberalism and the knowledge economy

As argued by Gillies (2015), education and training is now viewed as a form of 'human capital' providing social and economic benefits from a highly-skilled workforce and the quality of the education system that produces it. A critique of Human Capital Theory and its effects on education policy-making and practice was discussed in Chapter Three at section 3.3. This discourse of skills is reflected throughout the PfG document as illustrated through the language and style used in the extract below which connects improving productivity and sustainable economic growth directly to the development of a relevantly skilled population.

> Northern Ireland's capacity to become more successful in the rapidly changing global, innovation driven economy will be significantly influenced by the skills of its people. Continuing to develop a highly, relevantly skilled population is essential to improving productivity and sustainable economic growth… Equipping our workforce, and those entering it, with the skills that employers need is critical to the attraction and creation of new quality jobs.
>
> (Programme for Government, 2016:68)

Here the drive to ensure economic growth by focusing on skills that are 'relevant' and desirable to employers is clearly articulated by the Executive in pragmatic and functional terms. From the extract it is clear that decisions about what these relevant skills actually are will be made by employers, and that they are influenced primarily by economic imperatives rather than broader, more inclusive, societal goals. The need for the Executive to regenerate NI society economically, socially, and culturally is not disputed, instead, what is in question is the model of education that the approach to the delivery of these objectives entails and its effects. This is perceived as being in conflict with teachers' beliefs about their role as educators and their views on the broader aims of education based on principles of equity, wellbeing and justice for all. Following Troyna (1994), the pragmatic and technical style of the language used conveys a message to its readers about the nature of the approach to achieving these objectives across public services and the form that this will take. In keeping with the Programme's managerial flavour the teacher is viewed as the manager of their pupils' learning. Their role is now to 'equip' them to be members of the future workforce rather than to 'teach' them. This shift from learning to the acquisition of skills represents a pattern throughout the document and has implications for pupil's relationship to knowledge and the role and purpose of thinking skills within current curriculum models. As highlighted by Mulderrig (2008:163), compared with learning, acquiring skills is very much an individualised and instrumental activity and a process much more amenable to being compartmentalised into discrete elements that can be easily measured. Whereas learning is embedded in a network of interdependent social relations, the acquisition of skills isolates learning from its local context and prevents the learner from making the kind of abstract connections that are the key to higher-level thinking and understanding (Bernstein, 2000). From a global perspective, Ball (2008:25) argues that education is now increasingly viewed

primarily in these terms, entangled in the concept of a knowledge economy which is based on assumptions that the ability to produce and use knowledge has become a major factor in economic development and critical to a nation's competitive advantage more globally. This shift is further illustrated by comments from teachers about the purpose of schooling and how this has changed over time, as reflected by one experienced teacher below.

> We are preparing our P1 children for jobs that haven't even been created yet and that's the reality… that's what we are told… it makes no logical sense to me because we live in the here and now, and while some things change a lot stays the same and you can learn what skills you need to do a job when you're in the job. It feels like a fool's gold approach to learning and life for many of our children. (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+ yrs experience)

For these teachers, the disconnect between the Executive's rhetoric and the reality of learning and life for many of the children that they teach is very tangible. Rather than having limited expectations for their children, these teachers understand that education is about more than the acquisition of skills and is in contrast to the '*fool's gold*' approach described by the teacher in the extract above and promised by policy reforms and interventions.

In the PfG, globalisation is portrayed as an irrevocable fact of life and NI's ability to fully capitalise on the opportunities that it brings is interpreted as a need for public services to become more aligned with the private sector in its values and ways of working. This aspiration is driven by ideologies of the market and the insertion of management theory into public sector institutions which require new forms of managerialism and control. Whilst the skills discourse is, arguably, the narrative of modern governments in the 21st century, the comments from the majority of participants interviewed as part of this study highlight the deep theoretical divide that exists between policy-makers and teachers on the purpose of education, the ways in which it is being re-defined, and how what it means to be an educated citizen is changing as a result. Their concerns centred around the marginalised and those left behind by a heartless system that privileges only those capable of taking part in the race to the top. From their perspective, the policy is

devoid of equity and social justice in any meaningful way despite the rhetoric, a subject which is discussed in the following section.

7.3.3 Social Democratic Discourse

In contrast to the ways in which discourses of managerialism and globalisation feature in the text, objectives relating to the tackling of structural barriers such as poverty and the outcomes associated with this are presented in more limited terms. For example, scant detail is provided beyond broad quantitative percentage measures that relate to levels of poverty and outcomes from health surveys on the practicalities of how precisely these barriers will be addressed.

> Inequalities in health outcomes arise from the most invidious effects of poverty and deprivation… these will be reduced by supporting people to make healthy lifestyle choices, and by providing excellent standards of care.
>
> (Programme for Government, 2016:48)

People 'experience' poverty as opposed to being trapped in it and need to be 'supported to make healthy lifestyle choices' rather than be provided with the capability and means to do so. Life in the vicious cycle of disadvantage and neglect that so many children face is presented in the extracts above as a choice that their parents have chosen to make rather than a failure of the system. A number of the teachers spoke powerfully about the feelings of guilt that they experienced when attempting to support children in their learning against a backdrop of poverty, neglect, and lack of community and family resources, as expressed by one experienced foundation stage teacher here.

> It's just there all the time… gnawing away at them from the minute that they come to school, how can you learn if you are going home to a house where feeding the family day to day is the priority and the stress… you're barely surviving on your own with your children? the desperation… how must that feel? and then we complain when the reading book isn't returned intact and the homework isn't done… where's the humanity in this? we need to put the humanity back into teaching.
>
> (Participant 1C, Foundation Stage teacher, 25+yrs experience)

These comments from practitioners were a recurring theme in the interviews and highlighted the futility of an approach to education based on economic rather than social aims for the most vulnerable children in our schools. The gnawing effects of poverty and disadvantage and the disconnect between the expectations of school and the reality of children's lives is interpreted by the teacher as a lack of humanity and collective feeling for families who struggle in these circumstances as school budgets and children's services are depleted by austerity measures and the need to do more with less.

As Ball (2008) points out, policy discourses that focus on taking personal responsibility for learning and apportioning blame is a feature of everyday neoliberal discourse where social cohesion, closing the attainment gap, and tackling inequality, is re-construed in economic terms as being about 'human' quality. From this perspective, quality is characterised by the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, secure and sustain better jobs, and develop transferable skills to maximise individual potential. This logic is clearly evident in the PfG document with its many references to 'maximising potential' in order to 'progress up the skills ladder' and the Executive's ambition to 'create employment opportunities for those who have become detached from the labour market' (PfG, 2016: 27). People are defined by the value that they can add to the workforce, conveyed through use of binary comparisons such as employed/unemployed, skilled/unskilled, and active/inactive that present a simplistic view of the problems faced and their solutions. This belies their complexity and promotes a mis-recognition of the impact of structural barriers as a personal failing, rather than the multiple failures of government policy to address them. Whilst it is evident that the document makes much of detailing the structural issues endemic in NI society and the need to tackle them, the vagueness of the proposals and the lack of clarity around where the funding required to deliver the changes in a sustainable way, poses questions about their integrity and whose interests are really being served by implementing them.

In summary, whilst both neoliberal and social democratic discourses are combined in the Programme for Government they attract different policy priorities and actions. On this basis, it would be important for the Executive to ensure that if it is

truly committed to its aim of improving wellbeing for all, that proposals on social inclusion and tackling inequality are prioritised and implemented in ways that do not end up excluding those who need them the most. As reflected by one experienced teacher interviewed below.

> We have a choice as the teacher in our own classroom…do we follow these policies blindly or act in ways that we know to be professionally sound and to the benefit of all children, you know? if we give in then we will be picking up the pieces of these children's lives across health and social services for many years to come… it's an own goal so I know what one I'd be choosing.
>
> (Participant 1P, Primary teacher (retired), 25yrs experience)

As contended by Fairclough (1998), how discourses, genres, and styles are worked together in a text has implications for how it is received, interpreted, and implemented. In the PfG, a neoliberal discourse is textured with discourses of partnership working and change in ways that construct particular ways of seeing and doing things. The genres selected support this and act as a conduit between the text and the context, providing a character and personality to the discourses that they represent, that when taken together, incline its audience to behave and act in ways that bring the preferred reading to life. The purpose of the above analysis has been to explore and establish what the Programme for Government Draft Framework 2016-2021 is, according to Fairclough (1998:70), 'doing discoursally'. My assessment is that the choice of discourses and genres and the way in which they have been textured together lays the groundwork with its broader audience for the nature of the societal reforms to come and how these will be achieved. The analysis suggests that these reforms seem to be driven primarily by economic rather than welfare considerations. Applying a human capital theory approach to policy making in education has been controversial and has exposed deep theoretical and ethical divides between policy-makers and teachers about the purpose of education and how the role of the teacher is defined and presented in policy. As illustrated by the excerpt from one of the interviews with teachers above, these differences run deep and require teachers to reflect and make professional choices about how curriculum policy should be interpreted and applied in practice and to live with the consequences.

In the following sections, an analysis of two influential policy texts that impact on how primary education is delivered and evaluated in Northern Ireland will be undertaken, namely, the Every School a Good School (ESaGS) (DENI, 2009) policy, and the Chief Inspector's Report (ETINI, 2016-2018). Both texts form part of a genre chain that connects the Executive's macro policy directives and approach to the specific field of education and training as a mechanism for furthering its broader economic objectives. The analysis will explore the extent to which the discursive elements contained within these policy texts are reflective of the PfG and how both texts work together to shape teachers' interpretations and responses to the interpretation and implementation of curriculum changes such as the TSPC in the classroom will also be explored.

7.4 Every School a Good School: A Policy for School Improvement (ESaGS)

7.4.1 Introduction

The Programme for Government Draft Framework (2016-2021) placed a high premium on the development of relevant skills as key drivers of economic growth across the region. This is captured in the Executive's stated ambition that 'we will be one of the UK's leading high-growth knowledge-based regions which embraces creativity and innovation at all levels in society' (PfG, 2016:25). Essential to achieving this ambition is the development of a workforce that has the relevant skills to meet the demands of employers now and in the future. This goal places schools in the spotlight and is used to legitimate the need for accountability systems and processes to be established to evaluate the quality of their outputs and performance on an ongoing basis (PfG. 2016:67).

The ESaGS Policy was published by the Department of Education in April 2009, eighteen months after the introduction of the revised NI curriculum and the TSPC Framework. As its title suggests, its purpose is to support schools to raise standards and address barriers to learning through a more rigorous approach to evaluating and improving the quality of teaching and learning across every NI school. The

Education and Training Inspectorate for Northern Ireland (ETINI), a branch of the Department of Education, is the body responsible for implementing the ESaGS policy with a role to promote improvement in schools through programmes of audit and inspection. Reporting on outcomes is both at individual school level and on a bi-annual basis, through the Chief Inspector's Reports. As highlighted by participants interviewed as part of this study, the inspectorate in NI holds considerable power in the system and their approach is often viewed negatively by school-based staff and those who support them. This is mainly due to its perceived focus on standardised and data-driven approaches to improvement which are deemed as being not fit for purpose in early years and primary school settings. The majority of participants interviewed also made reference to the 'fear factor' associated with the inspectorate's published reports that schools have no power to challenge and primarily because it will be on the basis of inspection findings that more formal interventions will be determined and implemented (ESaGS, 2009: 30). In the sections below Fairclough's three-dimensional model is used as a lens to explore how the language and discourses drawn upon in the ESaGS policy work together to promote the Executive's wider improvement agenda for NI through a particular approach to educational reform. The areas where the policy's approach to improvement intersects and conflicts with the experience of teachers who are required to implement thinking skills in the Foundation Stage classroom through this approach is included in the analysis.

7.5 Discourses and genres in the ESaGS Policy

On analysis, it is possible to detect the four main discourses at play in the PfG woven throughout the ESaGS policy, that is, discourses of change, partnership, those that seek to address issues of social justice and inequality, and human capital discourses based on neoliberal ideology. Specifically, there is a heightened emphasis in the policy on ensuring that robust mechanisms are in place to monitor, evaluate and report on the quality of education delivered in schools to ensure that sufficient numbers of young people acquire particular sets of skills. To this effect, discourses of change, partnership, and equity are deployed in ways that make the case for the policy's particular approach to improvement which is itself part of a

wider hegemonic shift across policy and practice toward a more instrumental understanding of education and its purpose.

In the opening paragraph of the policy's introduction the case for change is clearly articulated.

> Society is changing rapidly, and we must respond to that change to best meet the needs of our children and young people who will need the skills to take their place in an increasingly global economy, here or elsewhere.
>
> (ESaGS, 2019: introduction)

Here, change is again viewed as inescapable and driven by global forces that are beyond our ability to control. 'Society is changing rapidly' and it is everyone's responsibility to ensure that young people have the skills to be able to take their place in this new global economy or risk being left behind. The case for change is legitimated through the addition of specific references from experts that highlight the need for reform across the education system in NI. From a local perspective, outcomes and quotations from the Chief Inspector's Bi-Annual Report 2006-2008 state that findings from inspections completed during that two-year period suggested that there was considerable room for improvement in education across the region. Results from the NI PISA tests are quoted with an emphasis, not on pupils' success, but to draw invidious comparisons with other countries and to focus on areas where NI's position across the three key areas of assessment has declined. From a global perspective, reference is also made to the Mc Kinsey report, 'How the World's Best Schools Come Out on Top' (McKinsey and Company, 2007). Selected quotations refer to the need for teachers to have the right skills to deliver high quality teaching and the processes that need to be in place to hold them to account when they do not. However, on closer examination the Mc Kinsey report also states that there are many different ways to improve a school system and it refers to the need for teachers to have ongoing access to high quality learning as an essential building block for their professional development. Both the cause and the solution to the problem of falling standards highlighted in both the McKinsey report and the ESaGS policy is the quality of current standards of instruction in schools, placing teachers and their practice in the spotlight as the focus for intervention and

reform. These discourses are infused with references to global comparisons and standards that point to the need for urgent reform in education if countries are to remain competitive and survive, a subject to which I now turn.

7.5.1 School Improvement discourse

In terms of its structure and format, the ESaGS policy is similar to the PfG, and is 'mixed' in terms of its genre, comprised of both the conventions of a traditional policy genre and more promotional, 'glossy', corporate publications. This replication of the genre and style of the PfG document suggests that it is being used to replicate its key messages, albeit in a more explicitly defined field.

The word 'improvement' is used extensively throughout the ESaGS text and reinforces its key message and approach. All schools are 'capable of improvement, 'need to improve' and must continue to 'promote' and 'sustain' improvement if they are to continue to remain viable. 'Effectiveness' and 'accountability' are the new watchwords to be achieved through programmes of external audit and inspection. Such approaches seek to measure and evaluate school performance through systems such as benchmarking, target-setting and key performance indicators in an approach to autonomy that is 'accountable' and a professional trust that continuously needs to be earned, as illustrated in the extract below.

> This is a key aspect of our wider policy of accountable autonomy – giving schools more flexibility and freedom to take decisions and to manage their own affairs but within a context where they are accountable for their outcomes and where the degree of autonomy that they have is directly related to their ability to demonstrate that they have produced the best possible outcomes for their pupils. (ESaGS, 2009:31)

The view that teachers are at least partly to blame for failures in the system and not to be trusted was a recurring concern in the majority of interviews with participants. The approach proposed in ESaGS was viewed by them as being narrow and reductive, failing to take into consideration the complex ways in which learning and skills develop and ignoring the need to talk to teachers and work constructively with them to effect positive change. It is also interesting to note, that despite the

tenacity with which the ESaGS policy was to be applied to schools in 2009, over ten years since its inception the target areas that it set out to address, and the actions set out in the policy at that time to resolve them, remain the same if not worse.

7.5.2 Globalisation and the Knowledge Economy

On analysis, the influence of the McKinsey report on the language and approach to improvement presented in the ESaGS policy is stark. The McKinsey report's strong emphasis on a global knowledge economy that is driving a world-wide demand for high-level skills is a key theme throughout the ESaGS policy, and is a concept strongly linked to neoliberal approaches to education that treat knowledge and learning as a commodity. From this perspective, economic and social change is now 'knowledge-driven', a view strongly reflected in the PfG and its ambition to become 'one of the UK's leading high-growth knowledge-based regions' (PfG, 2016:35). The high level of overlap, referred to by Fairclough (2013:97) as the 'intertextuality' between the PfG, ESaGS policy and the McKinsey Report highlights the powerful connection between current global discourses on public service reform, the wider public reform agenda set out by the NI Executive, and the role that education and training will play in its achievement through implementation of the Every School a Good School policy. That knowledge has always made a significant contribution to social change is not in dispute, rather it is the dramatic increase in its significance that is noted. The implications of these powerful global concepts in shaping how education is designed and delivered at the local level were predicted by Patrick here.

> The evolution of the concept of the knowledge economy and of the knowledge worker has been allied to the rise of neoliberalism as an end with respect to educational processes and when coupled with discourses of globalisation, taken together, these three ideological constructs exert considerable shaping force on educational systems across the world. (Patrick, 2013:1)

In this paradigm, the value of knowledge is measured by its ability to develop human capital. In turn, this places an emphasis on the production of knowledge that can be commercially exploited rather than developed within a broader set of educational aims. This shift is clearly discernible in the ESaGS Policy, with its

strong focus on ensuring quality improvement through quantitative measures and comparative benchmarks both locally and internationally. Its connection and dependence on human capital theory as an organising principle is illustrated in the extract below.

> There is an argument that we should be benchmarking ourselves rather more ambitiously and in an international context. It is after all from across the globe that our young people will have to face challenges and compete in tomorrow's economy. (ESaGS, 2019:9)

Despite revisions to the NI curriculum and the introduction of the TSPC as a framework for the development of thinking skills and personal capabilities, the ESaGS policy still places a strong focus on the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills which are presented in the document as a key indicator of high-quality teaching and learning. This focus remains firmly to the fore and is highlighted in key documents such as the Programme for Government Draft Framework 2016-2021; and, more recently, the Skills Barometer for Northern Ireland Report (2019). This focus is retained on the basis that employers in NI report consistently that these basic skills are often lacking in potential workers and are an entry level requirement irrespective of the role. This significance is illustrated in the ESaGS policy at page 7.

> It is widely accepted and understood that achievement of at least five GCSE grades A*-C (or equivalent) is, for the majority of young people, the key that unlocks the door to further and higher education and to well-paid jobs.
>
> (ESaGS, 2019:7)

Whilst the importance of acquiring these skills is not disputed, there is an argument that a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on skills deemed desirable only by employers defeats the broader aims of education. This type of policy approach also assumes that all young people have further and higher education as their goal and sets the expectation that failure to do so will be to their disadvantage and constitute a failing on their behalf. Authors such as Tholen (2017) also remind us that it is important to realise that the knowledge-based economy is not a neutral descriptive concept. It supports an ideological project that regards the development and

application of human capital (the productive skills that individuals possess) as the answer to consistent productivity and prosperity problems, as well as issues of social justice, a subject which I discuss in the following section.

7.5.3 Social Democratic Discourse in the ESaGS policy

A commitment to equity and addressing barriers to educational achievement is expressed throughout the ESaGS policy both by the Minister for Education in her opening comments 'there is too strong a link between disadvantage and educational outcomes and we must do more to achieve equity in our system' and in its stated key principles in which equity of access and equity of provision is listed as underpinning its purpose (ESaGS, 2019:1). The policy's approach to tackling inequity in education is to focus on the quality of teaching in schools through systems of self-evaluation and accountable autonomy (ESaGS, 2009: 31). These systems utilise inspection findings to determine standards of learning, the quality of leadership within schools, and the ethos and culture of the school and its relationship with the wider community. However, participants' experiences of the inspection approach highlighted the unequal power relations at play in the system despite the partnership working rhetoric. Whilst some recognition is given in the policy to the impact of structural factors on children's ability to succeed academically, the focus on achieving targets in external examinations, with a specific focus on English and mathematics, remains the benchmark for academic success in NI. However, as Patrick (2013) reminds us, approaches to education reform that rely primarily on systems of accountability and effectiveness to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning often assume that by providing access to educational opportunities all children can succeed regardless of their socio-economic background, and where this does not happen, failure lies within the school system rather than government.

From this perspective, it is worth noting that the targets published in the ESaGS policy for closing the attainment gap at GCSE between students entitled to Free School Meals and their more affluent peers for the period 2008 - 2011 were not achieved. Perry (2016:19), also reported that the gap in attainment between 2008

and 2015 remained broadly consistent without any clear trend in terms of narrowing or widening the gap. Indeed, the 2017/18 data on attainment, almost a decade after ESaGS was published, whilst showing some signs of improvement generally, demonstrates that there is still a significant gap in attainment at GCSE between socially disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers. On reflection, the calls for realism from participants reported in the ESaGS consultation outcome document (Dept of Education, 2009) continue to ring true, that is, the need for honest recognition and consideration of the often multi-faceted and complex range of factors that lead to poor educational outcomes that schools alone cannot address. The point was also frequently made that data needs to be contextualised to the school and not isolated from the factors that influence it. It is also ironic that, despite the Department of Education's consistent failure over a decade of policy-making to meet its own targets in relation to closing the attainment gap, an improvement approach with robust interventions to deal with its poor performance has not been deployed by the Executive.

In summary, the outcomes from the analysis of the ESaGS policy suggest that the connections between the discursive features of both the PfG and the ESaGS policy work strategically together to promote specific discourses and their effects in education. The genre and style of the text coupled with the main discourses of 'skills' and 'effectiveness' work together to promote approaches to education reform that conceive knowledge as a form of capital and learners as the knowledge workers of the future. Whilst other discourses feature in the policy this is only to the extent that addressing the issues that they raise contribute to wider economic goals. Whilst the teachers interviewed as part of this study were able to navigate the challenges of this system to good effect in the delivery of the TSPC in their schools, the difficulties in doing so, and the practical, professional and personal impact of this choice, was also acknowledged by them. Maintaining a focus on the importance of delivering the TSPC effectively as a whole school programme was only possible because the underpinning principles of ESaGS were not adopted unquestioningly by the staff. Instead, a broader conception of the aims of education for all children was embraced. This conception was realised in practice through approaches to teaching and learning that were potentiating, focused on the holistic

needs of all learners, and that encouraged them to think, to be critical, and to imagine other, possible selves. Rather than assuming the role of facilitators or technicians of learning these teachers managed to navigate the neoliberalised system and at the same time maintain their status as outstanding schools. In this respect, they are living proof that alternative, person-centred approaches to education provision and reform that put the humanity back into teaching and learning are choices that can be made at the individual level, and in spite of the prevailing discourses and the objectives that they serve. As endorsed by Patrick.

> Educators should be encouraged to realise that they have a choice of whether or not to accept neoliberal practices at the classroom level. Curricula may be set, examinations and tests may dominate, but teacher's individual pedagogic choices and classroom cultures need not be beholden to neoliberal ideology even though this doctrine continues to shape wider education policy.
>
> (Patrick, 2013:7)

In the following section the most recent Chief Inspector's Bi-annual Report (2016-2018) is analysed to explore the extent to which the discursive features put to work in both the PfG and ESaGS documents are reflected in its structure, recommendations, and approach.

7.6 The Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2018

7.6.1 Introduction

The Chief Inspector's Report is a highly influential document for schools that draws together key findings and insights from evaluations carried out across the system over a two-year period. I have selected this report for analysis due to its close connection with the PfG's objectives and the ESaGS policy which is implemented in schools by the Inspectorate. The focus of the analysis will be on uncovering the extent to which the discursive features drawn upon in the report both legitimise and facilitate the Executive's broader economic objectives set out in the Programme for Government, and their realisation in education through implementation of the ESaGS policy. In other words, what the analysis seeks ultimately to understand is how these three policy texts work together to embed human capital approaches to

educational reform in NI. In section 7.10 the Inspectorate's views as an agency on the role and function of inspection and the inspection process and how this is experienced from the perspective of teachers interviewed is explored. In section 7.11 the role and position of the TSPC Framework, as it is understood and articulated in the report, is analysed in order to determine how Inspectors view its purpose and the degree of alignment between this view and teachers' interpretations in practice. Section 7.12 explores how the role of the teacher is defined by the Inspectorate in the report and how this aligns with the views of the teachers interviewed. The chapter concludes with a discussion on how the discursive features of these three texts work together to influence foundation stage teachers' interpretation and implementation of policy reforms such as the TSPC in education in practice.

7.7 Learning Lessons: Inspiring People: Putting Learners First

The 2016-2018 report includes a foreword from the Chief Inspector and an extensive 48-page commentary entitled 'Learning Lessons: Inspiring People: Putting Learners First'. The purpose of this section is to draw together key messages from this two-year period of inspection and identify areas where further improvement is required. In her foreword, the Chief Inspector sets out the role of the ETI as 'promoting improvement in the interests of all learners' with the rationale behind the work of the service described here.

> Inspection is an important element of public accountability and confidence, and also of improvement, supporting as it does the primacy of the learner. Inspection also provides an assurance to parents and carers that the education and training for their children and young people is of good quality, as well as the government on the effectiveness of policy in practice.
>
> (Chief Inspector's Report, 2018:3)

From the language used it is clear that improvement is viewed by the service as a process which is driven by inspection activities that are designed to provide assurance to both parents and the Executive on the 'quality' and 'effectiveness' of education provided in schools. All three texts see reform as a move away from

more profession centred approaches to improvement in schools. This shift in focus is mirrored in the terminology and style used in the report and consolidates the key messages from the PfG and the ESaGS policy in this regard. Professional approaches to evaluation and improvement are now largely replaced by the appropriation of systems that rely on external evaluation and performance data as measures of improvement and success. The role of ETI as the drivers of improvement is highlighted by the Chief Inspector's assertion that 'Inspection drives positive change and, as a result, learners get a better education' (Chief Inspector's Report, 2018:4). In short, in her view, it is processes of inspection that ultimately drive improvement and positive change in education rather than the professional expertise of teachers.

This mindset is felt keenly on the ground as articulated by the majority of participants interviewed as part of this study. Four of the teachers interviewed reported that whilst they were highly committed to the TSPC's principles, they often felt anxious and exposed because they were aware that the approach was not being consistently implemented across all schools. The constant need to gather evidence of their work using prescribed systems and mechanisms as a means of capturing children's progress did not, in their view, provide sufficient evidence of the impact of their teaching on children's thinking and was not considered to be an effective way of providing assurance to parents or inspectors. In addition, teachers reported that having to ensure that the content set out in their planning was visible missed the point of what they were trying to achieve as teachers. Their observation is that the poor outcomes in key policy areas over time are more about policy-makers and their staff focusing on the wrong objectives and using the wrong tools to measure improvement for all children rather than a lack of skill or commitment from teachers. Teachers also reported that meeting these demands often meant that their work had to be structured around them with one experienced teacher, Participant 1A, describing their own ways of '*working around*' the paradox of integrating the TSPC into a child-centred curriculum and at the same time ensuring that the requirements of scrutiny and inspection are met. Such requirements were viewed by teachers and school principals as an additional burden that provided proof that content had been covered but added little value to the individual learner's

experience. Indeed, the Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2018 itself makes the following observations in relation to practice observed in pre-school settings.

> There is an increase in adult-directed activities, at the expense of a more appropriate focus on child-initiated play, which curtails the children's ability to make choices and develop creative thinking and problem-solving skills.
>
> (Chief Inspector's Report, 2018:55)

From the teachers' perspective, this approach is driven by current models of inspection that equate quality and effectiveness with what can be seen rather than a more holistic evaluation of children's development over time. On this basis, it could be argued that the introduction of more formal approaches to teaching and learning by teachers at this early stage are as a consequence of the external pressures and demands of the system, rather than the need for them to acquire 'a better understanding of early childhood development' (Chief Inspector's Report, 2018:21). From this perspective, the inspectorate's expectations in relation to how improvement can be externalised in the classroom, and teachers' attempts to comply with and meet these expectations, collide. A key area of concern across the broad spectrum of participants interviewed indicated that this conflict is not uncommon, with one academic, Participant 1G, describing the ETI's ethos and approach as a '*parallel universe'* far removed from the challenging reality of the classroom and what it means to be a teacher today. The ETI's approach has an impact on how policy reforms are understood and implemented by teachers in the classroom, including the TSPC approach, which is referenced in the Chief Inspector's Report and discussed in the following section.

7.8 The role and position of the TSPC in the Chief Inspector's Report

The TSPC is referenced in the Chief Inspector's Report in a positive light, and is cited as an example of more child-centred approaches to education in the primary school that are 'going well'. As quoted on p.20 of the report, 'more purposeful application of the children's thinking skills, personal capabilities and self-assessment leads to better quality work'. In the individual inspection reports for the

schools that participated in this study, the children's ability to apply TSPC was acknowledged in their inspection reports. Teachers' ability to implement the approach through skillful questioning that challenged and extended the children's critical and creative thinking was also commented on. However, when the TSPC approach is not evidenced in other schools it is neither reported on nor highlighted as an area for development in the published report. This is unusual given its prominent position in the revised NI curriculum and the Chief Inspector's Report in which it is cited as being a key driver for better quality work. This concern was echoed by a former Curriculum Advisor who offers the following explanation for this lack of consistency.

> My sense is that the inspectors will report on what they see. You will see reported in some reports mention of the children's thinking being evident, the use of thinking tools being used by the teachers. Where they don't see it in very many other schools, they don't report on it. So it's unfortunately difficult to say if the TSPC has had a significant impact or not really.
>
> (Participant 1L, Curriculum Advisor (retired), 30+ yrs experience)

This lack of impetus from inspectors was also commented on by school staff who felt that it was really very much up to themselves whether they developed the TSPC approach or not, and that the responsibility for staff professional learning and development was also something that was driven by the school rather than the system. From this perspective, questions need to be asked about why the TSPC was introduced in the first place and the purpose that it serves in the wider reform agenda. As argued by Vassallo (2012) (cited in Patrick, 2013:4) even approaches to teaching that appear to offer the learner autonomy and choice can be problematic. Taking the growth of self-regulated learning in schools and universities as an example, he argues that although such practices are often associated with empowerment, agency, and autonomy they often form part of what Ayers (2011:104) describes as 'the hidden curriculum of obedience' and are also 'entangled in politics of control, obedience and oppression'.

In contrast, what is highlighted across the majority of the inspection reports published for primary schools since 2017 is the sustained focus on the development

of literacy and numeracy. This is also strongly echoed in the Chief Inspector's Report which cites gaps in attainment between those entitled to free school meals and their more affluent peers as 'chronic' despite a range of longstanding government policy interventions. This focus on literacy and numeracy as a life skill and basic entry level qualification for employment is also prevalent in the PfG and the ESaGS document. This evaluation is legitimised in the report by reference to the recent Skills Barometer Report for NI (2019) which provides the following advice.

> Greater cognisance needs to be taken by pupils and teachers of the most recent Skills Barometer Report which identifies those skills that are likely to be in demand in the labour market over the next decade and which will support the main growth areas in the Northern Ireland economy.
>
> (Skills Barometer Report for NI, 2019:23)

The inclusion of the Skills Barometer Report in the document also sends a clear message to readers and to teachers. It confirms the strong influence that economic forecasts play in shaping the design and content of education in NI and raises questions about its aims and purpose as well the role of the teacher in the process, as discussed in the following section.

7.9 The teacher as a knowledgeable practitioner

In the Chief Inspector's Report, the role of the teacher is defined as 'an informed, knowledgeable practitioner'. Biesta (2005:54) argues that differing terms which describe the role of the teacher have evolved over time and are connected to powerful discourses that represent a new 'language of learning'. Students are redefined as learners, teaching has become the facilitation of learning, and schools have now been redefined as learning environments. This new language puts pressure on an older, and in a sense more explicitly normative, language of education, one in which the point of schooling is not viewed in terms of facilitating students' learning, but where there is a clear engagement with the question of purpose, that is, the question of what the learning is supposed to be for (Biesta, 2005). This shift in ways of seeing the role of the teacher in the more traditional sense to new terms such a practitioners and facilitators was described by a number

of participants interviewed as indicative of the gradual downgrading of the profession over time. These prescriptions were viewed by three of the six teachers interviewed as being reductive and patronising, as described by one experienced teacher below.

> Being described as a 'classroom practitioner' just doesn't sit right with me, it isn't what I started out as and it isn't what I am … for me that describes a role where you don't really have to think that much about what you're doing or why you're doing it, you're applying things to a situation from a … well … handbook that gives you an answer. A lot of what we do is complex and challenging and requires time and skill … children don't come in neat wee packages and neither do teachers, you have to build them, and invest in them, and that just isn't happening.
>
> (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30+ yrs experience)

From a similar perspective, one former Curriculum Advisor, Participant 1L, referred to the '*de-professionalisation'* of teaching, describing it as an '*incremental erosion of old-fashioned trust'*. This is characterised by processes that replace teacher judgement with standardised approaches to testing and assessment that have limited scope for teacher input or voice in relation to decisions about the purpose and direction of education. This was further articulated by this participant in the following terms.

> Yes well … back when the revised curriculum was being implemented the strategic decisions … well … it was like an echo chamber. Every School a Good School launched in 2009 and that literally pulled the rug out from under everybody's feet. All projects were pulled. So, to my mind, it was the political system level pressure that moved us down the school improvement route. (Participant 1L, Curriculum Advisor (retired), 30 yrs of experience)

As Nicols and Griffith (2009) point out, this change in ways of seeing and representing the role of the teacher in policy and discourse has an impact on how teachers see themselves and how they make sense of their work. Such perceptions are not invented by teachers but are the outcome of the complex interaction between personal sense-making and wider discourses, including policy, research and public opinion, a subject that will be explored further in the final chapter.

This lack of trust in teachers and the different types of knowledge that they bring to their work plays out in a number of different ways in the Chief Inspector's Report. One key example is the way that the current Action Short of Strike directed by Trade Unions is portrayed in the document. This action was implemented in January 2017 following a longstanding dispute over pay parity, teacher workload, and wellbeing. A large section of the introduction to the report is dedicated to this issue with the action presented in a decidedly negative light, one which focuses on the 'risks' and 'highly undesirable impacts' with no mention of the wider dimensions of the dispute that pertain to teacher conditions and wellbeing concerns.

> The risk is that, in these schools, learners may be continuing to experience a quality of education which is not good enough. In primary and post-primary schools this action has left the ETI unable to assure that any school improvement work is having the desired impact for 3,433 learners.
>
> (Chief Inspector's Report, 2018:9)

In effect, what this section of the report arguably illustrates is ETI's antipathy toward the profession's concerns. This approach resonates with the views expressed by participants in relation to the erosion of trust and lack of professional regard afforded to teachers by the systems designed to support to them, and its effects. As expressed by one Curriculum Advisor 'in the dismantling of teachers and their work another industry is created that must find ways to constantly sustain itself… and so it goes on.'

7.10 Conclusion

In summary, the relationship between education and economic productivity in policy has been highlighted as a central consideration across the three texts analysed. The PfG views education and training as a key driver for the achievement of its broader economic goals underpinned by an outcome-based approach to delivery that focuses on impact. In support of this ambition, the ESaGS policy is used as a power-tool to ensure that the educational objectives outlined in the PfG are met and that the skill sets required by employers are consistently delivered. This is further reinforced by the Chief Inspector's Bi-Annual Report, a powerful document that benchmarks selected areas from inspection activity that are working

well, against previous targets and with recommendations for improvement across the system. As demonstrated in the analysis, the genres and discourses used in all three documents bear a striking resemblance to one another and, when structured together, present a powerful force for legitimising educational reform using neoliberal logic as its organising principle.

Whilst globalisation and international trends shape modern government's perceptions of education as human capital across the world, the analysis highlights that NI has not escaped this influence. From the PfG to ESaGS the focus on shaping learners in accordance with current economic goals adopts an approach to governance that sees neoliberalism as the only common-sense frame for implementing and evaluating policy. Vassallo (2014) argues that schools are political and ideological places, and that those that are guided by a neoliberal ethic of efficiency and productivity cultivate the necessary competencies to function within neoliberal environments. These competencies include adaptability, flexibility, and creativity which are all key components of the TSPC Framework and closely aligned to the current occupational landscape that renders thinking skills the new technical knowledge for efficient production. This in turn poses questions about whose interests are really being served by its implementation and the development of structures designed to sustain it, as reflected by Vassallo below.

> Both products and byproducts of neoliberal reform shape schooling and produce particular pedagogical structures that are difficult to change because of the various organizational, corporate, legislative, cultural, and individual forces that protect it. (Vassallo, 2014:161)

From this perspective, the three documents analysed form part of the multi-level forcefield of interests that protect the enactment of neoliberal approaches to educational reform in NI schools. Vassallo (2014:148) argues that such an approach carries with it the risk of shaping people in ways that are radically individualistic, amenable to corporate interests, productive, and economically useful at the expense of more humanistic approaches that have social justice and wellbeing as a life principle at their core (Apple, 2006; Briscoe, 2012; Lakes & Carter, 2011; Martin, 2004; Matusov, 2011).

In this chapter an analysis of three influential policy texts was undertaken using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis as a guiding framework and the outcomes were discussed and presented. The purpose of the analysis was to explore how the discursive features of these texts work together to influence teachers' interpretation and implementation of policy reforms in education in practice. The following chapter synthesises and provides a critical analysis of the key findings from the study. The implications for future policy and practice are also explored and discussed with a series of recommendations proposed for each level of the system: schools (microsystem); support agencies (exosystem), and policy-makers (macrosystem). The chapter concludes with my reflections on the limitations of the study and possibilities for future research in this area as well as considering the implications for my own professional practice moving forward.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion

You see it the minute you walk in the door - it's in the bricks.

Participant 1C, Primary two teacher, 25 yrs of experience

8.1 Introduction

In this final Chapter, I return to my primary research question: In the current educational context in NI, what are the factors that influence how Foundation Stage teachers interpret and enact the TSPC approach in the classroom? I address the question by analysing the three key findings that were presented in Chapters Six and Seven which suggest that attention should be paid to the following factors when implementing educational reforms.

- The importance of understanding specific contexts of practice;
- The degree of agency that teachers and schools are afforded in the interpretation and shaping of change in the classroom;
- The role of teacher interpretation and sense-making in the effective delivery of curriculum reform, and,
- The importance of ensuring genuine engagement between teachers, agencies, and policy-makers in the design and implementation of policy reforms.

These elements will be explored in terms of their relation to this study's overarching research question and three sub-questions as outlined in Chapter One and restated here:

In the current educational context in Northern Ireland, what are the range of factors that influence how Foundation Stage teachers interpret and implement the TSPC approach in the classroom?

1. What are the factors that enable or constrain teachers' ability to interpret and implement the TSPC effectively and consistently in practice?

2. What are the dominant discourses in the key documents and policy texts that influence the interpretation and enactment of the TSPC? what questions do they raise and how do they connect with teachers' experiences in the classroom?

3. What changes are required at policy, school, and teacher level to ensure the effective and consistent implementation of the TSPC approach across all primary schools in Northern Ireland?

In essence this chapter brings together the findings from the research in an attempt to understand, in the words of the teacher quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, why the TSPC is embedded '*in the bricks*' of the schools that took part in this study and to explore ways in which the TSPC could become embedded more consistently in others based on these insights.

In section 8.1 the influence of context on teachers' ability to interpret and implement the TSPC in their practice is explored. Key findings from the analysis of the interview data that highlighted the factors that either enable or constrain these processes are presented and discussed. In section 8.2 the main discourses identified in the policy analysis are considered alongside the findings from the interviews with specific reference to how these discourses and their effects influence teachers' interpretation and implementation of the TSPC in practice. Section 8.3 considers the importance of teacher agency as a key element of effective implementation of curriculum policy in schools. Findings from the interviews are considered alongside current research in this area and the effects that particular policy discourses and the current system of education exerts on teacher agency is also explored. The role of teacher sense-making in the interpretation and implementation of curriculum reforms is considered in section 8.4. The discussion here returns to Spillane's (2002) sense-making framework to highlight the complexity of the processes involved as teachers make sense of a policy and make decisions that affect its implementation in important ways. The chapter concludes with a number of cross-system recommendations for teachers, curriculum leaders and policy-makers in relation to possibilities for the future development of the TSPC approach in NI schools as well as my personal reflections on the limitations

of the study, possibilities for future research, and the implications for my own teaching and professional practice moving forward.

8.2 Understanding the importance of context

As explained in the Methodology Chapter, an interpretive approach to the study was undertaken using qualitative interviews with fourteen participants as the primary research tool. An analysis of the interview data identified a number of recurring issues which participants saw as presenting either opportunities or barriers to the implementation of the TSPC in practice. Although the purpose of the study related to the factors that shape foundation stage teachers' approaches to implementation of the TSPC in practice in some ways the issues that emerged during the interviews went beyond this focus. Applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model provided a useful starting point from which to understand and explore these issues further. For example, barriers to implementation were often viewed by the majority of participants as relating to challenges at the wider, macro level that influence education policy-making at the Exosystem level and then are filtered down into schools. Responses highlighted recurring concerns about the effects of austerity measures on children and their families and its adverse impact on wellbeing and learning generally. Opportunities that enable implementation focused on the commitment and resilience of the leadership team and the staff at the micro level and their ability to creatively overcome these challenges and maintain their commitment to developing the TSPC over time. These barriers and affordances to implementation from the perspective of the fourteen participants interviewed and where these either concur with, or challenge, the literature and the outcomes from the policy analysis are discussed below.

8.2.1 Enablers and barriers to effective implementation

In relation to the perceived barriers to implementation of the TSPC, a recurring concern from the school-based participants interviewed related to the adverse impact of demands from a range of systems, both in and beyond the school. This was explored in detail in the introduction to the Dissertation and in Chapter Five

where Bronfenbrenner's systems approach was used as a starting point to understand the ways in which school systems naturally interface with wider societal systems and structures and are affected by them. Applying this lens highlighted the influence of the broader political, economic and cultural landscape in which children in NI live and learn and the tensions that often exist between them that shape their experience. Whilst many of these systems operate at a macro level and are not experienced directly by children and their families, they exert a high degree of influence at the Exosystem and Microsystem level through the policies and discourses that they privilege and their effects. For example, teachers and principals interviewed described the tension that they felt between knowing what children need to succeed academically and being unable to provide adequate resources to support this. These included interventions to mitigate the effects of structural barriers to learning such as poverty, disadvantage, poor health and challenging family dynamics that are increasing year on year. Participants working at the Exosystem level, in roles that provide curriculum advice and support to schools across the region, concurred with this view with the added concern that schools located in inner cities and areas of high social and economic deprivation encounter higher levels of need and experience wider system challenges more profoundly. However, the current NI outcome data confirms that the negative impact of structural inequality, poverty, unemployment and the growing attainment gap in education is increasing exponentially across the region and is no respecter of religion or background. Based on this evidence, schools, irrespective of where they are located, are not immune from these issues and their effects, which also has an impact on how the TSPC is prioritised in schools and, in turn, how it is interpreted and enacted by foundation stage teachers in the classroom.

ETI's continuing focus on literacy and numeracy during inspection was also highlighted by the majority of participants as having a significant influence on how schools integrate the TSPC in practice. This sustained focus reflects the influence of a human capital approach to education policy in NI that was discussed in Chapter Seven. All participants argued that such a focus does nothing to embed a thinking-based curriculum consistently in schools. This point was illustrated by two experienced Curriculum Advisors who highlighted that, in contrast to literacy and

numeracy teaching, when the TSCP approach is evident in a primary classroom during inspection this is commented on in the published report, however when this is not evidenced it is not commented on as an area for either inclusion or improvement. In their view, because teachers in NI place such significance on inspection outcomes, ETI's lack of focus on implementation of the TSPC approach during inspection diminishes its position as a priority area within the curriculum. The analysis also highlighted the conflict that foundation stage teachers experienced between delivering the curriculum in ways that satisfy the demands of external regulation and inspection and the freedom to design teaching and learning in ways more suited to the development and integration of a thinking curriculum and the principles of autonomy, criticality and independence on which the TSPC approach is founded.

At the level of the school all of the participants interviewed stressed that due to sustained cuts to school budgets over the past ten years, CPD opportunities and the availability of substitute cover to attend conferences and cluster groups has been diminished which impacts on schools differently depending on their size and location. Foundation stage teachers interviewed commented on the importance of maintaining and updating their skills and knowledge in the teaching of thinking and development of the TSPC approach in the classroom, irrespective of career-stage. This included engagement with research, innovations in teaching approaches, and opportunities to share good practice and ideas both in and beyond the school, all of which were highlighted as essential components of a whole school approach to the development of thinking skills in the outcomes from the McGuinness Review in 1998. Time and space for collaboration was viewed as a key mechanism for embedding and sustaining motivation and momentum as teachers described how they work together to update their skills and source information and resources to ensure that the TSPC remains a priority. These teachers also highlighted that, due to the lack of curriculum expertise and support locally, responsibility for leading the professional learning and securing resource is now of crucial importance but lies ultimately with the school to develop itself. They stressed that, whilst schools do their best to meet this deficit, in reality this approach will inadvertently lead to inconsistency in how the TSPC approach is understood and implemented more

widely. Variation is inevitable since schools and their leadership teams will have competing priorities and different levels of experience which reduces its power to make a real change for all children and young people and NI society as a whole. However, despite all of the above challenges, the schools that took part in the study had effectively managed to integrate the TSPC Framework into the culture of their school and were recognised externally as experts in their practice. In the sections below I will reflect on the conditions that enabled these teachers to achieve effective implementation of the TSCP so effectively in their Foundation Stage classrooms and on how these can be developed strategically into existing policy commitments that will support other NI schools to do the same.

8.2.2 Effective Implementation of the TSPC in the Foundation Stage

Although the schools that took part in the study are relatively small in number, they have been influential in promoting the TSPC approach across the system and are able to evidence its positive impact on their pupil outcomes over a sustained period of time. As articulated by one experienced Curriculum Advisor, effective implementation does not happen in a vacuum in one or two classrooms in a school.

> To really have impact a whole school, coordinated approach to the TSPC is needed, the leadership needs to be fully committed and willing to defend it as a priority … it's not a two-minute job either. (Participant 1K, Curriculum Advisor (retired) 30 yrs of experience)

What emerged strongly from the interview data was that the Foundation Stage teachers interviewed really welcomed the renewed government focus on the development of thinking skills as part of the revised curriculum and enjoyed teaching it. Teacher attitudes toward the introduction of the policy was not highlighted as a barrier and the schools that took part in this study were motivated and positive about its beneficial effects. Essentially, these schools have taken control of the implementation of the TSPC themselves, and, using creative and innovative approaches in the choice of teaching tools and strategies, work collaboratively to actively create time for professional learning and sharing of good

practice both within and across schools. None of this was easy and required committed and courageous leadership at every level, both principals and senior staff and the Foundation Stage teachers themselves, to manage external expectations and competing demands whilst at the same time maintaining a focus on the development of the TSPC over time. As one teacher commented here.

> The schools that implement the TSPC most effectively are driven by their experience of the benefits that this brings to every pupil - you see it the minute you walk through the door, it's in the bricks.
> (Participant 1C, Foundation Stage teacher, 25 yrs of experience)

The analysis of the interview data identified a number of enabling factors that underpinned successful implementation of the TSPC in the Foundation Stage of these schools. Committed and knowledgeable leadership was seen as being key to the long-term effectiveness of the TSPC approach and to sustaining momentum and the motivation of the staff. This aspect was described by participant 1A, an experienced foundation stage teacher with over 30 years of experience, as '*the glue that holds it all together*' and the primary driver in supporting integration of the TSPC in practice. What is striking is that leadership is not viewed as being only the remit of the Head Teacher or the senior management team in these schools. Rather, in line with the ethos and objectives of the Learning Leaders Strategy (DENI, 2017:30), leadership is distributed across every level of the school and teachers are facilitated to engage in innovative practice, to build their professional networks, to share good and next practice and are actively encouraged to take the initiative in driving reform. Participant 1F, one of the Head Teachers interviewed referred directly to the importance of '*leadership at every level'*. For them, successful implementation of all curriculum reforms in schools was not only about their role. For them, effective leadership involved trusting the professional judgement of the staff, building their leadership capability and expertise through professional dialogue and mentoring, and '*letting go of the notion that the only leader in the school is the Principal'*. From the perspective of the Foundation Stage teachers interviewed, this distributed and inclusive approach to leadership from Head Teachers and senior leaders did engender trust and was reported as empowering

teachers to explore possibilities in the development of the TSPC approach in their practice.

This approach was also supported by an ongoing cycle of professional learning and CPD opportunities both within and beyond the school with additional resources planned for and allocated as required. Dedicated time for collaboration and shared learning, which successful integration of the TSPC depends on, was viewed as being and essential part of professional development and also a mechanism for inducting new teachers to the school into the approach. Often this involved teachers being released consistently to work on aspects of the TSPC in year groups, to attend cluster groups or conferences, or to facilitate training opportunities or visits to other schools and vice versa. This supported the teachers involved to continuously develop resources in an evidence-led way, ensured exposure to new ideas and approaches, and extended their networks. All of this was viewed as being extremely motivating for teachers who felt that their work was valued and invested in with opportunities provided to share their practice which in turn helped to develop a whole school approach to the implementation of the TSPC over time. This approach to a more distributed form of leadership in schools is acknowledged and supported through the introduction of the Learning Leaders Strategy by DENI in 2017. The overarching aim of the strategy is 'to empower the teaching profession to strengthen its professionalism and expertise to meet the challenging educational needs of young people in the 21st Century' (DENI, 2017:5). The framework is comprised of five key elements: clear pathways for programmes in professional learning; access to appropriate support and development at all stages of a teacher's career; tools to help teachers as professionals and reflective practitioners to determine their learning needs; planned opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively to share best practice through learning networks; and opportunities for nurturing and building leadership capability starting with ITE. Each element is supported by collaborative practice at every level and the framework provides a vision and a flexible structure in which schools embarking on a similar journey to those that took part in this study can develop their teaching and learning practice in more creative ways beyond the traditional models currently implemented in schools.

Interestingly, the foundation stage teachers and Head Teachers interviewed all referred to the complexity of teaching thinking skills, of the need for expert input to support understanding of, for example, some of the terminology such as 'metacognition' 'infusion' and 'transfer' and how this then translates into practice in the Foundation Stage and throughout the primary school. This is in line with the views of Swartz (1998) referenced in Chapter Four who posited that teaching children and young people to think skillfully is not something that happens naturally on its own without specific education and training and regular opportunities for follow-up. In many ways what developed in these schools was what one teacher, Participant 1A, described as '*a lifeworld of thinking about thinking*', a self-extending system for the effective implementation of thinking skills that begins in the early years and develops throughout the school. However, the complexity of actually achieving this was clearly articulated by school-based participants who proposed that a number of key building blocks need to be in place in order for the TSPC to be optimised to the benefit of all students. These included the following actions: a coordinated approach to the planning and assessment of thinking skills across the school; agreed and fully understood approaches to the teaching of thinking with clear pathways for progression and assessment from year to year; collaborative approaches to planning and practice that are developed and agreed between, and across, year groups and which include an understanding of the theoretical principles that underpin the teaching of thinking and its interdisciplinary roots; a whole school approach to formative assessment of thinking skills with opportunities for teachers to come together to review discuss pupils' work and improve outcomes; and a shared language for thinking across the school community, one that was clearly understood, visible in every aspect of the curriculum and in the corridors and reception areas; ensuring that it is indeed '*in the bricks*'. In many respects, the kind of professional learning and practice that foundation stage teachers described in the interviews with them align with the objectives of the current Learning Leaders Strategy which seek to support teachers in taking more autonomy over their own professional learning with leadership skills integrated at every stage of their learning (DENI, 2017:11). The strategy also identifies characteristics of 'good provision' for both generic and system-wide

professional learning programmes which include modelling of effective practice for teachers; development of partnership approaches to course design and delivery; enhancing evaluation skills such as lesson observation and enhancing the role of the teacher tutor or professional learning leaders. Responses from teachers and Head Teachers interviewed confirm that the learning environments in which they work create optimal conditions for the TSPC Framework to embed and flourish. These flexible and creative learning environments are facilitated by school leaders and developed by the teachers themselves in line with the changing needs of their particular contexts.

In considering the factors that both enable and constrain the implementation of the TSPC Framework in the Foundation Stage of the primary school and the combined effects of pressures on schools discussed above it is not entirely surprising that integrating the TSPC approach as a priority in a consistent and meaningful way has been a step too far for many schools, despite the many benefits that it has been shown to bring. The question then is about whether it is was ever reasonable to expect that the approach could be effectively implemented across all schools. This question is central to understanding government's purpose in including it as part of the revised curriculum without changes to inspection regimes, sustained professional learning programmes, and opportunities to collaborate and share good practice and resource and opportunities for ongoing evaluation of its impact built into the approach at the time of its inception. As one of the experienced Curriculum Advisors, Participant 1L, who was directly involved in the development of the TSPC in schools, commented.

> The Every School a Good School policy was introduced in 2009 and all the big messages about moving beyond content and the power of a thinking curriculum disappeared … all funding and resource went to post-primary … the focus was on five GCSEs plus English and Maths and all projects were pulled. (Participant 1L, Curriculum advisor (retired) 30 yrs of experience)

This reflection, arguably, illustrates the effects of a system driven by neoliberal approaches to education and its realisation in curriculum models that view thinking as a 'skill' and as a form of human capital. Despite the rhetoric, policy analysis of the language and discourses at play in the ESaGS policy in Chapter Seven clearly

highlighted that priorities in education in NI are driven primarily by the needs of employers rather than schools or individuals themselves. In this model thinking skills and dispositions are cast in a supporting role and are secondary to the core subjects required to enhance economic, rather than human development, goals. From this perspective it is perhaps not surprising that the TSPC as an approach has had such limited impact across all schools. Indeed, as the foundation stage teachers interviewed suggest, perhaps it was always intended that its role was to enhance the core subjects rather than develop effective and skillful thinking in all learners as an end in itself. However, as illustrated above, these teachers moved far beyond this narrow view of thinking, facilitated by the conditions created and sustained within their schools.

It is also important to note that the data analysed in this study was collected in 2018/19 before the Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020. In the past 12 months the pandemic has had a devastating effect on schools, teachers, children and their families and it has created multiple challenges in the struggle to maintain education provision throughout extended periods of disruption. Trade Unions and school leaders predict that recovery will be costly and take time, particularly as the economy has been ravaged by the pandemic and both teachers and students are returning to schools in a time of great uncertainty and anxiety about the future. Whilst the onset of the Covid pandemic has presented challenges for this study in terms of my ability to access a broader range of participants for interviews it also has presented challenges in relation to the implementation of recommendations and aspirations for the future development of the TSPC. For example, there is a real concern that the TSPC Framework may not be viewed as a priority for development in schools as teachers focus on recovery work in the core subjects such as literacy and numeracy. Recovery may also require further cuts to public services and budgets in order to fund cross-system priorities which will drive resource allocation even further toward these core subjects, with approaches such as the TSPC possibly relegated to the margins despite the many benefits that it could bring to the recovery process. The policy analysis undertaken in Chapter Seven highlighted economic priorities supported in education policy by discourses that promote what Fairclough (2003:95) describes as ‘particular ways of seeing and doing’ in the classroom which

lead to specific outcomes for learners. These discourses have subtle but powerful effects on the foundation stage classroom and are reflected on below.

8.3 Discourses in the TSPC and their effects

As discussed in Chapters Six and Seven, as well as the impact of contextual issues, education policy-making in NI has not been immune from the influences of wider global forces in education and the agendas and discourses that drive them. The study's second research question sought to identify the dominant discourses that shape policy and practice in education in NI and how their effects connect with teachers' experiences of implementing the TSPC in practice. As presented in Chapter Three, the gradual shift from learning to thinking is discernible across a number of international publications. Its renewed focus in policy also reveals the strong connection between the development of thinking skills and the country's economic goals. From the policy analysis undertaken, the development of thinking skills is now viewed from a human capital perspective and is cast as a 21st century skill. Over the past two decades this connection has become more deeply embedded in NI education policy and is now explicitly integrated into a range of policies such as Learning to Learn: a framework for early years education (DENI, 2013) where it had not featured previously or to the same extent. The growing disconnect between policy-making and the realities of the classroom was articulated by one experienced primary teacher below.

> They do not see what we see, they do not experience what these children experience, if they did, I would guarantee that these policies would be transformed overnight into something that resembles common sense, compassion and care. (Participant 1A, Foundation Stage teacher, 30 yrs of experience)

Human Capital Theory's concern with ensuring a pipeline of ready-made future workers with the skills required by employers to sustain economic development carries heavy implications for education systems. The outcomes from this study indicate the growing concern that its deep entanglement with education runs the risk of overshadowing its broader, more democratic, aims and that a focus on skills and

competencies runs the risk of leaving large swathes of the school population behind, particularly the most vulnerable.

The majority of the participants interviewed referred to a disconnect between what they perceived to be a narrowing of the curriculum and the professional role of the teacher. For the teachers interviewed, this narrowing constituted a further encroachment on their agency and diminished the purpose of their role as educators. Participant 1C, an experienced foundation stage teacher, compared this shift to being '*demoted*' from a professional to a classroom technician with all that this does to the person and to the future status of the profession. This conception of education and the role of teachers in its delivery impacts on how policy is formulated and structured which creates deep tensions between policy-makers and the teaching profession. The majority of the school-based staff interviewed reported that they felt this sense of disconnection and isolation in their role in a profession that no longer feels familiar, where they have very little voice or influence and where they feel that their skills and knowledge no longer belong.

For the majority of participants interviewed, this neoliberal approach to education has now been accepted for so long that it has become the norm despite concerns voiced from across the teaching profession. The majority of participants interviewed spoke powerfully about how the current system of education in NI creates inequity in the system and has exacerbated what many politicians in NI have referred to as 'the long tail of underachievement' and the sense of failure and despair that many disadvantaged young people experience as a result. For them, whilst these are issues related predominantly to the field of education, they are also broader, social justice issues, that are inextricably linked to the quality of life and potential of all young people, and include health and wellbeing, employment opportunities, and equal access to services and resources. These views strongly indicate that from the perspective of teachers the social determinants of education are cross-system and need to be viewed in more holistic rather than economic terms. As Bronfenbrenner's systems model illustrates, addressing these issues is complex and needs to be underpinned by an understanding of human experience that is nested in a series of multi-level and interconnected systems. For the majority of the

participants interviewed as part of this study, ensuring that these systems are equitable, accessible and maintained to a high standard presents as a much more worthy societal goal.

However, the need for a pragmatic approach to the acquisition of particular skills and knowledge in order to pursue a chosen career or secure employment was recognised by all participants as a given. Pupils' future contribution to a strong, well-functioning economy brings benefits for all members of society and the effective implementation of the TSPC approach was viewed as having the potential to add great value to the quality of the decisions and judgements made by young people in their future lives. For participants the question was not whether education should or should not have a significant role to play in explicitly preparing pupils for a chosen career. The issue for them is the extent to which education is used instrumentally as an economic driver and structured in ways that reflect this to the detriment of its broader, more inclusive and democratic aims as an enabler for all. From this perspective, teachers' experience in the classroom highlighted the tensions between the prescribed curriculum with its continued focus on literacy and numeracy and the integration of the TSPC approach across all schools. Thus, in practice, even for schools who are leading the way in the integration of the TSPC approach these challenges present as obstacles to be tackled not once but on an ongoing basis. In relation to the question on the purpose of integrating thinking skills into the curriculum participants' responses aligned with the views of Dearden (1972), and Papastephanou (2007), that teaching children the skills to think critically across a range of different contexts empowers them as individuals and develops their autonomy and ability to make wise and informed choices across the life course. All agreed that this was an important life skill particularly in today's globalised society where the need for criticality and the ability to question what is seen and heard across a wide range of media platforms has never been more important. Participants also noted the need to acknowledge the context in which children in NI live and the need for young people to be able to move beyond what Participant 1G described as a '*conflict mentality*' to construct a new reality based on tolerance, respect and inclusion. The majority of participants were clear that the only lasting route to this was through informed debate, empathy and understanding

for the other's point of view, and required negotiation and compromise. In the view of one senior academic this was '*all teachable in the right hands*' (Participant 1G, University Professor, 30+ yrs of experience). From this perspective, thinking skills are important life skills and the future of a peaceful, shared society depends on all citizens being able to utilise these skills in a context where, as stated by Participant 1G, a senior academic '*the battle for hearts and minds needs not only to be won once, but over and over again*'.

Questions about pupil autonomy and choice, and the degree of agency that teachers feel empowered to bring to the policy implementation process within the current structures were raised by all participants during interview. These discussions centred around the perceived tension between the need for co-production of learning experiences, and safe spaces for risk-taking when developing innovative approaches to the development of thinking skills and the current inspection regime. ETI's continued focus on specific areas such as literacy and numeracy through the Every School a Good School policy and how this influences teachers' practice was discussed in Chapter Seven. As teacher agency is viewed as being central to the effective implementation of the TSPC approach this subject is explored from the perspective of participants and the current literature in the section below.

8.4 The importance of teacher agency

A recurring theme from the school-based staff interviewed was that their success in implementing the TSPC was greatly enabled by a whole system approach that facilitated a high level of agency in their thinking and practice. As highlighted in Chapter Four, Priestley et al (2015) in their paper entitled 'Teacher agency: what is it and why does it matter?', argue that powerful discourses driving global education policy emphasise the role of teachers as the most significant within-school influence on school improvement (Priestley et al, 2015:9). However, they also argue that agency as a concept remains an inexact and poorly conceptualised construct in much of the literature where it is often not clear whether the term refers to an individual capacity of teachers to act agentically or to an emergent 'ecological' phenomenon dependent upon the quality of individuals' engagement with their environments (Priestley et al, 2015:2).

Following both Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Priestley et al (2015:3), an ecological view of agency sees it as an emergent phenomenon of the ecological conditions through which it is enacted. Biesta & Tedder describe it as follows.

> This concept of agency highlights that actors always act by means of their environment, rather than simply in their environment [so that] the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique, situations. (Biesta & Tedder, 2007:137).

The findings from this research suggest that it is the ecological conditions in which the school is operating that determines to a large extent how effectively the TSPC is enacted at school level. For example, one of the Head Teachers, Participant 1E, interviewed referred to the need to constantly '*try and find ways to make it work'* amidst a plethora of other competing demands. Teachers interviewed referred to the '*courageous'* leadership in their schools and another experienced Head Teacher, Participant 1F, referred to their '*toolkit of defence mechanisms*' as critical in maintaining TSPC as a priority year on year. Such descriptions suggest that enactment of the TSPC in NI schools is akin to winning a war rather than delivering on an essential statutory component of the revised curriculum. This is an important point given that curriculum policy in many countries now highlights the importance of a return to the centrality of the teacher in school-based curriculum development with teachers now cast as agents of change. However, Fullan (2003) questions the kind of change agent being created by education systems based on human capital theory and its purpose. This is due, he argues, to the often hidden agendas at play in such discourses as teachers' capacity to co-create and shape change is often circumscribed by features of the contexts in which they work. Priestley, in line with the arguments posed by Ball (2008) and outlined in Chapter Three, argues that these features include performativity and accountability measures, and lead to engagement with policy that is often 'instrumental and blighted by unintended consequences' (Priestley et al, 2015: 2). The findings from this study bear out Priestley's view and help explain the tensions experienced by staff in schools as

they struggle to integrate the TSPC approach against the backdrop of wider system demands.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998:963), writing two decades earlier, also contended that the development of teacher agency is a key enabler in the creation of curriculum change. They argued that teachers' skills and knowledge, personal and professional beliefs and values are all rooted in past experience and that those with a rich repertoire of experiences are able to draw upon a greater range of responses to the challenges of the current context than those without such experiences. From this perspective, the argument that initial and ongoing professional learning should provide teachers with a more extensive range of resources beyond practical skills is strengthened. From the data in this study, it is clear that the foundation stage teachers involved have engaged in a programme of continuous professional development that is based on these enabling principles. Despite the many challenges, they have developed a clear purpose and vision for the long-term development of the TSPC approach in their classrooms led by their senior management teams. This includes the provision of in-school professional learning and training that broadens the experience of all staff, particularly those new to the school, and that challenges and develops thinking and practice on an ongoing basis. However, responses also identified that a clear focus on the TSPC was variable across initial teacher training institutions and this created a gap in the system at an important stage of a foundation stage teacher's career. Well-embedded approaches to supporting policy implementation at school level helped to address that gap and built resilience into the system, providing a solid foundation from which future developments could be built. However, there was also an acknowledgement from participants that due to system pressures, both in and beyond a school's control, this might not be possible in all schools, particularly given the current economic climate and the perceived lack of interest and impetus in the embedding of the TSPC approach from the Inspectorate. In these circumstances it was believed that schools would naturally revert to the 'must-dos' in times of challenge in an effort to satisfy the external demands and expectations of the wider system as well as to navigate the challenges within the school and continue to provide a quality education for all children.

Linked to the discourse of performativity and school improvement is the increase noted by participants in the frequency and extent of what Gillies (2015:23) describes as 'back door' regulation through school inspections, audit processes, and data collection. In Chapter Three I noted that writers such as Ball, Gillies and Coffield argued that this is characteristic of a human capital theory approach to education policy and practice. Far from encouraging teacher agency, in their view this model has had a corrosive effect on teachers' practice and constitutes what Leat (2013:388) describes as 'a giving with one hand and taking away with the other'. As discussed in Chapter Six, the ETINI and their approach to conducting inspections in schools were cited by the majority of participants as a major challenge to teacher agency and a barrier to the consistent integration of the TSPC approach in all schools. For the majority of those interviewed, the ETINI approach was seen as outdated and regarded not to have moved sufficiently beyond practices that concentrate exclusively on scrutiny as opposed to more participative working with schools and teachers as partners. Whilst there was acknowledgement that the introduction of the new Self Evaluation Framework (ETI, 2017) was a welcome development, its effects were cast by one Curriculum Advisor as '*dubious*' due to the prevailing policy culture in education, the ethos of ETINI generally, and the lack of parity of esteem in relation to TSPC and literacy and numeracy. It was also interesting that the majority of the teachers interviewed had not used the ETI document in their self-evaluation work but were nonetheless graded as outstanding in all aspects of their practice. In line with Priestley's (2015) views on the significant influence of the professional, structural and cultural conditions in which teachers work on their practice, participants argued that ETI's approach has led to more performative cultures in schools with specific effects on teachers' identities. As described by Priestley below.

> Such environments affect the individual dimensions of what it means to be an effective teacher while ignoring or subverting the cultural and structural conditions which play an important role in enabling this to happen. (Priestley, 2015:2).

Following Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems approach, agency is always acted out in a concrete situation which can be either enabled or constrained by the cultural, structural, and material resources available, a view that remains relevant and that has been developed further by Priestley and colleagues almost forty years later.

There is no doubt that the revised curriculum in NI has opened up possibilities for teacher agency, including the integration of a thinking curriculum into the revised arrangements in 2007. However, the majority of participants did highlight the tensions between this new way of working and back door processes such as inspection, self-evaluation and data gathering that combine to erode it. 'Accountable autonomy' (DENI, 2008:38) is the new phrase which underpins a system that implies professional trust on the one hand and a lack of it on the other. However, despite these constraints the schools involved in this study did not capitulate to the demands of the system. Although they experienced the same challenges as other schools, they were able to navigate both the internal and external environments and were deemed to be outstanding in their field in all aspects of their practice. Coburn and Russell's research (2008) points to the important role that hierarchies play in teachers' achievement of agency. They argue that horizontal rather than vertical relationships are a strong factor in effective curriculum development and schools that develop effective structures to encourage such relationships cope more effectively with new policy, enabling teachers to engage dialogically with and make sense of that new policy. Coburn and Russell (2008) point to two further aspects in their research: the strength of the relationships aligned to engendering trust, and the scope of the relationships and the extent to which they extend beyond the school. The latter can break cycles of inward-looking practice, and allow access to external, expert knowledge to enhance interpretation and understanding of policy. The data from my study strongly suggests that the teachers involved are afforded strong relational resources and as a result are able to achieve higher degrees of agency, which in turn supports effective sense-making as a key driver in their success, an aspect to which I now turn.

8.5 The role of teacher interpretation in policy implementation - Spillane's framework for sense-making

A review of the literature on the role of teacher sense-making in the implementation of new policy reforms highlights the importance of understanding policy implementation through a cognitive lens, one that contrasts with the human capital view that sees the role of the individual in policy implementation in a limited and passive way (Coleman, 1990; Spillane et al, 2002; Coburn and Russell, 2001, 2005). Spillane and colleagues (2002) highlight the complexity of the processes involved as teachers make sense of a new policy and make decisions that affect its implementation in important ways. From their perspective, sense-making is not a simple decoding of the policy message.

> In general, the process of comprehension is an active process of interpretation that draws on the individual's rich knowledge base of understandings, beliefs, and attitudes. (Spillane et al, 2002: 391).

Differences in interpretation or in acting on understandings are therefore a necessary aspect of human understanding but are also fraught with ambiguity and difficulty. Spillane and colleagues (2002) argue that to explain these influences on implementation, it is necessary to explore the mechanisms by which teachers understand policy and attempt to connect understanding with practice. Their sense-making theory argues that the formation of these decisions is the product of an individual's prior experiences and that teacher sense-making is an integrated process rooted in three specific domains: individual cognition, the situation or context, and policy signals. Spillane et al (2002) argue that individuals are, by their nature, natural sense-makers and so they develop interpretations about policy based on the complex interplay between their prior knowledge, beliefs and experiences. The process of sense-making is defined by Spillane and colleagues as 'an active attempt to bring one's past organisation of knowledge and beliefs to bear in the construction of meaning' (Spillane et al, 2002: 395). Viewed from this perspective, the teachers interviewed as part of this study were able to successfully interpret and implement the TSPC approach due to the school community's strong belief in the need for a thinking-based curriculum, a belief that was strengthened by their

developing knowledge and positive experience, which in turn led to high-quality implementation and a high level of success for their students. Equally, in schools where teachers' knowledge and experiences of making sense of and implementing the TSPC are not supported by a strong belief in its underlying principles and potential, it may not be implemented as effectively and might, following Spillane, only lead to superficial changes at best.

Spillane et al's approach also contends that the context in which the policy is being implemented has a significant impact on teacher sense-making. As stated by McLaughlin & Talbert (1993, cited in Spillane et al, 2002:409) 'in general, implementing agents' work is nested in multiple organizational contexts simultaneously'. This view aligns with the principles of Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective on policy interpretation and enactment. As noted previously, Priestley et al (2015:131) also argue that beliefs are 'socially and contextually mediated' and that both personal and professional experiences shape teacher beliefs which in turn impacts on their perceptions about the degree of agency they have in effecting curriculum change. Spillane et al (2002:404) argue that teachers are essentially 'social sense-makers' and that 'all sense-making is embedded in social contexts'. This sense-making framework sees situation or context as not simply a backdrop for implementing individual's sense-making but as 'a constituting element in that process' (Spillane et al, 2002:389).

The views and perceptions of peers, school leaders and support staff exert a powerful influence on how policy messages are received, internalised and implemented by teachers in the classroom. The data from this study illustrate this view, particularly in relation to sustaining and developing the implementation of the TSPC approach which was viewed as the greatest challenge moving forward. Teachers and school leaders referred frequently to their common vision and shared language which was fully integrated into and across all aspects of their practice. Clearly the quality of the implementation was supported by this collegial approach, not just in terms of practice but also in terms of the shared beliefs and world view that enhanced the quality of teacher interpretation and engagement. Spillane et al (2002) and Coburn (2005) contend that teacher buy-in is cultivated when they

believe that a policy change adds value and so that it is worth changing their current thinking and practice to accommodate this at a deep level. This process, they argue, is greatly enhanced when teachers have the opportunity to discuss and gain knowledge about a policy and how it should be understood and implemented. Additionally, Coburn (2005) and Kisa & Correnti (2014) both argue that Head Teachers have the capacity to influence sense-making through their own approach to interpretation and implementation. Through their research Kisa and Correnti (2014) concluded that a reform has a greater chance of being adopted positively by teachers if they see that the leadership of the school is supportive of the policy and provide opportunities for collaboration, professional learning and shared decision-making to support its implementation. The outcomes from this study strongly align with the view that when school leaders actively and explicitly show support for an approach then this acts as a signal to teachers that it has the authority of their senior colleagues. This in turn leads to higher levels of uptake by teachers and enhances the quality of the implementation, and so follows Spillane et al's (2002) model.

> Implementing agents encounter policy in a complex web of organizational structures, professional affiliations, social networks, and traditions. Both macro and micro aspects of the situation are important for implementing agents' sense-making. (Spillane, 2002:404)

Equally, the school-based participants argued that the ETI's perceived lack of focus on the TSPC approach in schools in their published reports also sends a message across the system about how it is valued and this might explain why it has failed to embed consistently across the school system. According to Spillane et al (2002), both collective beliefs, attitudes and practices all contribute to the normative authority of a policy and teachers' responses to policy-maker's proposals and the degree of buy-in from those teachers tasked with implementing it. The findings from this study align with the view that the explicit response to interpreting and implementing reform from school leaders is instrumental in the sense-making process for teachers and in how effectively the reform is interpreted and enacted. This point was highlighted by Participant 1E, a retired Head Teacher with 40 years of experience, who reported that it took time for all staff to come '*on board'* and

that '*hearts and minds'* had to be won before the TSPC approach gained traction and moved to being fully integrated across the school.

Finally, Spillane's sense-making theory asserts that the sense-making process is influenced by policy signals and the 'representations of ideas about changing practice' (Spillane et al, 2002:389). In line with Fairclough's (2008) view of language as a form of social practice as outlined in Chapter Seven, Spillane argues that through the language and discourses deployed in policies and how they are structured, specific messages are communicated to the reader. These messages may or may not fit with their own views about teaching and learning which in turn can create tensions between the policy expectations and the changes that these may require in teachers' thinking and practice. Both Trowler (2003) and Ball (2008) argue that many reform ideas about schooling are value-laden and that the substance of the reforms require the implementation of changes in teaching practice, core behaviours that are central to teachers' self-image and identity. Hence teachers' motivations, goals, and values come into play in making sense of and reasoning about reforms (Spillane et al, 2002: 401). As Hargreaves (1998) points out, teaching and learning are not about knowledge and cognition alone; they are also emotional practices. The sense-making framework also aligns with the views of Fairclough (2013) and Ball (2008) on policy as discourse with performative effects as Spillane et al (2002) also contend that policy messages are not 'inert, static ideas that are transmitted unaltered in local actors' minds to be accepted, rejected, or modified' (Spillane et al, 2002:392). Spillane argues that teachers frame the policy messages within their own schema, that is, their prior knowledge and experiences, and what they already know and believe. These schemas act as a lens through which new information is filtered and interpreted, including, for example, the extent to which it aligns with current thinking and practice, how it will affect students' learning, and the extent of personal and professional change required to enact the policy. Social interactions can develop individual schema and support sense-making not only because individuals learn from one another but also because group interactions bring insights and perspectives to the surface that otherwise might not be made visible to the group (Brown & Campione, 1990). For example, discussing complex situations in relation to thinking skills and outcomes with other teachers from across

different grades or subject areas provides access to alternative interpretations of a shared experience. Interacting with each other, teachers can explain tacit beliefs and open them up to discussion, debate, and negotiation, supporting group sense-making to find inconsistencies and explore ways to resolve them. Calling on the distributed expertise of their learning communities, teachers can mediate uncertain situations by interacting with their colleagues, leveraging the knowledge that is situated within webs of social relationships to build solutions (Sachs, 1995). Thus, when Spillane and colleagues speak of context, they refer not only to structural and social arrangements but also to tools of various sorts, including language, that enable or constrain human sense-making.

The findings from this study suggest that when teachers are facilitated to come together and collaborate in a coordinated way as a natural part of their work, experiences can be shared, sense-making is optimised and teacher's self-efficacy and agency increases. This is dependent on an enabling culture which is led from the top, again emphasising the importance of leadership practice which visibly and explicitly supports and values the policy and its potential for positive change. However, this is difficult to achieve without resourcing and so raises questions of how funding is decided upon and prioritised at the macro level. Spillane & Zeuli (1999:13) contend that the potency of policy levers in getting teachers to change their practice depends in part on what they term as teachers' zones of enactment, the spaces where the world of policy meets the world of practice. In this study, teachers whose enactment zones extended beyond their individual classrooms to include frequent and ongoing discussions with fellow teachers and other experts about the TSPC approach understood its purpose more fully which enhanced their confidence and mastery over time.

The data from the study also highlighted the importance of the wider vocabularies and discourses that foundation stage teachers engage in and suggests that this can limit or enhance their ability to interpret and make sense of policy reforms. Priestley et al (2015:132) refer to the typology of professional dialogue that teachers engage in as teachers' 'discursive resources' and assert that engaging in professional dialogue with colleagues about aspects of teaching practice plays an

important role in the development of the interpretative and sense-making process. These discursive resources are deemed important because they are the tools through which teachers think about and interpret what they read, a process rooted in prior knowledge, experiences and beliefs. One example of this was highlighted in conversations with two teachers about the overarching purpose of the TSPC policy, one with over 30 years teaching experience and the other new to the profession. The more experienced teacher's responses were more nuanced and sophisticated as they referred to the constant churn of ideas in education and how *'the more things change the more they stay the same'* (Participant 1C). This teacher was able to draw on her extensive experience of the policy-practice cycle and her knowledge about how children's learning develops over time. In contrast, whilst the other, less experienced, teacher was equally motivated and enthusiastic about the TSPC approach and the many benefits that this brought to the learning experience, her responses were more limited and reliant on the policy discourses that linked thinking skills with the discourse of '*lifelong learning*' and '*transferable skills needed for the world of work.'* Whilst the more experienced teacher was able to position the current debates around the thinking school's agenda in a wider discursive context, her less experienced colleague relied more upon the language from policy texts with fewer discursive resources at her disposal to support a more sophisticated interrogation of policy. Again, this example highlights the important role that initial teacher education should play in developing teachers' repertoires of discursive resources and experiences beyond practical skills. However, as Spillane et al (2002) point out, it is primarily the micro level, the immediate workplace environment, that contributes to defining the ways in which teachers make sense of new experiences and situations. As is the case in these schools, teachers are able to draw on existing reservoirs of individual and collective knowledge to determine what particular policies mean in order to decide on an appropriate response to the recommendations in accordance with their context (Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989). Thus, the building-in of multiple opportunities for collaborative professional dialogue and sense-making in these schools serves many purposes all of which greatly support the effective and consistent implementation of the TSPC approach. For example, it develops teachers' experiences and range of discursive resources through which the policy can be interpreted and developed; extends

teachers' reservoirs of individual and collective knowledge, expertise, values, experience and beliefs; reduces variation and inconsistency in the interpretation and implementation of policy messages, and develops teachers' self-efficacy and confidence. Importantly, these spaces also provide opportunities for debate and recognising and challenging dominant discourses in curriculum policy and their effects. This is particularly important for novice teachers, whose zones of enactment are extended as they are more able to envision a broader range of possibilities and outcomes and move from the periphery to the centre of the professional conversation on the integration of thinking skills and personal capabilities into their practice.

8.6 Recommendations for future policy and practice

In the following sections, a number of recommendations for the future development of the TSPC in the foundation stage are presented for consideration. Essentially, these sections attempt to answer the following question 'what are these schools doing that can be used as a blueprint to promote the effective implementation of the TSCP Framework in other foundation stage classrooms?' The discussion is based on insights from the analysis of the interview data and policy texts presented in Chapters Six and Seven and are structured around three key dimensions of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems model, namely the Macro, Exo and Micro levels of the system. The recommendations are aligned with these dimensions to highlight the potential effects at each level of the system on teachers' approaches to the integration of the TSPC in practice. Macrosystem level recommendations relate to the broad arena of public policy-making in education that impact on the lives of children and their families and affect foundation stage learning. Exosystem level recommendations relate to the work of the various agencies that support families and communities to maintain health, safety and wellbeing as well as those that support schools to develop the curriculum and how these connect. Recommendations at the Microsystem level relate directly to the work of the school and to teachers' practice in the classroom. These include strategies for enhancing schools' ability to implement the TSPC approach consistently and also those that relate specifically to approaches to teaching and learning that will enable the

integration of the TSPC in practice as a key component of the foundation stage learning experience of all NI's children and young people.

8.6.1 Macrosystem Level Recommendations - Government Departments and Policy-Makers

These macro level recommendations fall broadly into two categories: those that relate to wider policy issues and education policy, and those that relate specifically to the implementation of the TSPC approach in the foundation stage. In terms of wider policy issues that impact on the foundation stage of education, the findings from this study suggest that greater cognisance needs to be taken of the social determinants of educational success and the impact of structural barriers to learning on children's holistic development, particularly in the early years. The findings highlight that there are opportunities for more integrated approaches to planning for learning in the foundation stage that could be capitalised upon more formally. These include sharing expertise, funding and resources across, for example, education, health, and social care, agendas in the pursuit of more equitable outcomes particularly for marginalised groups and their children. The findings suggest that this should be a common goal across all public sector policy leading to a fairer and more secure start in life for all children that maximises their chances of wellbeing and success across all areas of their learning and development. It is acknowledged that taking such an approach requires resources and funding which would need to be ring-fenced and targeted to support early intervention work with children and families as a priority. It is also acknowledged that, pragmatically, this may need to be achieved through creative and innovative approaches to planning from within existing resources due to the current post-Covid economic climate, but is important to consider nonetheless.

Outcomes from the analysis of interviews with participants in this study makes a strong case for the reinstatement of local Curriculum Advisory and Support Services and local cluster groups and opportunities for sharing practice across schools which enabled teachers to make sense of policy, pilot approaches, and learn from more experienced colleagues. The demise of the local service has been keenly

felt by schools and participants argued powerfully for a return to a hub and spoke version of the previous model and a more coordinated local approach if policy reforms are to be implemented consistently in all schools.

In relation to the future development of the TSPC policy in schools, the findings pointed to a number of actions at both the Exosystem and Microsystem levels as discussed in the sections below.

8.6.2 Exosystem Level Recommendations - Public Sector agencies and partners

Building on the recommendations above in relation to the integration of more formal opportunities for multi-disciplinary working into school planning at the local level, the majority of participants argued that academic achievement and wellbeing are interlinked. The point was made that there is much to learn from colleagues such as educational psychologists, health visitors, social workers and community-based staff who work with children and families and on the development of nurture principles and trauma-informed responses in early years education. At present, according to the foundation stage teachers interviewed, there is no planned approach to multi-disciplinary working unless a serious issue arises in the life of a child and the teacher is asked to become involved from an educational perspective. However, all teachers interviewed were of the view that the implementation of policies such as the TSPC would be much more effective in the early years if it was supported by a structured multi-disciplinary approach. This would involve drawing on the expertise of colleagues in, for example, the design and delivery of joint training programmes and the establishment of cluster groups to explore collaborative approaches to children's holistic development of which thinking skills and dispositions is a key part.

From the perspective of education, the findings suggested that the appointment of a dedicated TSPC link officer for schools would facilitate more cross-sector engagement. This would include working collaboratively with Universities, ITE institutions and the ETNI as well as external consultancy firms who currently offer training programmes in thinking skills to schools at considerable cost. In this

model, the TSPC approach could be developed in a coordinated way with professional learning embedded across all stages of a teacher's career. A structured approach such as this would also ensure that training in thinking skills was updated to reflect advances in research internationally. Having this resource would ensure opportunities to explore how this could be reflected in practice cross sector with agreed approaches to the development and assessment of the impact of the TSPC at classroom level agreed in partnership with schools and institutions. At present, there is a high level of variation in the implementation of the TSPC across schools mainly due to the lack of infrastructure to support a coordinated approach to its integration in the classroom. The majority of the teachers interviewed expressed strong views on the current model of inspection and saw it that as a significant barrier to implementation. A more integrated, partnership approach to inspection would, it was argued, facilitate more consistent implementation of the TSPC across all schools. Better engagement between the service and other sectors would enable professional dialogue around the purpose and aims of the TSPC and the co-design and delivery of professional learning and training with partners moving forward. From this foundation, Inspectors would, arguably, be better equipped to assess the impact of the TSPC in schools and to make recommendations for development and improvement within a commonly understood framework.

8.6.3 Microsystem Level Recommendations - schools and foundation stage teachers

Recommendations in this section refer to key themes on actions and approaches that support integration of the TSPC more consistently in the foundation stage of the Primary School. Foundation stage teachers interviewed as part of this study were clear on the actions that need to be taken at school and classroom level, and the structures that need to be in place to support them if the TSPC is to be implemented consistently in all foundation stage classrooms across NI. In their experience of effectively implementing a thinking curriculum in their classrooms the foundation stage teachers interviewed viewed the following aspects as being core to their success: a whole school approach to the TSCP which is coordinated from Nursery to primary Seven; access to programmes of quality professional learning on the

development of the TSPC on an ongoing basis; opportunities for sharing best practice both within and across schools; and a comprehensive review of the TSCP Framework after a decade since its inception. A whole school approach was seen as the essential building block if the TSPC was to be effective for all learners in the foundation classroom. Implementation across a school takes time and resource and the ability to be able to call on local support and expertise was viewed as adding great value to the implementation process. In these schools, the Head Teacher and senior management team were fully committed to the approach, engaged in professional learning in collaboration with their staff, and included the TSCP as a standing item on the annual School Development Plan. This ensured that it remained a focus and that it continued to be reviewed and developed in line with the other priorities identified on the SDP and that both funding and resource were allocated to support its development in a coordinated way across the school. The teachers and Advisors interviewed argued strongly that without a long-term strategic focus supported by professional learning and resource implementation would continue to be fragmented and patchy at best with limited impact and benefit in the foundation stage and across the primary school.

Built into the strategic and planned approach to the implementation of the TSPC in these schools was the ring-fencing of funding to support teachers to attend conferences, seminars, regular cluster groups and CPD sessions to support teachers' confidence and practice. This committed approach to professional learning was viewed by teachers as an essential component of the successful implementation of the TSPC in their schools which requires joint planning and resource at a time when budgets are already seriously depleted. From the perspectives of foundation stage teachers, access to targeted education and training on the principles underpinning the TSPC, and how these should be reflected in classroom practice in the early years, added value to their understanding which in turn informed and sharpened how they integrated thinking into their planning and practice. More experienced teachers talked about the opportunities that they had to engage with thinking-related concepts such as 'cognition and metacognition', 'critical thinking' and 'problem-based learning' and how these relate to their thinking development work with young children across the Areas of Learning and through a play-based approach.

Foundation stage teachers argued that often the underpinning principles of the TSPC are not well explicated and that a more thorough grounding in the psychology of the approach would be helpful for all teachers to consider when interpreting and implementing it. In these schools, this was provided by the TSPC coordinator or the Head Teacher and, when available, in-school training sessions were provided by external consultants or recognised experts funded by the school which gave teachers the opportunity to question and engage with these concepts with their colleagues in the context of their own schools. Teachers interviewed also referred to the opportunities that they had to observe other teachers in the classroom, share practice and challenges, and engage with new approaches and research. This approach to professional learning was seen as a key mechanism for teachers to consistently embed the TSPC in practice and in the development of a shared language for thinking which did not cost anything but required teachers to be creative and flexible with their time. Participants argued that the Shared Education Programme and Nurture Schools Initiative already provide a template for this way of working, and a methodology that schools involved in these initiatives could build upon to implement the TSCP in a consistent and incremental way in their schools. The development of an agreed toolkit of resources and guidance for each key stage and the use of IT solutions such as webinars and Webex sessions was suggested as a more cost-effective way to sustain connection and professional dialogue in relation to the TSPC approach, both in and beyond schools, particularly given the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought and may well continue to bring. Again, the schools involved in this study highlighted the need for teachers to take the lead in their own professional development and that of their colleagues, to consider alternative possibilities, and to be creative and flexible with their time. They referred to their implementation journey and to the learning process that they had worked through, described by Participant 1A, an experienced foundation stage teacher as involving the need to '*rip up the playbook and throw away the highlighter'* and to broaden their thinking around different models and possibilities for how professional learning can be organised in schools. This required the support of the leadership team and the engagement of the whole staff as they collaborated across key stage and disciplinary boundaries on a regular basis. What emerged from this process was an approach to professional learning that was driven

and shaped by the school staff themselves, one that aligned with the needs of their specific contexts and that was comprised of research, outcomes from practice, and expert input as their learning and development needs required. As discussed in section 8.2.2 above, the introduction of the Learning Leaders Strategy (2017) into the education system in NI provides both a vision and a framework to support schools in the development of more collaborative approaches to professional learning and leadership across all stages of learning. The strategy is a major step toward creating the support networks that will ensure that a coherent system of career-long teacher professional learning is developed to support teachers to lead both self and school improvement. The strategy encourages and supports schools to develop a self-extending system for school improvement that has teacher professional learning and development as its heart. This includes opportunities for the development of pathfinder pilot programmes and practitioner inquiry-based approaches to the interpretation and implementation of a whole-school approach to the implementation of the TSPC over time. The strategy's focus on collaborative practice, networking, and the development of communities of practice to share learning on the implementation of the TSPC aligns exceptionally well with the outcomes from both the literature and interview data in this study which identifies these approaches as being central to its successful implementation and impact for all learners.

All participants interviewed highlighted the need for the TSPC Framework to be evaluated, refreshed and relaunched. In the view of the Head Teachers, teachers, and Curriculum Advisors interviewed it had in many respects 'fallen off the radar' in the midst of other wider system demands and the lack of impetus that it had received from the Inspectorate and the Department of Education over time. Now, over a decade since its inception, participants considered that it was time to undertake a comprehensive review of the Framework, which had schools, teachers, parents, and children at its heart in order to determine the extent of its impact in primary schools and foundation stage classrooms and to establish a baseline for its future development. In many respects their comments are timely given the Minister for Education's announcement of a comprehensive review of the NI education system in January 2021. This review presents an excellent opportunity for a review

of the TSPC Framework to be included in its Terms of Reference, undertaken in line with the other elements of the curriculum and within an agreed and robust evaluative framework. All participants highlighted the importance of thinking skills and the dispositions that support them in addressing society's most pressing challenges. These include climate change, learning for sustainability, social justice and equity, and healthy connected communities that all require critical thinking, creativity and problem-based thinking to effect solutions. Indeed, perhaps there has never been a better time to restart the thinking skills conversation and to consider more realistic, innovative, and cost-effective ways to re-establish its position as a key curriculum priority.

8.7 Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

As discussed in Chapter Five, no study can ever be all-encompassing and cover all aspects of a research topic in its entirety, there will always be certain limitations. From the perspective of this study, and in addition to the limitations caused specifically by the Covid-19 pandemic discussed above at section 8.2.2, I have identified two further limitations: one that relates to the size and scope of the study and another that relates to the breadth and composition of the participant group. As this study was specific to the context of participants' experiences of the implementation of a particular policy in the NI context it involved a small, purposive sample of only fourteen participants. Following Morrow (2005), given the small sample size and the absence of statistical data I am making no assertions of generalisability or claims that the outcomes from my research are applicable to all teachers or all schools in NI. In addition, it should be noted that the majority of the participants interviewed in this study, both those working directly in schools and those from the broader educational context in NI, were very supportive of the TSPC and strong proponents of its approach in the primary school. This suggests that my data should be read with this in mind and that it is a limitation of the study that data is drawn only from those who supported the TSPC. Inevitably, not all schools or teachers in NI will be in agreement with the TSPC approach for a range of different reasons and in future research it would be important to hear and understand why

this may be the case in order to further inform the analysis, discussion and, ultimately, to inform recommendations for future policy and practice.

Limitations also pertain to the findings from the policy analysis which was undertaken on three texts that I selected from an extensive body of policy texts on this subject. One way that I would suggest to mitigate this potential limitation for the future would be to extend the scope of the participant group to include a broader range of primary and secondary schools from across the region, both urban and rural. Extending the scope of the study in this way might take more time and resource to conduct but would provide a much richer picture of the opportunities and challenges to implementing the TSPC consistently in all schools in Northern Ireland. Extending the methodology to include, for example, focus groups or the development of a questionnaire, could also yield a broad range of insights that would inform a more extensive range of recommendations that might be transferable and applicable across all schools. As suggested in the recommendations above, a baseline audit of the current TSPC position in schools could be undertaken as part of the comprehensive review of education recently announced by the Minister for Education. I would also recommend that teachers, school leaders, parents/carers, and pupils should have a key role in the design and delivery of the audit design and approach and in any recommendations or proposals that flow from it.

A second limitation was that due to the limited scope of the study and the timeframes for completion, the perspectives of a number of important stakeholders are not included. For example, qualitative interviews or focus groups with children and their parents or carers could be incorporated to elicit their views on the thinking curriculum they have experienced in school. Interviews with teachers and Head Teachers working in large inner city primary and secondary schools would also have added to the trustworthiness of the findings. Extending the scope of the research could potentially provide important insights on the purpose of education from their perspective and also on the barriers and opportunities to implementing the TSPC approach in a more challenging social and economic context than the schools taking part in this study. It was also disappointing that the ETINI declined to take part in this research since this would have afforded them the opportunity to

respond to the perceptions of teachers on the negative role that they play in the implementation of the TSPC as a key component of the revised curriculum. In sum, I would contend that, by extending the methods used to conduct the study and by incorporating a broader range of participants, a more diverse and multi-faceted range of perspectives on the factors that influence enactment of the TSPC approach would be provided. Such an approach would further strengthen and legitimise any recommendations for future policy and practice in this area.

However, having identified these limitations I would argue that there are aspects of the study and its outcomes that resonate beyond NI's specific approach to the development of a thinking curriculum in the primary school, and in foundation stage classrooms more specifically. As noted in the literature reviewed throughout the Dissertation, there has been an enhanced focus on thinking skills in education policy-making, both internationally and more locally, over the past three decades. This has resulted in countries prioritising the development of thinking skills in school curricula using a range of different approaches as highlighted in the McGuinness (1998) review which was discussed in Chapter Four. As Priestley and Biesta (2015) point out, irrespective of the approach to reform that is being implemented, teachers are the primary medium through which these reforms are interpreted and their effective implementation in line with policy objectives depends on teachers. From this perspective, the opportunities and challenges experienced by the foundation stage teachers who took part in this study are likely across education systems and contexts. The findings also provide a baseline against which other foundation stage teachers, and the staff who support them, could evaluate their own experiences of implementation readiness or their current position in relation to the development of thinking skills. They point to, for example, the importance of considering the school context when planning the implementation of curriculum reforms, the need for a co-ordinated, whole school approach, committed and knowledgeable leadership, as well the need for collaborative approaches to professional learning and the inclusion of all stakeholders in evaluation and development processes as the policy becomes embedded and moves forward. NI's approach was relatively unique in that it is one of only two countries which has developed a specific framework for the teaching of thinking skills using an

integrated approach across all key stages on a statutory basis. This approach by the Department of Education provides a solid foundation from which schools can build their implementation plans and foundation stage teachers can develop their practice consistently over time. The approach also provides significant scope and possibilities for early years teachers to embed curriculum structures for thinking and to develop the dispositions and personal capabilities that support them. Accordingly. I would suggest that the core components of the effective implementation of a thinking curriculum which emerged from this study are likely common across all early years settings. This gives the findings and the recommendations and proposals from this study application potential across the totality of the education system with relevance and meaning for foundation stage teachers working beyond the NI context.

8.8 Ensuring the trustworthiness of the research

Morrow (2015:250) contends that to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the outcomes of qualitative research certain qualities are indispensable to this regardless of the research paradigm. These include elements such as, the sufficiency of the data, attention to subjectivity, and issues related to interpretation and presentation. In relation to the sufficiency of the data used to generate the findings from this study, I did not focus only on numbers of participants but used purposive sampling to ensure that I had access to a broad range of participant perspectives on the factors that affect teachers' implementation of the TSCP approach, both in and beyond the classroom context. This is in line with Morrow (2015:255) who contends that 'adequate amounts of evidence are not achieved by mere numbers'. Patton (1990:185) also recommends that 'validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size.' The actions that I took to address my own subjectivities and potential biases in relation to the research were outlined in Chapter Five and involved, for example, ensuring openness and transparency between myself and the participants at all stages of the interview process, including providing each with a Plain Language Statement that clearly set out the aims and objectives of the research and

their roles within it and spending time discussing this before the start of each interview. Copies of completed transcripts were also returned to a sample of participants and any changes that participants wished to make by way of clarification were accepted. Issues of trustworthiness that relate to the interpretation and presentation of the outcomes of the study were an ongoing consideration for me throughout the research process. To ensure that the outcomes were trustworthy and reliable I applied a structured approach to the gathering, organisation and analysis of interview data. For example, I ensured that the interview approach was clearly articulated, and, following Kvale (1996), I used a small number of open-ended questions to engage participants in a conversation with a purpose in order to elicit richer responses to the issues presented as they emerged. Gasson, (2004:94) contends that the reliability of qualitative research depends on a number of key elements and that 'the way in which a study is conducted should be consistent across time, researchers, and analysis techniques'. In my approach to this study, I tried to ensure that the methods applied to conduct the research were clearly and explicitly explained and presented in the Methodology Chapter and that an audit trail of, for example, the different stages of development of the coding template, including emerging themes and notes on how these were developed from the data were included in the relevant chapters of the Dissertation and in the appendices as appropriate. In addition, I endeavoured to ensure that the findings presented were derived from the data, were consistent across the methods used and the data sources, and were presented honestly and authentically in the writing up of the Dissertation.

8.9 Contributions to professional practice

The six years that I have spent completing the EdD course at the University of Glasgow has been a journey of enormous personal and professional growth. My journey involved reflecting on my strongly held beliefs on the need for equity in learning, and examining them from perspectives that were often very different to those that I held when I left the classroom ten years ago.

Now at the end of this process I can reflect on my motivations for undertaking this study and my unshakeable conviction about the importance of teaching thinking skills and dispositions to young children in the foundation stage of the primary school. Through the Dissertation process I was able to re-engage with the world of my teaching practice and was immediately faced with the reality of an education system that has lived through a substantial period of change over the past ten years. This was a system ravaged by the effects of large-scale system change, not least of which was the speed and scope of developments in information technology that affect all teachers and learners irrespective of context. I was struck by the way that social media has permeated every aspect of school life and every student, and with many unintended consequences. For example, notions of schools and teachers as the primary source of knowledge and questions about what constitutes knowledge in the first instance have been transformed in this new reality. Children and young people now require different sets of skills and orientations to enable them to live and progress in society in ways that help them to grapple with the new 21st century challenges that these new developments have created. As a classroom teacher I always believed that a curriculum based on the delivery of subject knowledge and testing regimes was an empty endeavour, particularly in the primary one and two years of school. Engagement with the Enriched Curriculum project back in 2003 confirmed this for me and highlighted the need for children's thinking to be developed in explicit and structured ways which brought greater benefits for the learner across a range of different indicators. The introduction of the TSPC in 2007 as part of the revised NI curriculum felt like an enormous victory replacing the previous content-based approaches with a framework for promoting a thinking-based curriculum on a statutory basis. Whilst progress in the implementation has not been as effective as it could be, this study has highlighted that, despite the challenges, there is a firm foundation for refreshing and re-engaging with the TSPC approach using the impending review of NI education as a lever for positive development and change moving forward.

During my time on the EdD I have also had the opportunity to work with a number of groups of MSc students on the development and supervision of their Dissertations. I have also recently taken a tutorial group as part of the Modern

Educational Thought (MET) course run by the University. Having worked with Masters students for the past few years it has become apparent that the ability to think critically and creatively about the ideas that they are encountering does not come easily to them and is not an approach that they have been used to engaging with in school. As a result of this course and the outcomes from my Dissertation, a key focus of my work with students will always be to engage them in questioning, debate and challenge as they explore the different philosophical, sociological and psychological perspectives on education that they encounter on the course. My approach is to teach in ways that provide a safe space for them to question what is presented as the norm and to draw their own conclusions based on more critical engagement with the material that they are exposed to.

At the time of writing, the world is still in the grip of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The complexity of the challenges and the fallout from the breakdown of the economic, social and political systems will take years to recover from. This process of reconstruction will require people who are able to think critically and creatively in contexts rife with unpredictability to resolve them. In many ways the fragility of the education system and its lack of resilience in the face of the severe challenges that this pandemic has brought has been fully exposed. The lack of preparedness, flexibility, and the resources to respond swiftly and effectively across the system have been noticeable by their absence. This significantly added to the pressures experienced by teachers at school level and at all levels of the system. School closures and the pivot to online learning created further challenges, particularly for the most marginalised, and removed an important safety net from children and parents at a time when they needed it the most. As I highlighted previously, I am under no illusion about the challenges that lie ahead in education and the impact that this may well have on the development of the TSPC Framework in this new, unexpected reality.

Hoverer, adversity also brings opportunity and if this experience has taught us anything it is that schools can rise to the challenge when they need to, resources and solutions can be found at short notice and the generosity and kindness of people from all sections of society brings great hope for the future. Things will get better and as pointed out by Yvonne Roberts in her article in the Guardian article at the

beginning of the year entitled ‘Does true grit just belong in movies or can we teach it to our children?

> Children manage adversity better when they have positive relationships with responsible adults, have confidence in their own abilities and these are valued by others. The power of a child’s mindset can rocket boost a life.
>
> (Roberts, Guardian, Saturday 23rd January 2021)

There is now an opportunity to learn from this experience and to press the reset button on policy making in education in NI to ensure a fairer, more resilient and more socially just approach to educational provision for all children irrespective of their background. Now is the time to rethink the purpose of education. The structure and content of the new curriculum needs to reflect the knowledge and skills required to address the greatest problems of our time, reflect the connection between people, place and the planet, and develop learners who are able to evaluate, problem-solve and think critically across contexts. This can no longer be an option. The comprehensive review of education has already been announced by the Minister and this should include the views of teachers, parents and children on the purpose of education, its content and structure and what matters most to them. The review of the TSPC Framework will fit exceptionally well into these conversations and hopefully trigger a re-setting of the discourses about the role of the teacher in the development of thinking skills. Thinking skills are life skills and teachers are central to the process and in the lives of children generally, a role described by Frank Coffield in his think piece for the Learning Skills Network back in 2008 entitled ‘Just Suppose Teaching and Learning Became the First Priority’ in the following terms.

> I learned from my father, as he learned from his, to hear the music, the excitement and the hope in the word ‘education’. (Coffield, 2008:61)

I believe that a curriculum that focuses not only on literacy and numeracy and skills for work but on the development of creativity, criticality, compassion and care for self and others has the power to provide all of Northern Ireland’s young people with the mindset and capabilities that can truly rocket-boost their lives. They just need

an education system that cares enough about the right things to help them make that a reality. Perhaps, more than ever, that time is now.

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Appendix 1

Plain Language Statement

Researcher
Michelle Donaghy email:

Degree Title
Doctorate in Education (EdD)

School
School of Education

Project Title
How do Foundation Stage teachers in the Northern Ireland context interpret the concept of the 'Thinking Classroom' and integrate it into their practice?

Supervisors

Professor Nicki Hedge:
Professor Penny Enslin:

Invitation Paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a Doctoral research study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand the nature of the research, why it is being done and what it will involve should you choose to take part. To ensure that you have a clear understanding of the project, please take some time to read over the following information carefully and feel free to contact me to discuss further if there is any aspect that is not clear or if you would like more information. Alternatively, you can also contact my supervisors Professor Nicki Hedge and Professor Penny Enslin (details above). Please take time to decide whether or not you would like to take part in the project.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this Doctoral study is to explore how Primary One and Two teachers in the Northern Ireland context interpret the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities statutory framework and integrate it into their planning and practice. In order to do this I will conduct a 60 minute interview with you where you will have the opportunity to express your views and perspectives on your current approach to the integration of the framework into your teaching. I may also request a further 30 minute interview to clarify issues raised during the main interview and to check that I have interpreted and represented your views and opinions accurately. You have been chosen for this research project because you are a Foundation Stage teacher with experience of implementing this policy requirement as part of the Northern Ireland primary school curriculum or because you have a role in developing, evaluating or assessing the framework in primary schools.

Do I have to take part?

You are not compelled in any way to take part in this study unless you wish to do so. You are also free to withdraw from the project at any time without the need to provide a reason for doing so.

Is the information that I provide Confidential?

Confidentiality may be limited and conditional and the researcher has a duty of care to report to the relevant authorities where possible harm or danger to a research participant or others is suspected.
Should you wish to take part in this Doctoral research project you will be asked to read and sign a consent form. Any information that you provide will be de-identified and kept strictly confidential and anything that can identify you will be removed from any write-up, of any kind, arising from this project. All written and recorded information will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and all electronic files stored on the computer systems will be password protected. At the end of the research period, July 2019, any identifying paper documentation will be shredded and any voice recordings will be deleted.

How will the information that I provide be used?

The information provided by you through interview will be used in my EdD dissertation submission which is planned for June 2019.

Has the research project been reviewed and approved?

This project has been considered and approved by the College of Social Science Research Ethics Committee.

Contact for further information

For further information on the review and approval process and to pursue any complaint, please contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer: **Dr Muir Houston, email:**

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider the above information.

Appendix 2

Consent Form

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: **How do Foundation Stage teachers in the Northern Ireland context interpret the concept of the 'Thinking Classroom' and integrate it into their practice?**

Name of Researcher: Michelle Donaghy

Name of Supervisors : Professor Nicki Hedge & Professor Penny Enslin

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I confirm that I have read and understood the **Plain Language Statement** for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

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

I consent / do not consent (underline as applicable) to interviews being audio-recorded.

I wish/do not wish (underline as applicable) to see a copy of the interview transcript.

I acknowledge that participants will not be identified by name in any publications arising from the research and that:

- all names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised
- the material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times
- the material will be destroyed once the project is completed.

I agree / do not agree (underline as applicable) to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant:

Signature:

Date:

Name of Researcher:

Signature :

Date:

Appendix 3

Interview Guide: All participants

Introductions: purpose of the study, professional role, background, experience, years in practice.

Q1. David Leat, in his discussion on teacher development and the implementation of TS programmes states that '*along with most other curriculum innovations TS programmes usually fail to make a lasting impact or become established within school systems, despite promising evidence of their effects*' He likens attempts to embed these programmes in schools to 'rolling the stone uphill'.
Has this been your experience? **What has enabled or constrained your efforts?**

Q2. Should thinking skills play an important part in the primary school curriculum? What would a good 'thinker' look like at the FS level? **What are your views on this?**

Q3. Do you think that initial teacher training programmes and CPD for teachers equip them well enough for the complex task of teaching thinking at FS or indeed any stage? **Why/ Why not?**

Q4. In relation to the Thinking Skills Programmes currently in use: specific programmes which aim are taught separately from the main syllabus or infusion of thinking through all conventional subjects and areas of study? **Which approach do you think is best? Why?**

Q5. What, in your view, are the essential building blocks necessary to support and sustain the teaching of TS programs in schools?

Q6. Hanneke Jones conducted research in primary schools to investigate the relationship between, for example, standards and formal assessments and the teaching of TS in the classroom. The principles underlying each were found to be in conflict and she concluded that TS cannot be expected to flourish against the demands of the curriculum - **what has your experience been? What are the barriers to effective integration of the TSPC from your perspective?**

Q7. Metacognition and metacognitive approaches to teaching is one of the SESP programmes selected by teachers as part of the Joint Programme Development work with Professor Carol Mc Guinness, **why do you think teachers have opted for this? is it a good use of time and resource in this context in your view?**

Q8. The TS&PC Framework was developed and implemented as part of the statutory requirements of the revised (NI) curriculum (2007). The Framework is based on an infusion approach to the development of Thinking skills - **10 yrs on do you think that it has had sufficient impact? why? why not?**

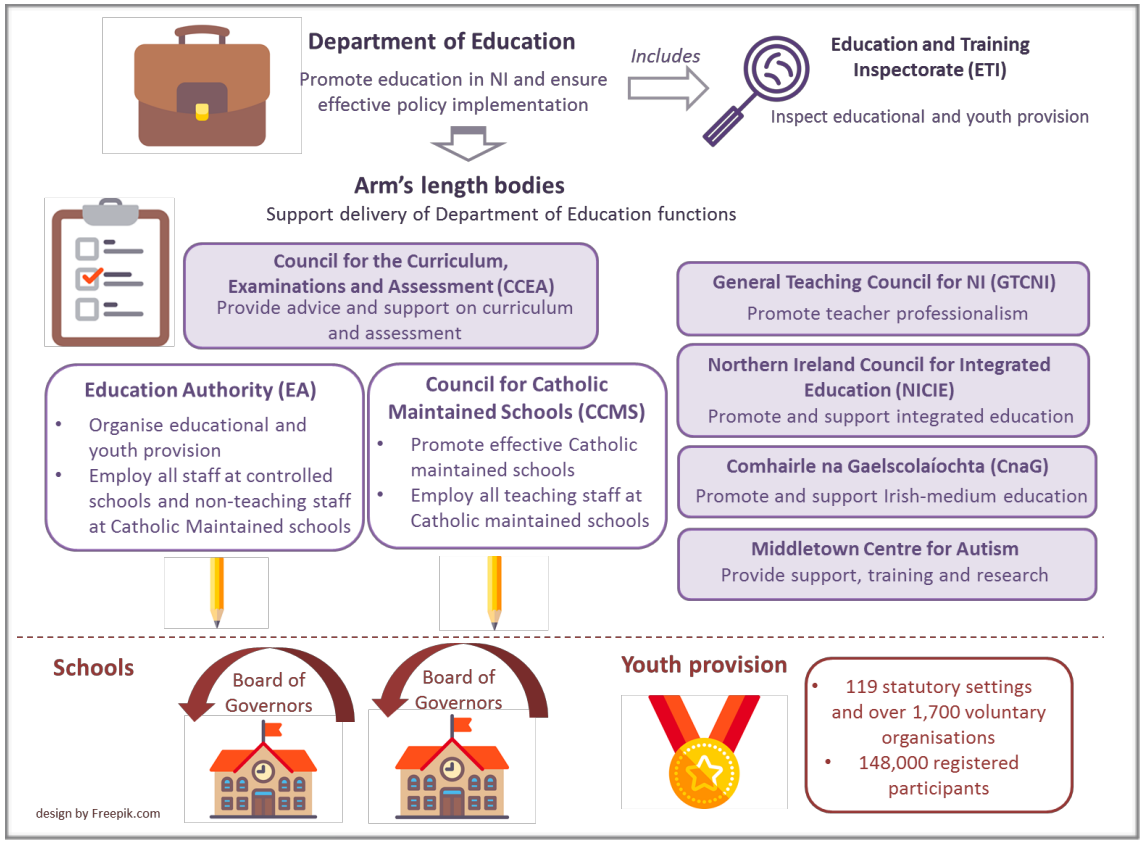
Q9. A funded pilot study was conducted in the NEELB 2009 - 2012: *'Developing a Thinking School: Norway to Northern Ireland'.* The final report in 2013 presented positive outcomes for the schools involved and the broad range of staff who participated - was this something that you were aware of and were any aspects of the best practice examples taken forward by any of the other Boards?
why/why not? (in your view)

Q10. Nisbet back in 1981 stated that 'Before the century is out, no curriculum will be regarded as acceptable unless it can be shown to make a contribution to the teaching of thinking'.

- Have we succeeded?
- 3 key components that we need to put in place moving forward to make it happen…?

Appendix 4

Strategic Overview of the NI Education System



Appendix 5

Codes for template analysis of the first 4 interview transcripts.

1.	Beliefs relating to current level of knowledge and skill in the delivery of the TSPC (*ITE & preparation, opportunities for collaboration & sharing best practice, opportunities for professional learning and development)*
1a	Positive beliefs
1b	Negative beliefs
2a	Beliefs about the place of thinking skills in schools (*why teach it? How should it be taught in the primary school? in the foundation stage?)*
2b	Beliefs about the factors that **enable** effective implementation of the TSCP
2c	Beliefs about the factors that **inhibit** effective implementation of the TSPC
3	Beliefs about the future of the TSPC framework *(what changes are viewed as being necessary to embed this approach effectively into all schools? at school level? at a cross-system level? recommendations? policy directions?)*
3a.	Positive views – *what is working well?*

3b.	Negative views and concerns – *what needs to change?*

Appendix 6

Initial draft of the coding template

1. Implementing the TSPC Framework

1.1 Enablers
- 1.1.1 Strong Leadership
- 1.1.2 Whole School Approach - 'thinking school'
- 1.1.3 Conducive environment
- 1.1.4 Teacher skills and experience
- 1.1.5 Teacher attitudes and expectations
- 1.1.6 Training and education provision

1.2 Challenges
- 1.2.1 Demands of the prescribed curriculum and 11 plus exam
- 1.2.2 Inspection processes
- 1.2.3 Teacher attitudes and expectations
- 1.2.4 Political instability
- 1.2.5 Lack of focus
- 1.2.6 Inadequate provision of training and education at all levels

1.3 Changes in teaching approach - planning and practice

2. Purpose of the TSPC Framework

2.1 Positive beliefs
- 2.1.1 Flexible learners
- 2.1.2 Independent thinkers

2.1.3 Improves/develops teachers' classroom practice
2.1.4 Facilitates essential skills for life in a globalised/connected world

2.2 Negative points/criticisms

2.2.1 Inconsistently applied across schools - lost impetus
2.2.2 Mixed messages from the inspectorate (creates anxiety)
2.2.3 Schools create their own focus and have to drive it themselves internally
2.2.4 Teachers unclear about what is expected of them in terms of impact and outcomes (assessment)

3. Characteristics of a 'Thinking School'

3.1 Teaching approaches

3.1.1 Whole school involvement
3.1.2 Constructivist - teacher and pupil work together on thinking skills and problem-solving
3.1.3 Infusion - TS are a 'natural' part of what you are teaching
3.1.4 More pupil autonomy in terms of organisation of resources and freedom of movement in the classroom

3.1.5 Less teacher control of the learning - outcomes are not prescribed but are generated part of the process
3.1.6 Focus on dispositions as building blocks - starts in early years
3.1.7 High levels of collaboration and communication - changes discussed and agreed
3.1.8 Assessment based on close observation and dialogue - drives areas for progression and development year on year

3.2 School Ethos

3.2.1 Open to change - growth mindset
3.2.2 Committed leadership
3.2.3 Culture of trust and respect

3.2.4 Culture of appropriate risk-taking/ trial and error viewed as a valuable part of professional learning & development
3.2.5 Sharing of good practice across key stages
3.2.6 A shared language for thinking across the school

4. Way Forward

4.1 Positives

4.1.1 NI has adopted the framework on a statutory basis
4.1.2 All teachers in NI will be aware of it
4.1.3 Welcomed by early years and FS teachers
4.1.4 Pilot schools who are successfully implementing it as a whole school focus

4.2 Issues that need to be addressed

4.2.1 Still a long way to go
4.2.2 ETI and policy makers disconnected from challenges of classroom practice
4.2.3 Inconsistent messages from ETI re what is expected
4.2.4 Lack of focus and impetus - still literacy and numeracy focused
4.2.5 Need for programmes of training and education at all levels offered consistently - mandatory?

Appendix 7

Example of how one of the sub-themes developed from the initial to the final stage of the analysis.

Initial Version of the Template

1. Implementing the framework

1.1 Enablers

1.1.1 Strong Leadership

1.1.2 Whole School Approach - 'thinking school'

1.1.3 Conducive environment

1.1.4 Teacher skills and experience

1.1.5 Teacher attitudes and expectations

1.1.6 Training and education provision

Final Version of the Template

4.1 Enablers/ Affordances

4.1.1 Strong Leadership

4.1.1.1 Clear vision

4.1.1.2 Experts in terms of knowledge and skills

4.1.1.3 Motivated and interested - innovative 'always on the look-out' for new approaches

4.1.1.4 Resources prioritised - change is sustained

4.1.1.5 Courageous and not afraid to defend their vision/take a risk - 'bit of a maverick'

4.1.1.6 Proud of their school and their staff and express this openly

4.1.1.7 Person-centred

4.1.1.7.1 Grounded in reality - practically connected

4.1.1.7.2 Practices the capabilities and dispositions themselves

4.1.1.7.3 Solution-driven and trustworthy - resourceful

4.1.1.7.4 Passionate about the work and how best to engage staff with it

4.1.1.7.5 Values and appreciates effort - focus on wellbeing

4.1.1.7.6 Resilient - supports staff 'when things get tough' - nurturing environment

4.1.2 Whole School Approach - 'thinking school'

4.1.2.1 Phased approach to implementation agreed and clearly set out in the SDP

4.1.2.1.1 Priorities agreed collectively - clear vision

4.1.2.1.2 Objectives measurable and achievable

4.1.2.1.3 Resources allocated to support development - change is sustained

4.1.2.1.4 Regular consultation and review - inclusive

4.1.2.1.5 Parents/carers/ all members of the school community involved in strategy and review

4.1.2.2 Structured approach to staff training and development

4.1.2.2.1 Coordination of TSPC - planning/development/staff training

4.1.2.2.2 High level of teacher collaboration and sharing of good practice

4.1.2.2.3 External training accessed (school-funded)

4.1.2.2.4 Programmes of mentoring and coaching well embedded

4.1.2.2.4.1 Led by senior/experienced staff

4.1.2.2.4.2 Available to new staff/ non-teaching staff/ parents/ carers

4.1.2.2.4.3 Involves school to school networking where possible

4.1.3 Conducive environment

4.1.3.1 'Safe space' for staff and pupils to experiment and explore new approaches

4.1.3.2 Positive staff relationships based on mutual trust and respect

4.1.3.3 A learning community - capacity building through trial and error

4.1.3.4 Positive teacher attitudes and high expectations

4.1.3.5 TSPC culturally embedded and a 'natural' part of practice

Appendix 8

Final version of the coding template.

1. Background context in which TSPC framework is located

1.1 Political context
1.1.1 Instability
1.1.1.1 No functioning Executive/ Minister for Education
1.1.1.2 Lack of vision/direction for education
1.1.1.3 Budget cuts across all public services - reduced resource all round
1.1.1.4 Fears about the effects of Brexit on NI
1.1.1.4.1 Downturn in trade and the economy
1.1.1.4.2 Return of sectarian violence
1.1.1.4.3 Inequalities deepen further and impact on most vulnerable
1.1.2 Segregation
1.1.2.1 Segregated Education System
1.1.2.1 Separate school/training/government systems
1.1.2.1.1 Controlled/Maintained/Integrated/Grammar schools (segregated on basis of religion)
1.1.2.1.2 ITE institutions (2 main campuses segregated on the basis of religion)
1.1.2.1.3 Government departments - Health/ Education/ Social Work/ Housing/ Children & Families - silos
1.1.2.2 Effects of Academic selection (11+)
1.1.2.2.1 'Teaching to the test' - narrowing of the curriculum, content focused
1.1.2.2.2 De-motivating - children experience failure at a young age
1.1.2.2.3 Reinforces inequalities - 'long tail of underachievement' continues to grow
1.1.2.2.4 Schools and teachers judged on the basis of high stakes results
1.2 Policy context
1.2.1 Restructuring of Education Services
1.2.1.1 Five ELBs subsumed into one Education Authority (EA) 2013 - lengthy transition period/ interim arrangements
1.2.1.2 CASS no longer available locally (moving to a regional service)
1.2.1.3 Onus now on schools themselves to build capacity and train staff
1.2.1.4 Review of Public Administration (RPA) (perception that very little achieved in terms of actual reform)
1.2.2 Revised (NI) Curriculum (2007)

1.2.2.1 Focus on skills and dispositions (rather than content based) - 16 subjects subsumed into 5 Areas of Learning
1.2.2.2 Streamlined - to facilitate teacher autonomy and professional judgement
1.2.2.3 TSPC framework from early years to Key Stage 3 implemented on a statutory basis

1.2.3 Pilots/Initiatives
1.2.3.1 Culture of small-scale educational initiatives with seed funding - no provision for follow-up
1.2.3.2 Shared Education Programme
1.2.3.2.1 Funding available for CPD (schools have selected metacognition and TS as a focus)
1.2.3.3 Nurture Schools Initiative
1.2.3.2.1 Funded by Shared Education Programme
1.2.3.2.2 ACE awareness/ trauma-sensitive practice (attachment/ EBD/ memory & attention)

1.2.4 ETINI (Education and Training Inspectorate for Northern Ireland)
1.2.4.1 School improvement driven agenda
1.2.4.1.1 Discourse of accountability and effectiveness
1.2.4.1.2 Driven by Every School a Good School (ESaGS) policy (focus on all pupils getting 5 GCSEs + Eng & Maths)
1.2.4.1.3 Strong challenge & scrutiny function - schools fear being labelled a 'failing school'
1.2.4.1.3.1 Assessment carried out via observation and reporting on what inspectors 'see' during inspection
1.2.4.1.3.2 Success measured through outcomes of high-stakes testing - mainly quantitative
1.2.4.1.3.3 Perception that the skills-based curriculum was not given enough time to embed

1.2.5 Approaches to implementation of the TSPC Framework
1.2.5.1 Schools involved in the Thinking Schools Initiative (External providers)
1.2.5.2 Use of structured programmes (e.g. P4C/ Kagan Structures/ Thinking Maps/Debono Thinking Hats)
1.2.5.3 Blurred into discourses of effective teaching and learning as part of revised curriculum - (not clearly set out 'invisibilised')

1.3 Social context
1.3.1 High levels of deprivation and inequality across NI leading to:
1.3.1.1 Introduction of Nurture Schools Initiative
1.3.1.2 Increased awareness of the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences
1.3.1.3 Trauma-informed practice training
1.3.1.4 More focus on the need for inter-disciplinary working (education/health/social work/ psychology/

housing/police/justice)

1.3.1.5 Inconsistent levels of awareness and practice of all the above across schools

1.3.2 Lack of social mobility

1.3.2.1 People traditionally remain within their own (segregated) communities - limited movement

1.3.2.2 Distrust of the 'other side' - historical & a legacy of the 30yr conflict - (understood from a young age)

1.3.2.3 School programmes to encourage cross-community engagement fail to take effect in any lasting way

1.3.2.4 Many young people feeling that the only way to get on is to 'get out' (loss of skills)

1 3.3 Increase in pupil need

1.3.4.1 Effects of austerity/ child poverty/ punitive social policy

1.3.4.2 Increase in MH issues in young children

1.3.4.3 More complex communication difficulties (on coming to school)

1.3.4.4 Family breakdown/ isolation and lack of parental support

2. Characteristics of a 'Thinking School'

2.1 School Ethos

2.1.1 Open to change - growth mindset - inclusive

2.1.2 Committed leadership driving from the top - values and actively seeks out feedback

2.1.3 Culture of trust and respect among all members of the school community

2.1.4 Culture of appropriate risk-taking/ trial and error viewed as a valuable part of professional learning & development

2.1.5 Sharing of good practice across key stages and with parents & other stakeholders

2.1.6 A shared language for thinking developed across the school

2.1.7 Change managed and communicated well (generally)

2.1.8 Caring/nurturing environments where diversity is valued and encouraged

2.2 Teaching approaches

2.2.1 Whole school effort

2.2.2 Constructivist approach - teacher and pupil work together on thinking skills and problem-solving

2.2.3 Infusion - TS are a 'natural' part of what you are teaching

2.2.4 More pupil autonomy in terms of organisation of resources and freedom of movement in the classroom

2.2.5 Less teacher control of the learning - outcomes are not prescribed but are generated part of the process

2.2.6 Focus on dispositions as building blocks - starts in the early years

2.2.7 High levels of collaboration and communication - changes discussed and agreed

2.2.8 Assessment based on close observation and dialogue - drives areas for progression and development year on year

3. Overarching Purpose of the TSPC framework

3.1 Positive Beliefs about the Framework

3.1.1 For learners

3.1.1.1 Flexibility - equips learners with transferable skills

3.1.1.2 Independent and informed thinkers

3.1.1.3 Increased autonomy

3.1.1.4 Enhanced employment opportunities - essential skills for life in a globalised world

3.1.1.5 Enables 'learning to learn' - metacognitive capacity is developed

3.1.2 For teachers

3.1.2.1 Development of professional learning and classroom practice - (enhances skills and knowledge base)

3.1.2.2 Increased motivation and interest - (fresh approach)

3.1.2.3 Enhanced awareness of new and different approaches to teaching TSPCs

3.1.2.4 More collaborative working - networking opportunities (less isolated/more open to new ideas)

3.1.2.5 Improved working relationships and focus at school level - 'more professional'

3.1.3 For society

3.1.3.1 Independent thinkers who contribute positively to their communities

3.1.3.2 Development of citizens who are able to critically evaluate what they hear/read

3.1.3.3 Less impulsivity - more considered approach to important decisions/life choices - takes responsibility

3.1.3.4 Able to weigh up pros/cons - acknowledge the consequences to their actions

3.1.3.5 More empathy and compassion - kindness toward others - able to resolve conflict effectively

3.1.3.6 Respect for diversity - tolerance of views and opinions other than your own

4. Teachers' Experience of Implementing the TSPC framework

4.1 Enablers/ Affordances

4.1.1 Strong Leadership

4.1.1.1 Clear vision

4.1.1.2 Experts in terms of knowledge and skills

4.1.1.3 Motivated and interested - innovative 'always on the look-out' for new approaches

4.1.1.4 Resources prioritised - change is sustained

4.1.1.5 Courageous and not afraid to defend their vision/take a risk - 'bit of a maverick'

4.1.1.6 Proud of their school and their staff and express this openly

4.1.1.7 Person-centred

4.1.1.7.1 Grounded in reality - practically connected

4.1.1.7.2 Practices the capabilities and dispositions themselves

4.1.1.7.3 Solution-driven and trustworthy - resourceful

4.1.1.7.4 Passionate about the work and how best to engage staff with it
4.1.1.7.5 Values and appreciates effort - focus on wellbeing
4.1.1.7.6 Resilient - supports staff 'when things get tough' - nurturing environment

4.1.2 Whole School Approach - 'thinking school'
4.1.2.1 Phased approach to implementation agreed and clearly set out in the SDP
4.1.2.1.1 Priorities agreed collectively - clear vision
4.1.2.1.2 Objectives measurable and achievable
4.1.2.1.3 Resources allocated to support development - change is sustained
4.1.2.1.4 Regular consultation and review - inclusive
4.1.2.1.5 Parents/carers/ all members of the school community involved in strategy and review
4.1.2.2 Structured approach to staff training and development
4.1.2.2.1 Coordination of TSPC - planning/development/staff training
4.1.2.2.2 High level of teacher collaboration and sharing of good practice
4.1.2.2.3 External training accessed (school-funded)
4.1.2.2.4 Programmes of mentoring and coaching well embedded
4.1.2.2.4.1 Led by senior/experienced staff
4.1.2.2.4.2 Available to new staff/ non-teaching staff/ parents/ carers
4.1.2.2.4.3 Involves school to school networking where possible

4.1.3 Conducive environment
4.1.3.1 'Safe space' for staff and pupils to experiment and explore new approaches
4.1.3.2 Positive staff relationships based on mutual trust and respect
4.1.3.3 A learning community - capacity building through trial and error
4.1.3.4 Positive teacher attitudes and high expectations
4.1.3.5 TSPC culturally embedded and a 'natural' part of practice

4.2 Challenges

4.2.1 Demands of the prescribed curriculum
4.2.1.1 Always a lot to cover (curriculum still very content focused)
4.2.1.2 Parental expectations/ school reputation
4.2.1.3 Fear of criticism / failing
4.2.1.4 Foundation Stage not always fully understood by stakeholders (specialist area)
4.2.1.5 Pressure of academic selection process (11+)
4.2.1.6 Majority of NI schools engaging in Action Short of Strike (since 2017) (no directed time)

4.2.2 Inspection processes

4.2.2.1 Mixed messages from ETINI - teachers feel unclear about what is expected of them re TSPC
4.2.2.2 Fear of criticism/ published reports
4.2.2.3 Lack of partnership working - too much of the challenge function (not enough practical support and engagement)
4.2.2.3.1 School self-evaluation process not fully understood or well embedded in all schools
4.2.2.3.2 Documentation issued by ETI is vague and open to interpretation
4.2.2.3.3 Lack of consultation and engagement with staff on the ground re the challenges experienced
4.2.2.5 High staff turnover in ETI - perception that there is a loss of knowledge and experience (lots of associates)

4.2.3 Teacher attitudes and expectations
4.2.3.1 Teachers who are unable to cede control
4.2.3.2 Low expectations of younger children's ability to think independently and critically - 'patronising'
4.2.3.3 Inflexibility and resistance to change - status quo is the safer option
4.2.3.4 Lack of confidence in their ability to deliver TSPC (no training to support development)
4.2.3.5 Feeling that 'teaching is tough' - fatigue and burn out set in - low energy/morale
4.2.3.6 Attitude that some children will never be able to achieve academically because of issues outside of the school's control

4.2.4 Lack of clear focus for TSPC
4.2.4.1 TSPC not seen as a priority - blurred into effective teaching and learning
4.2.4.1.1 Focus depends on the leadership of the school
4.2.4.1.2 Lack of clarity on 'how' to implement and assess progress (at classroom & school level)
4.2.4.1.3 Documentation is vague and open to interpretation
4.2.4.1.3.1 Lack of expertise and confidence in interpreting guidance at school level
4.2.4.1.3.2 No local CASS resource or support to call upon
4.2.4.1.3.3 Leadership are not committed to TSPC as a priority area of focus
4.2.4.1.4 Focus is still very much on literacy/numeracy/ world around us
4.2.4.2 Schools researching TS independently and 'doing their own thing'
4.2.4.2.1 Wide range of tools and resources in place across schools
4.2.4.2.2 Inconsistency of implementation and approach
4.2.4.2.3 Unclear about assessment - are we actually making progress?
4.2.4.2.3 Creates inequity in the system - not all schools can fund external training/support

4.2.5 Training and education in TSPC
4.2.5.1 CASS resource no longer available locally to support development & provide regional overview
4.2.5.2 Implementation is dependent on expertise and capacity within the school
4.2.5.3 Not a specific focus in ITEs - NQTs require mentoring and support at school level

4.2.5.4 Limited resource available in schools to develop and sustain **Teacher Professional Learning**
4.2.5.5 Low staff confidence:
4.2.5.5.1 Teaching and assessment approach/es
4.2.5.5.2 Underpinning theory and principles
4.2.5.5.3 Use of resources
4.2.5.5.4 Planning for TSPC - baseline assessment and progression
4.2.5.5.5 Understanding the terminology e.g. 'infusion' 'metacognition' 'transfer' - and applying it
4.2.5.2 No clear/consistent focus in ITE institutions on the TSPC framework across all subjects
4.2.5.2.1 No clear programme for teaching & assessing TS consistently across ITE institutions
4.2.5.1.1.1 Cognition/ child development/ practice (tools and methodologies) variable
4.2.5.2.2 NQTs unaware of TSPCs and how to implement in practice - places pressure on schools
4.2.5.2.3 Lack of collaboration with pilot schools/ ETI/ universities
4.2.5.2.4 Lack of engagement with Shared Education and Nurture School initiatives

5. Way Forward for TSPC

5.1 Positives - (what's going well?)
5.1.1 NI has adopted the framework on a statutory basis - it is an identified and agreed priority
5.1.2 All teachers in NI are aware of it and most will have had some initial training
5.1.3 Welcomed by early years and FS teachers from the outset
5.1.4 A number of pilot schools are successfully implementing TSPCs as a whole school focus - a base to build on
5.1.5 Increasing interest from Principal/leadership groups - approaching key staff to provide input

5.2 Barriers to progress - lack of joined up working
5.2.1 Still a long way to go before all schools are applying the TSPC framework consistently
5.2.2 Perception that ETI and policy makers are disconnected from challenges of classroom practice/ don't understand TSPCs
5.2.3 Inconsistent messages from ETI re what is expected - fear factor
5.2.4 Lack of focus and impetus - curriculum is still literacy and numeracy focused - ''if it's so important where's the focus?''
5.2.5 Need for TSPC to be core part of all programmes of training and education at all levels - mandatory?
5.2.6 Social barriers - complex issues affecting children that are outwith education's ability to address alone

5.3 Next steps in developing the TSPC framework
5.3.1 A dedicated curriculum service to support teacher professional learning at local level
5.3.1.1 Dedicated team for development of the TSPC framework locally
5.3.1.1.1 Support schools in the implementation of the TSPC framework as a whole school approach

5.3.1.1.1.1 Regular training opportunities available for teaching staff - research led
5.3.1.1.1.1.1. Provide training on the underpinning principles/cognition/ child development terminology and interpretation
5.3.1.1.1.1.2 Explore appropriate tools/resources with schools with advice on implement
5.3.1.1.1.1.3 Provide a thorough grounding in infusion methodology - support with planning and model implementation in practice

5.3.1.1.1.1.4 Opportunities for cascade of training in school for non-teaching staff/parents/ carers & community groups that provide homework clubs etc
5.3.1.1.1.2 Support with sharing of good practice to ensure self-extending system for TSPC in school
5.3.1.1.1.2.1 School to school networking - build a community of practice
5.3.1.1.1.2.2 Development of cohorts of 'expert practitioners'
5.3.1.1.1.2.3 TSPC focus at principal/leadership cluster groups/ training
5.3.1.1.1.2.4 Schools given time to embed the framework - embarking on a 'learning journey'

5.3.2 Access to quality resources
5.3.2.1 Accessible and well promoted
5.3.2.2 Updated regularly based on research and feedback from teachers (building all the time)
5.3.2.3 School links with pilot schools and cohorts of expert practitioners

5.3.3 Fully integrated into Initial Teacher Education
5.3.3.1 Consistency of approach to TSPC across all ITE institutions
5.3.3.1.1 Agreed approach to teaching cognition/ child development/ philosophy of education/ tools/methodologies for TSPC - more dialogue and collaboration between settings
5.3.3.1.2 Well embedded across all courses - 'not hit and miss' - meaningful and relevant
5.3.3.1.2.1 Connected to Philosophy and sociology of education courses
5.3.3.1.2.2 Embedded in real 'hands-on' experience of Shared Education and Nurture School initiatives
5.3.3.1.2.3 Connected to work on equality and diversity/ building capacity for tolerance and resilience across communities
5.3.3.1.2.4 Input from pilot schools/ expert practitioners/ TSPC coordinators
5.3.3.1.2.5 Formally assessed and reported on as part of school observation - part of feedback
5.3.3.1.2.6 Input from CASS and ETI - case studies and exemplars discussed and worked through
5.3.3.1.2.7 Integral part of the leadership focus in yrs 3 and 4 of ITE and training

5.3.4 More joined up working between schools/ other services (policy perspective)
- 5.3.4.1 ETI/Dept of Education
  - 5.3.4.1.1 Change of policy focus from improvement and effectiveness to more participative/collaborative approaches
    - 5.3.4.1.1.1 Shift of emphasis in inspection processes to self-evaluation where schools 'take the lead'
    - 5.3.4.1.1.2 Development of a broad set of TSPC assessment indicators to guide teachers on what is expected
    - 5.3.4.1.1.3 Acknowledgement that there are different ways of approaching TSPC and that's ok
  - 5.3.4.1.2 Work collaboratively with schools to plan and embed TSPC over time
    - 5.3.4.1.2.1 Provide input into ITE and teachers' CPD courses - co-deliver where appropriate - more visible
    - 5.3.4.1.2.2 Use of case studies/ pilot schools/ communities of practice to support improvement
    - 5.3.4.1.2.3 Acknowledgement that learning is about much more than 5 GCSEs + Maths and English
    - 5.3.4.1.2.4 Collaborate with schools/ITE to agree a broad range of TSPC tools/methodologies
    - 5.3.4.1.2.5 More longitudinal focus on outcomes as part of impact monitoring and assessment
- 5.3.4.2 Health/ Social Care/ Housing/ Criminal Justice/ Policing/Third sector & Vol organisations
  - 5.3.4.2.1 Education more connected to the Health and Social Care integration agenda
    - 5.3.4.2.1.1 Focus on the social determinants of poor health/ wellbeing - poverty, inequality and the risk factors linked to both - the structural barriers that impede educational achievement
    - 5.3.4.2.1.2 More focus on promotion of health and wellbeing from a system/social justice perspective
    - 5.3.4.2.1.3 More inclusive participatory processes that engage all members of society in decisions that affect them 'What matters to you?'
    - 5.3.4.2.1.4 Move away from punitive social policy and austerity measures
      - 5.3.4.2.1.4.1 Funding and resources targeted and proportionate to need
      - 5.3.4.2.1.4.2 Early intervention prioritised and funded
        - 5.3.4.2.1.4.3 Re-investment in programmes such as SureStart and Triple P Parenting to help reduce inequalities
        - 5.3.4.2.1.4.4 Restorative Justice with support for young people involved or at risk of becoming involved in crime or sectarian violence
        - 5.3.4.2.1.4.5 Intensive support for LAAC children and those in the care System - more training and awareness of the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences
  - 5.3.4.2.2 Support systems for children & families in navigating the various systems surrounding them
    - 5.3.4.2.2.1 Creative use of school facilities and community assets/ resources to reduce inequalities

5.3.4.2.2.2 Advocacy and support - ‘we are here for you’ ‘we are listening’
5.3.4.2.2.3 Links with services and third sector to support families and help develop their resilience and wellbeing

5.3.5 Review of the impact of the TSPC framework to date
5.3.5.1 Baseline audit across all schools in NI conducted
5.3.5.1.1 Include audit tool for non-teaching staff/ parents/ carers - focus groups & qualitative work where possible
5.3.5.1.2 Audit of ITE staff and student teachers’ knowledge and experience across all year groups
5.3.5.1.3 Audit/focus groups with ETINI inspectors
5.3.5.1.4 Longitudinal review of pupil outcomes - Accredited Thinking Schools - did they make a difference? e.g. review pupil performance at GCSE/ other indicators?
5.5.5.2 Findings shared with schools/ ETI/ universities/ ITE/ Dept of Education
5.3.5.3 Root & branch review of the framework based on audit outcomes and feedback

Appendix 9

Examples of how a theme and sub-theme was developed from interview data and policy analysis:

1. Characteristics of a thinking school (from the interview data)

Key words/phrases noted from participant interviews	Clusters	Quotations
Shared vision *(13/4)* Leadership *(14/14)* Positive Ethos *(13/14)* Inclusion *(11/14)* Whole school approach *(13/14)* Supportive relationships *(12/14)* Planning for thinking (processes) *(10/14)* Coordination *(12/14)* Collaboration *(12/14)* Communication *(14/14)* Courage (Leadership and staff) *(9/14)* Culturally embedded *(9/14)* Perseverance *(10/14)* Observation *(10/14)* Constructive feedback *(11/14)* Knowledge & skills *(13/14)* Shared language *(11/14)* Learning community *(9/14)* Assessment of thinking skills *(9/14)* Trust *(10/14)* Ethos *(10/14)* Child-centred approaches *(9/14)* Patience *(8/14)* Professional Learning (CPD) *(11/14)* Wellbeing *(9/14)* Critical thinking *(9/14)* Explicit *(9/14)* Strategic thinking *(9/14)* Importance of language *(9/14)* Informed choices *(9/14)* (Benefits to) society *10/14*	**Leadership Style** Shared vision Whole school approach. Long term planning & resource allocation. Inclusive practice (e.g. curriculum design & assessment; managing change). Positive school ethos. Trust & respect. Positive working relationships. Open communication. Facilitates engagement across key stages. Engaged in classroom practice. Courageous & supportive (e.g. Inspection). **Teaching & Learning Approaches to the TSPC Teachers** Access to ongoing professional learning: • Skilled questioning for thinking - explicit & visible • Language as a medium for developing thinking. • Underpinning principles of thinking (e.g. critical, metacognitive, reflective) Assessment for Learning approaches. Self-evaluation processes (engagement in). Shared language for thinking. Adequately resourced (including time). Agreed set of tools and approaches to teaching for thinking (consistency). Joint planning opportunities across key stages. Constructive observation & feedback on planning & practice. Collaborative culture (reflection). Shared language for thinking. Freedom to choose resources and approaches based on professional experience & judgement. Trial & error encouraged (innovative practice) Supportive working relationships. Involvement of the whole school community.	All change takes time to embed and become part of the culture of the school… it's not a two minute job this you know. **1K, Advisor, 30yrs experience** A Thinking School is a learning school, and that means everyone, pupils, teachers, senior staff, non-teaching staff, parents and the wider community too, it's about listening and constantly taking the temperature of your school and then developing things from there. **1H, retired principal, 40 yrs experience** I had no experience of TSPC before I came to teach here, I had great support from the teacher who was leaving and a thorough induction from the principal. I have read a lot but.. you know… you really need to be able to see it to fully understand it. **1J, FS teacher, newly qualified** The right ethos and culture is the glue that holds everything and everyone together… change is relational first and foremost, when the climate is right and staff feel safe to take the risk and know that the leadership is behind them, that's what leads to success, not policies or checklists, relationships based on trust, that's the key to embedding the TSPC across all schools I think. **1A, FS Teacher, 30yrs experience**

Key words/phrases noted from participant interviews	Clusters	Quotations
	Learners Culture change - less control by the teacher. Language work (questioning, explaining, justifying, debating) Consistency of approach & thinking tools to facilitate development of skills Nurtures creativity and exploration. Accessible classroom layout (resources). Approaches that nurture independence & choice-making. Encourage critical thinking across contexts. Thinking skill integrated into all areas of learning. Formative assessment approaches. Indoor/outdoor experiences. Critical literacy central to thinking skills development.	These are life skills we are teaching children, critical liter-acy and skilled use of questioning and language is key to any approach to thinking skills that schools decide to use. This doesn't happen by itself and at the moment we are asking teachers to do this really important work without sufficient training and support. It wouldn't hap-pen anywhere else but teaching in this country. **1K, Advisor, 30 yrs experience.** No point at all in bringing something new into the school if you are not prepared to walk the walk alongside the teachers who are delivering it in the classroom… if you can't make it work how can they? every day's a school day for all of us. **1G, retired Head Teacher, 40 yrs experience** One or two days courses on this with no follow-up just doesn't cut it - it's reflective of how the job is viewed by policy-makers, if it's such an important area of focus well I just don't see it… where is the training and resource, it wouldn't happen in any other profession, in industry, if you didn't have the right level of training you wouldn't be allowed on the job, but with children it's ok? **1D, FS Teacher, 25 yrs experience** The best training experience I have had in relation to the development of children's language and thinking skills was being able to observe colleagues in the classroom and then work with them and share observations and whatever resources they had developed for the tasks. It was really a transformational experience for me. We then used this for other areas of the curriculum too, and I felt myself grow in confidence and was able to really support the teacher in her work with the children. It was just a great feeling to be included. **1R, Teaching Assistant, 10 yrs experience**

2. Social Democratic Discourse (from policy analysis of the 'Every School a Good School' Policy)

Key words/phrases from the policy	Development of themes/sub-themes	Interview extracts
Accountability Accountable autonomy Aims Achievement gap Achieving full potential Barriers to learning Benchmarks (ing) Collaboration Communication Child-centred Connected (communities) Caring culture Disadvantage and educational achievement (link to) Dissemination of good practice Equity of provision Equity of access Equality of opportunity Economic disadvantage Engagement Effective teaching (and learning) Expectations High quality teaching & learning High expectations (staff and pupils) Literacy Numeracy GCSE(s) Improvement Intervention Leadership Outcomes Partnership(s) (working) Performance (data) Potential Professional development (training) Quality of education Rights Reform(s)	Characteristics of a SDD evidenced in the policy Variation in standards of literacy and numeracy attained. Partnerships (collaborative working). Multi-agency working. Tackling barriers to learning. Fostering engagement. Ensuring equity of provision/access. Addressing the achievement gap. Effective communication (strategies). Connected to local communities. Rights-based approaches. Understanding the link between educational disadvantage & achievement . Child-centred. Caring/ rights-respecting cultures. Nurture. Respect for diversity & difference. Participation and voice. Policy approaches to enhancing SDD: • Accountable autonomy • Accountability measures/ Action Plans/ standards • Benchmarking/ targets • Building resilience (pupils/ communities) • Effectiveness - effective teaching & learning • GCSEs (grades & standards) • Improvement/ Quality assurance • Inspection process/ outcomes • Interventions • Literacy • Numeracy • Reform • Respect for diversity • Self-evaluation • Self-improving communities • Tackling underachievement • Targeting resources	All change takes time to embed and become part of the culture of the school… it's not a two minute job this you know. **1K, Advisor, 30yrs experience** A Thinking School is a learning school, and that means everyone, pupils, teachers, senior staff, non-teaching staff, parents and the wider community too, it's about listening and constantly taking the temperature of your school and then developing things from there. **1H, retired principal, 40 yrs experience** I had no experience of TSPC before I came to teach here, I had great support from the teacher who was leav-ing and a thorough induction from the principal. I have read a lot but.. you know… you really need to be able to see it to fully understand it. **1J, FS teacher, newly qualified**

Key words/phrases from the policy	Development of themes/sub-themes	Interview extracts
	Evidenced at School level • Leadership • Vision/aims • Ethos/culture • High quality teaching and learning • Performance data/ monitoring strategies (out-comes) • High expectations - teachers & pupils • High quality professional development & training • Dissemination of good practice/ collaboration • Good relationships between school/community/ partners • Inclusive practices - respect for diversity	

Quotations from the ESaGS policy

The school works closely with other relevant statutory and voluntary agencies whose work impacts on education, especially Health, Social Services, the Public Library Service and, where appropriate, local Neighbourhood Renewal groups.

(Partnership working, p.16)

We will therefore ensure that there are more effective links between initial teacher education, induction, early professional develop-ment and continuing professional development. We will also look for new ways of involving our best teachers in supporting the learn-ing both of beginning teachers and of their more experienced counterparts.

(CPD, p.21)

The creation of communities of best practice, where teachers themselves are willing to share what has worked well (and what has not) with their colleagues and with other schools must be an important out-come from the school improvement policy. Dissemination of good practice is the key to improvement and will be a central focus of ESA's policy on professional development.

(Sharing best practice, p.21)

There is too strong a link between disadvantage and educational outcomes and we must do more to achieve equity in our system.

(Ministerial foreword, p.1).

We will continue to support work through the developing pupils' emotional health and well being programme and the counselling pro-vision in schools in order to build pupils' resilience to deal with the challenges in their lives and improve their readiness to learn.

(Supporting resilience, p.24)

As part of our school improvement policy we want to see a greater focus on engagement within schools – particularly with pupils – and between schools and the families and communities they serve.

(Partnership working, p.31)

We are currently piloting the full service extended school concept in three Belfast schools, exploring new ways in which schools can link with other statutory and voluntary agencies, particularly those involved in health and social care, youth justice and adult education, to ensure that support for young people and their families is provided in a more cohesive and joined up manner.

(Example of partnership working, p.32)