

*Policy Actors' Experiences of the Decision-
making Processes in Irish Primary
Educational Policymaking 1990-2023:
A Continuum from a 'Cosy Consensus' to a
'Fight in the Ditch'*

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Policy Actors' Experiences of the Decision-making Processes in Irish Primary Educational Policymaking 1990-2023: A Continuum from a 'Cosy Consensus' to a 'Fight in the Ditch'

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Declaration

I, Luke Sweeney, hereby declare that this dissertation,

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Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.

Policy Actors' Experiences of the Decision-making Processes in Irish Primary Educational Policymaking 1990-2023: A Continuum from a 'Cosy Consensus' to a 'Fight in the Ditch'

By Luke Sweeney

Abstract

This research investigated the mechanisms by which decisions are made surrounding Irish primary educational policymaking. Policymaking can be viewed as a complicated and complex process abundant with change, tension and opposing perspectives (Anderson 2003; Bell and Stevenson 2015; Luetjens and Mintrom 2016). This research aimed to identify the policy actors involved in educational policy design and examine the appearance, influence and extent of this involvement (Ball 2016). A further aim of this research was to contribute rich insight into the mechanisms of policymaking thus positively contributing to future policy formulation (Lingard 2013).

Data-collection for this research was completed through the use of open-ended interviews, documents and a methodological journal in accordance with the qualitative constructivist grounded theory research design and social constructivism paradigm (Charmaz 2014). A combination of initial sampling and theoretical sampling was used to recruit a research sample of fourteen participants with a range of policymaking experiences. The research data was analysed through the use of initial, focussed and theoretical coding as well as the use of analytic memos (Charmaz 2014).

The findings of this research indicate that educational policymaking is innately shaped by political, economic and societal influences. Furthermore, the findings highlight the multitude of policy actors involved in policymaking processes and the differentials of power that exist between policy actors. Finally, consultation is presented as a celebrated and flawed construct. This research presents eight conclusions arising from the findings, spotlighting the influential and side-lined voices in the policymaking space as well as the challenges associated with the involvement of numerous policy actors in policymaking. A number of recommendations for improving policymaking processes in Irish education are advanced. The accumulation of these recommendations enabled the construction of the conceptual framework for this research which proposes potential improvements to Irish educational policymaking at primary level.

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List of Abbreviations

COGG	An Chomhairle um Oideachais Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
ERC	Educational Research Centre
EU	European Union
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals' Network
LAOS	Looking at Our School
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
MIREC	Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessments
SEE	Social and Environmental Education
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths
TIMSS	Trends in Mathematics and Science Study
WSE	Whole-School Evaluation

Chapter One

Policy Actors' Experiences of the Decision-making Processes in Irish Primary Educational Policymaking 1990-2023: A Continuum from a 'Cosy Consensus' to a 'Fight in the Ditch'

1.1 Introduction

This research investigates policy actors' experiences of decision-making processes in Irish primary educational policymaking. More specifically, this research seeks to understand 'the how' of policymaking, examining how policies are shaped and influenced from the articulation of a policy idea to the resultant implementation. A crucial part of this study is the pursuit of learning around the mechanisms and structures that permit interactions between the participants in policy creation, referred to in the research question as policy actors (Ball 2016). The focus of this research on policymaking between the years of 1990 and 2023 was influenced by the experiences of participants in this research and the extent of their involvement in policymaking processes. In completing research on policy, literature recommends that research is conducted into what causes policy and how the influences affect the resultant actions (Anderson 2003). Additionally, it is recommended that policy research develops "reliable theories and explanations" on the policymaking process (Anderson 2003, p.2). Critically, the research question in this study places an emphasis on policy actors and their experiences as a prominent source of information.

This research arrives in an era of significant change and reform in Irish education (King and Nihill 2019). In the case of Irish primary education, a number of changes are apparent, including significant curricular change as well as considerable changes in school governance (Coolahan *et al.* 2017). One such change witnessed the launch of the new Primary Curriculum Framework in March 2023. This framework, for all primary and special schools, outlines the plans for ambitious curriculum change with the introduction of five broad curriculum areas; Arts Education, Language; Social and Environmental Education (SEE); Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) Education, and Wellbeing (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2023). Such change augments the need for research in the area of educational policymaking in order to ascertain the determinants of favourable policy progression. While there is a vast amount of international research on policy design and implementation, there is a lack of research surrounding "the process that shapes policy outcomes" (Elmore and

McDonnell 1987, p.133). Hence, this research intends to inform the policymaking space from the perspectives of those with direct experience of policymaking in the Irish primary context.

Firstly, this chapter outlines the aims and rationale for this investigation, referring to a number of motivating factors that promote this research. This articulation of the research rationale also allows for the researcher to state the personal and professional motivations for this research. Subsequently, clarification is provided on the research question and embedded questions. The educational policymaking context in Ireland is then examined, tracing the historical developments of educational policy in Ireland as well as the development of partnership in education. The current setting in which policymaking processes occur at primary level is also discussed, relaying information on the primary school structures, prominent decision-makers and various stakeholders. Following this, the theoretical framework for this research is presented, combining threads of literature in a bid to build a theoretical lens through which the findings of this research can be analysed and evaluated. Finally, the structure of the dissertation is outlined, providing an overview of the remaining chapters.

1.2 Aims and Rationale

This section outlines the aims and rationale of this research. Firstly, articulating the aims of this research provides insight into the guiding purpose and the intentions for this investigation. Subsequently, the rationale that drives this research is explained, expressing the underlying motivations and justifications for completing research on the topic of educational policymaking. The aims and rationale communicate the relevance of this study to the field and collectively point to the potential contributions that can be made to inform the policymaking space.

1.2.1 Research Aims

This research aims to investigate the processes by which educational policy is formulated in the Irish primary sector. More specifically, this research aims to identify the policy actors involved in educational policy design and examine the appearance, influence and extent of such involvement (Ball 2016). A further aim of this research is to contribute rich insight into the mechanisms of policymaking. Research in the area of policy design and implementation is essential in informing future policy design (Coburn *et al.* 2016). Therefore, it is intended that the findings of this research will be used for “enlightenment” purposes in order to positively

contribute to future policy formulation in this country (Lingard 2013, pp. 113-119). The specific objectives for this research are drawn from the aforementioned aims and are outlined below.

This study endeavours to:

- Examine the processes of policymaking in Irish primary education.
- Identify the policy actors involved in Irish primary educational policy design and implementation.
- Investigate the methods employed to involve policy actors in policymaking processes
- Contribute to the policymaking space through the articulation of findings, conclusions and recommendations

The rationale that drives this research is now discussed.

1.2.2 Research Rationale

There are several motivating factors that promote this research into educational policymaking. Firstly, this section examines the personal and professional motivations of the researcher in pursuing research of this nature. As such, the delineation of these motivations confirms the positionality of the researcher. Further motivating factors from literature and policy developments are also referenced in this section.

The experiences of the researcher both professionally and personally have contributed majorly to this research pursuit. On a personal level, the researcher is grounded by an enduring philosophy that education remains the pivotal mechanism for social, cultural, economic and moral development. This unyielding philosophy is the impetus for this research into the contemporary tale of education in an attempt to contribute insight, reflection and understanding to educational discourse. The researcher has a keen interest in the area of policy development, in particular relating to the various sources of influence that can affect how a policy is shaped and eventually implemented. From a professional standpoint, the researcher is a primary school teacher and has experience working in an advisory capacity to the support services for Irish primary schools. This professional interaction with policy at a local level in schools has provided multiple opportunities for the researcher to observe practitioners' scepticisms and frustration at the seemingly unrelenting nature of change in Irish primary educational policy.

Irish literature on educational policy notes that a “plethora” of educational policies have been introduced into Irish primary education in recent years (King and Nihill 2019, p.58). In fact, a review of Irish education concluded that this dawn of policy change and renewal does not provide ideal conditions for policy implementation (Coolahan *et al.* 2017). Furthermore, a cursory glance at the trends in educational development in the last two decades depicts a marked rise in the number of educational policies being thrust into the education system (Irish Primary Principals’ Network 2023). The findings of a report produced by the Irish Primary Principals’ Network (IPPN), which constitutes an analysis of literature and practitioner research into the role of leadership in primary schools, acknowledges that schools are “policy overloaded” and calls for policymakers to liaise with school leaders and to establish further supports that enable school leaders to effectively engage in leadership and management duties while also leading learning in schools (Irish Primary Principals’ Network 2023, p.12). This report analysed the number of circular letters issued to schools since 1973, demonstrating that from 1973 to 2003 there were ninety-five circulars issued to schools, which contrasts starkly with a total of seven hundred and ninety-four circulars issued between 2004 and 2022 (Irish Primary Principals’ Network 2023, p.98). An increase of this nature invites questions regarding the causes of such an incline and reinforces the need for research in the area of educational policy development. Literature points to the challenging role of teachers in the midst of these policy changes, stating:

one of the great paradoxes of modern Irish education is that, while the official discourse is replete with references to change and reform, much of the available evidence suggests that little change has occurred in teachers’ beliefs and values

(Gleeson and O’Donnabhain 2009, p.37).

This lack of change in teachers’ perspectives towards new policies could be due to a number of reasons including the inability to meaningfully cope with the volume of policy change. However, this quotation prompts questions into the efforts made by policymakers to work with teachers and enable them to see the value and rationale behind a policy as part of policy discourse (Ball 2015). This is an aspect of policymaking that this research seeks to uncover by exploring the current mechanisms for policy formulation in Irish primary education. In addition to this, research is required to identify the sources of influence that currently shape the educational policymaking landscape.

On a personal level, this research represents the commitment of the researcher to progress with the completion of educational research. The researcher has completed undergraduate and

Masters studies in Mary Immaculate College and has enjoyed academic and personal development through these pursuits. The researcher is enthused by the process of identifying a research question, constructing an appropriate research methodology and unearthing findings that provide insights into the research inquiry. The commitment to take further steps on this path of education through completing doctoral studies, again, reverberates with the aforementioned philosophy of the researcher that education plays a pivotal role in personal, social and moral development. Following the completion of postgraduate studies, an opportunity was made available to the researcher to engage in PhD studies that would contribute to the policymaking space in Irish education. Mary Immaculate College were continuously supportive and invested in this research, permitting the researcher to take his own stance and position on the direction of the research inquiry.

The researcher published a thesis as part of the Master of Education in Educational Leadership and Management in Mary Immaculate College. The research study was entitled: ‘An Investigation into the Perspectives of Teachers and Principals Surrounding the Leadership and Management of School Self-Evaluation as a Means of School Improvement in an Irish Primary School Context’. As School Self-Evaluation is a process of reflection, schools are required to engage with the key educational stakeholders in the school community including teachers, principals, parents, pupils, patron bodies, trustees and boards of management as part of completing a review (Department of Education 2016b). A fundamental finding of this research was the emergence of the intrinsic role of stakeholders in the process of local policy implementation. This echoes the ideals of the Education Act 1998 by endorsing the involvement of all members of the school community in the process of school policy development (Education Act 1998). The benefits of community involvement in educational policymaking are also cited in domestic literature (O’Connor 2014). This keen promotion of stakeholder involvement at local policy level invites consideration as to the prevalence and role of stakeholder involvement in the design of national educational policy. Such consideration piques the curiosity of the researcher into the roles of stakeholders in educational policymaking in Irish primary education.

Modern Irish society espouses democratic, pluralistic and inclusive values (Mitchel 2010). Evidence of these values in Irish society should, therefore, be expected as a key component in the fabric of educational policymaking. This research seeks to explore if Irish education upholds the values of democracy, pluralism and inclusivity through the processes of

policymaking. In a research report commissioned by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a framework was proposed for pertinent components of education policy design. This report propounds the inclusion of educational stakeholders in policy development, insisting that the means of involvement is “crucial” in policy “effectiveness” (Pont and Viennet 2017, p.6). Resultantly, this research aims to investigate who is involved in the processes of Irish policy formulation, how such involvement occurs and the influence these interactions have on the development of educational policy.

A further rationale for this research is reinforced by one of the findings from recent Irish research in education. This research portrayed a worrying image of Irish teachers dealing with “a pedagogy of restriction and oppression” due to increasing accountability measures in educational policy (Moles *et al.* 2019, p.65). Furthermore, the findings communicated a lack of meaningful dialogue between practitioners and policymakers (Moles *et al.* 2019). This research is timely and illuminating as it shines a spotlight on policy implementors in education at the epicentre of an ever-evolving policy space and invites further research into policymaking processes. The authors acknowledged that this was a “limited analysis” as online surveys were the primary means of data-collection. While the sample size was significant, with fifty-four participants in the study, the use of surveys arguably limited the depth of qualitative response. This provides a justification for further research to be completed on policymaking processes to gather further insights into the perspectives of policy actors. Additionally, the acknowledgement of the limitations in the aforementioned research promotes the use of a research methodology that permits a greater depth and richness of data to be obtained.

Finally, this chapter traces the historical emergence of multi-lateral dialogue and partnership in educational policymaking in Ireland which were initiated in the 1990s. In an education system that is currently reforming curricular policy that was developed in the same era, perhaps it is also a suitable time to evaluate the current policymaking mechanisms and assess where improvements can be made. Literature points to the historical reliance that the Irish system has placed on external reviews and international input to inform policymaking (O’Doherty 2014). Instead of relying on external reviews or guidance, this research aims to provide an informative account to policymakers from policy actors operating within the education system in relation to strengths and limitations of the current policymaking procedures. The succeeding section provides an explanation relating to the research question and embedded questions.

1.3 Research Question and Embedded Questions

This section outlines the research question and embedded questions for this investigation. As such, the research question illuminates the overarching inquiry into policymaking processes while the embedded questions indicate the more specific focal points for this research.

1.3.1 Research Question

The title for this dissertation is derived from the research question that guides this entire study. The research question asks the following:

What can be learned about policymaking processes in Irish primary education based on the experiences of policy actors who have engaged in decision-making processes?

The resultant dissertation title then states:

Policy Actors' Experiences of the Decision-making Processes in Irish Primary Educational Policymaking 1990-2023: A Continuum from a 'Cosy Consensus' to a 'Fight in the Ditch'.

This research question can be understood to have two main components. Firstly, the question asks, what can be learned about policymaking processes. This signifies the aim of this research to develop a deeper understanding about policymaking processes in Irish education and subsequently seek to comprehend what works well and what could be improved. Secondly, the question indicates that this learning needs to come from policy actors within the Irish education system and crucially, these policy actors must have experience of engaging in policymaking processes. Understandably, engagement in policymaking spans a wide spectrum, potentially ranging from the completion of an online survey as part of consultation to a decision-making role within the Department of Education. This range of experience is welcomed in this research in order to fulfil the first component of the question, learning and enlightenment on policymaking (Lingard 2013). The tagline after the research question uses segments of quotations from participants in this research, providing an indication into the range of policymaking experiences shared in this research.

The research question articulates a problem requiring investigation which, in the case of this research, pertains to the mechanisms by which Irish primary educational policy is created. This research aims to unravel the multi-varied experiences of a range of policy actors and begin to build a picture of how educational policy is created in Irish primary education. A review of the Irish education system indicated that amendments are required to the approaches used to create

educational policy in order to promote involvement and inclusion of policy actors (Coolahan *et al.* 2017). This research contends that in order to identify potential amendments to policymaking processes, a deeper understanding must be obtained from research to clarify the strengths and limitations of the current procedures. The embedded questions for this research are now delineated.

1.3.2 Embedded Questions

The embedded questions reflect the objectives of this research inquiry. Each question is outlined below, accompanied with a justification stating the pertinence of each question.

The first embedded question:

- 1. How are educational policy problems presented, defined and decided at Irish primary level?*

This question seeks insight into the processes by which policymaking processes are initiated in Irish education. This research, therefore, investigates how policy problems or topics make their way to the policymaking agenda. Furthermore, this research examines the early stages of policy design, assessing the “levers” and influences that direct the policymaking process (Reimer *et al.* 2002, p.421).

The second embedded question:

- 2. Who are the policy actors that are involved in decision-making surrounding the formulation of Irish primary educational policy?*

This question seeks to clarify the policy actors that participate in policymaking processes. Ball (2016) uses the term policy actors in reference to any group and/or individual that is involved in the policymaking process. Policy actors can, therefore, include politicians, members of government, educational practitioners, stakeholders and other “interest groups” (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.364). While the Department of Education is identified as the prominent creator of educational policy in this chapter, this research examines the roles of other policy actors that interact in the policymaking space.

The third embedded question:

3. *What mechanisms exist to permit discourse in the decision-making surrounding the formulation of Irish primary educational policy?*

Haddad and Demsky (1995) endorse policy design systems that permit consultation between policy actors. Therefore, this research explores how dialogue is facilitated between policy actors in Irish education.

The fourth and final embedded question:

4. *How could the mechanisms for decision-making in Irish primary educational policy formulation be improved?*

In terms of the aims of this research, this embedded question represents a significant driver for this research. This question outlines the intention for this research to provide insight into the limitations of the current policymaking processes and make recommendations for improvements that could be made to aid future policy development. The succeeding section sets the context for this research by examining the historical developments in educational policymaking in Ireland, the role of partnership and the current policymaking context in Irish primary education.

1.3 Educational Policymaking Context in Ireland

This section details the educational policymaking context in Ireland. This research aims to understand the current mechanisms by which policy is formulated in Irish education, therefore, it is essential that this research considers the contextual underpinnings of Irish education. Firstly, the historical trends in educational policy are outlined. Subsequently, the emergence of social partnership in Irish educational policymaking is examined. Finally, the current landscape for Irish educational policymaking is presented.

1.3.1 The evolving nature of educational policy in the Irish context

Educational policy in Ireland has undergone significant transformations since the founding of the Irish state, reflecting the evolving social, cultural, and economic landscape of the country. This section outlines the historical trends of educational policy in Irish education. Firstly, the educational policy landscape following independence and the associated influences at the time are discussed. Following this, the impact of the economy on education is examined coupled

with the critical influence of reports and reviews completed by the OECD. The formation of the Education Act in 1998 is then marked as a significant development in Irish education. Finally, the growing relationship between education and the market economy is articulated.

In contrast to the continuous publication of educational policy that is observed in the current education system (Irish Primary Principals' Network 2023), this was not always the case in Irish education. In fact, literature explains that sparse educational policy existed in Ireland until the development of the Education Act in 1998 (King and Nihill 2019). The Constitution of Ireland in 1937 outlined the parameters of education following independence. Article 42 of the Constitution stipulates commitments to free primary education and recognised that the family was the primary educator of the child (Bunreacht na hÉireann 1937, Article 42). In the period following Irish independence, the educational policy agenda concentrated on “cultural nationalism” built on the principles of instilling nationalism, Catholicism and reviving the Irish language (Fleming and Harford 2014, p.636). The first National Programme Conference in 1922 and Second National Programme Conference in 1926 enabled the establishment of curricular policy for primary schools that remained in place until 1971 (Walsh 2016b). The policy agenda of cultural nationalism was evident in the curricular policy through the promotion of “Irish language, culture and traditions” (Walsh 2016b, p.21). This period also witnessed the power and dominance of the Catholic church in the management of primary education (Walsh 2016b; Devine *et al.* 2017, O'Connor 1987). A report from the Department of Education for the academic year 1923-1924 captures the dominance of the Catholic church in education at the time with approximately 93 per cent of schools under the patronage of the Catholic church (Department of Education 1924 cited in Sullivan 2018). This dominance was witnessed in the “ownership, management and control” of the education system at the time and had a “strong moralising influence in Irish schools” (Walsh 2016b, p.28). Therefore, a tentative nature of policy development was observed during this time due to the ties between the Department of Education and the Catholic church which acted as a barrier to progression in comparison with other international counterparts (Harford and Herron 2016). Literature describes a lack of criticality in the education system at the time and a period of “consensualism” in Irish education was observed (Moles *et al.* 2019, p.58).

The impact of the economic crisis of the 1950s was an integral milestone in the development of the Irish economy and indeed Irish educational policy (Harford and Herron 2016; Fleming and Harford 2014). The subsequent changes to Irish political ideals marked a shift from

“economic protectionism” towards post-war western Europe ideals of strategic-planning and co-operation between international organisations (Harford and Herron 2016, p.80). These changes resultantly impacted the arena of economic and educational policymaking. In fact, this period is regarded as a “paradigm shift” in Irish educational policy whereby the domination of private interests such as the Catholic church were reduced by the desire for economic development in line with international counterparts (Fleming and Harford 2014, p.635) The reduction in dominance of influences such as the Catholic church is coined in literature as the “democratisation” of Irish education (Fleming and Harford 2014, p.635). This, however, began to change in the 1960s with an emerging “openness to new ideas” and a building of collaborative international networks (Harford and Herron 2016, p.84). There was a “growing realisation” amongst policymakers at this time that the education system needed to equip citizens with the necessary skills to work and compete in modern society (Mac Ruairc 2014, p.24). The Irish educational policy agenda was heavily influenced by the policy developments in Europe and began to focus on the ideals of free trade and competition (O’Connor 2014; Harford and Herron 2016).

The critical influence of the OECD on Irish educational policy at this time can be seen in the raft of educational reforms that followed the publication of OECD reports and reviews (Drudy 2009). Irish participation in the Investment in Education Report 1965 marked the first involvement with the OECD. This OECD report highlighted the shortcomings of the Irish education system and indicated areas for reform and development (O’Doherty 2014; Fleming and Harford 2014). This report was an indication for Irish government of the need for change and the recommendations became a roadmap for development in the education sector (Walsh 2009; O’Connor 2014). In relation to Irish primary educational policy, the report indicated a number of concerns regarding the primary curriculum;

The dominant position of the Irish language in the curriculum, the narrow range of subjects offered, the inequitable distribution of resources across schools and the irrelevance of the curriculum for the future lives and occupations of students

(Walsh 2016b, pp.24-25)

This prompted the development and introduction of an updated primary school curriculum in 1971. Educational reform was also ignited by youthful ministers with ambition and new “priorities” (Fleming and Harford 2014, p.644). The vision, enthusiasm and perseverance of certain politicians and policy officials was the catalyst for change in educational policy at the time (Harford and Herron 2016).

A further review was conducted by the OECD in 1991 entitled the 'Review of National Education Policies: Ireland'. This report also encouraged a number of policy developments in Irish education (O'Doherty 2014). In 1993, the National Education Convention took place, which was a two-week conference involving educational stakeholders from over forty organisations. This convention constituted the first "multi-lateral dialogue among all the major partners in education on crucial issues affecting the development of education" (Department of Education 1995, p.1). Furthermore, this collaboration contributed to the eventual production of the Green Paper entitled 'Education for a Changing World' in 1992, the White Paper entitled 'Chartering our Education Future' in 1995 and the Education Act in 1998. These wider policy developments in Irish education also influenced the re-development of curricular policy in Irish primary schools with the publication of a revised curriculum for primary schools in 1999 (Walsh 2016a). This era marked the emergence of social interaction and partnership in the area of policymaking which is examined further in the next section.

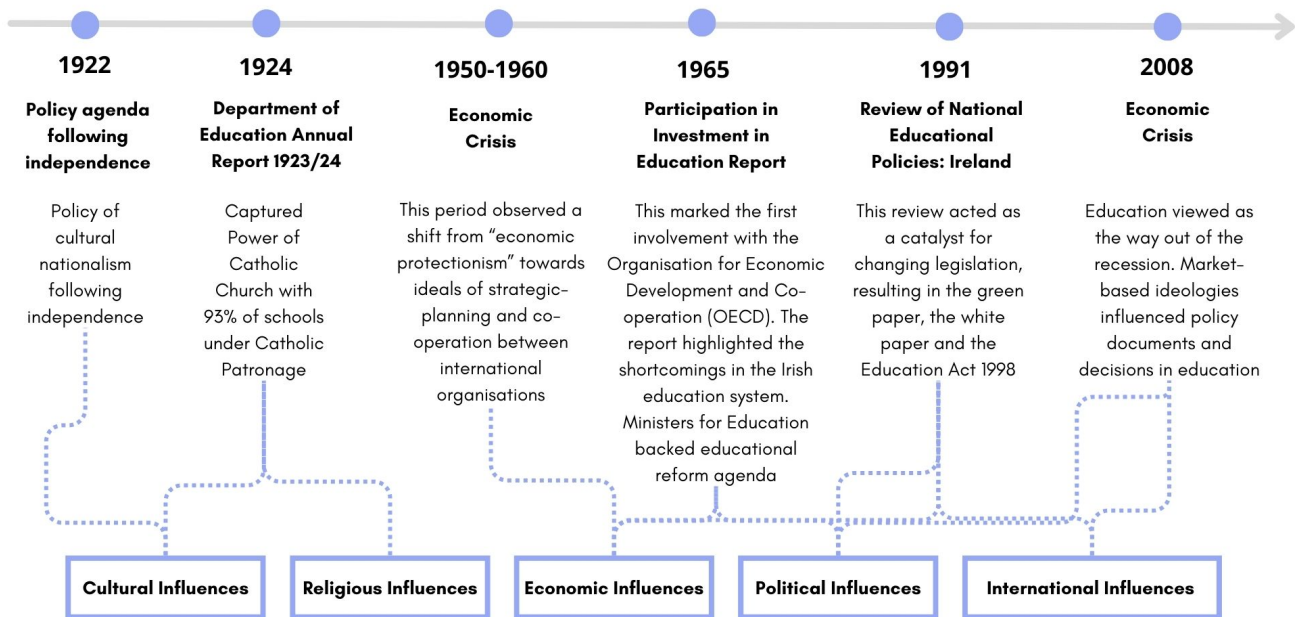
Economic influences on educational policy were observed once again in 2008 when the global economic recession resulted in educational reforms in Ireland. Education was viewed as the vehicle for change and the "way out of the recession" whereby Irish students were deemed to need the necessary knowledge and skills to compete in the world of employment (King and Nihill 2019, p.58). The perception of education as an economic instrument was further evidenced in policy documents such as the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011-2020 which aligned the need for development with the need to rekindle economic growth (Department of Education 2011). Further examples of reform resulted in cut-backs in education to adapt to the changing economic climate such as the moratorium of posts in primary schools (Department of Education 2009). This era was characterised with a marked increase in the production of educational policy, with new policies emphasising performativity and accountability (King and Nihill 2019). Policies such as the Croke Park and Haddington Road Agreements underlined concentrated efforts to improve educational performance (Devine *et al.* 2015). Educational performance was closely monitored through participation in international comparison assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA) and the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) produced by the OECD and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) respectively. A deterioration in performance in PISA assessments in 2009 combined with the economic recession presented the necessary conditions for educational reform (Moles *et al.* 2019). The performance of Irish students in PISA in 2009 was used as an opportunity to introduce

educational policy changes in Irish education (O’Doherty 2014), capturing the influence of what Grek refers to as ‘PISA shock’ (2009, pp.23-37). In fact, the Chief Inspector at the time, Harold Hislop, described the PISA results as “a unique opportunity” to introduce changes to the system (Hislop 2011 cited in O’Doherty 2014, p.11). While this statement has been made by an individual and does not necessarily communicate the collective view of the Department of Education, it does serve to capture the influence of international assessment data on educational policy. The Looking at Our School document published in 2016 outlined specific domains, standards and statements of practice to standardised evaluative practises in teaching, learning, leadership and management (Department of Education 2016a). This document contains detailed standards for schools to use as a means of assessment and as a compass for directing and monitoring school improvement. The policy document also outlines how these standards are to be used by the Inspectorate to adjudge external evaluations such as incidental inspections and whole-school evaluations. Further changes to curriculum remain underway at primary level in a bid to continue the educational reforms that were sparked off the back of this crucial period in Irish education.

This section has provided a general overview of the historical trends in educational policy in Ireland. The story of educational policy in Ireland denotes the inherent political, cultural, religious, economic and international influences that operate within the policymaking space as illustrated by Figure 1.1. This figure presents a timeline with specifically selected policy milestones in Irish education that capture the multifaceted influences that have interacted with educational policymaking. It is important to note that a multitude of integral policy milestones in Irish education do not appear on this timeline. Instead, the six policy examples have been chosen for illustrative purposes in order to clearly demonstrate the range of influences that have impacted policymaking in various forms. The policy milestones that have been included from this section are indicated by the blue dots on the timeline accompanied with a timestamp and a brief explanation. The connections between the policy milestones and a range of influences to policymaking are depicted using dotted lines. Firstly, the development of a policy agenda to protect and serve cultural nationalism following independence in 1922 demonstrates the cultural influences that impact policymaking. The position of power adopted by the Catholic Church in Irish education, as evidenced by the results of the Annual Report from the Department of Education in 1923/24, indicates the religious influences in policymaking. Two of the remaining four milestones allude to the influence that an economic crisis can have on educational policymaking, contributing to reform efforts and market-based ideologies (Furlong

and Kraft 2014). These economic influences in Irish education sparked involvement from the OECD which summoned further international and political influences through the Investment in Education Report and the Review of National Educational Policies. While all the influences to a complicated process like policymaking cannot be neatly captured in a figure such as this, this snapshot of Irish educational policy serves as an indication to the array of influences that have interacted within the policymaking arena (Bell and Stevenson 2015).

Figure 1.1: Sources of Influence in Irish Educational Policymaking



This section has demonstrated the powerful influence that can be exerted by particular policy actors in both impeding and instigating educational policy development. The succeeding section leans on this historical account of educational policy development outlined in this section and focusses more specifically on the emergence of social partnership in Irish education.

1.3.2 Social partnership in Irish education

Building on the articulation of the historical development of educational policy in the Irish context, this section discusses the emergence of social partnership in Irish educational policymaking. As indicated by the embedded questions of this research, investigating the involvement of policy actors in policymaking processes is one of the core objectives of this

research. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the historical emergence of partnership in education and what this means in terms of policy development.

The concept of social partnership in Irish policy development can be traced back to social and economic developments in the 1980s (O’Doherty 2014). The echoes from the Investment in Education report in 1965 called for greater citizen involvement in decision-making (O’Connor 2014). The economic and social advancements at the time called for an approach to policymaking that was “inclusive”, “consultative” and “democratic” which resulted in the introduction of the social partnership model (Harford and O’Doherty 2016, p.41). This meant that citizens were now getting the opportunity to partake in policymaking processes which altered the mechanisms for policy creation that had presided previously (Harford and Herron 2016). Increased opportunities for partnership were evident through forums such as the National Education Convention in 1993, a two-week conference involving stakeholders from over forty organisations as well as the National Forum on Early Childhood Care and Education in 1998 (Harford and O’Doherty 2014). The rationale behind this approach to policymaking was to permit negotiation and collaboration on policy developments (Boyle *et al.* 2007). The Education Act in 1998 defined the responsibilities and duties of those involved in education whereby policy formulation and review fell under the auspices of the Department of Education (Devine *et al.* 2015). The Education Act outlined the functions of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), describing the council as being “representative of bodies and persons involved in the education system” (Education Act 1998, 40.2(a)). This recognition of the place of representation embodied the commitment to partnership with the presence of “social partners” on the council for curriculum and assessment (Harford and O’Doherty 2016, p.42). The composition of the NCCA council allowed for representation from a variety of vested interests in the development of educational policy including, teacher unions, school management bodies, parents’ organisations and business groups (Harford and O’Doherty 2016). The processes of consultation in Irish education gradually increased the levels of collaboration resulting in policymaking forums in the 1980s (Harford and Herron 2016).

While the construct of social partnership was viewed as the “guiding framework” for policymaking in Ireland (Devine *et al.* 2015, p.7), criticism is evident in Irish research and literature regarding the efficacy of this model (Harford and O’Doherty 2016; Devine *et al.* 2015; King and Nihill 2019; Gleeson 2004). It is claimed that partnership has been used as a “cloak” to provide the appearance of collaboration to paper over inequality (Devine *et al.* 2015,

p.7). In relation to the composition of the NCCA, it is argued that while the council is representative in nature, it remains political, characterised by the pursuit of interests on behalf of varying stakeholders (Looney 2014; Granville 2004). Furthermore, criticism is directed at the numerical differences between representatives on the NCCA council as three members out of twenty-five on the NCCA council are representatives of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) (Sullivan 2018). This is an indication of the position of strength held by the teacher unions as a player in the partnership domain (Devine *et al.* 2015; Harford and O'Doherty 2016; King and Nihill 2019). The influence of teacher unions is also evident through examples of directives of non-compliance to members (Boyle *et al.* 2007). In fact, these examples of directives of non-compliance from teacher unions serve to undermine the presence of true partnership in Irish education and instead, provide weight to the description that partnership has been "loosely employed" in the Irish education system (Harford and O'Doherty 2016, p.39).

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the concept of partnership remains at the core of policymaking intentions. For example, the Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 from the Department of Education, highlights the need for policymakers, partners and stakeholders to work together to achieve the ambitious aims outlined for the education system (Department of Education 2021a). This document, therefore, signifies the recognition on behalf of policymakers as to the importance of partners and stakeholders in delivering change and enabling the achievement of priorities. While the value of partnership is explicitly endorsed by policymakers, this research aims to explore the relationship between partnership and decision-making in Irish primary educational policymaking. The next section outlines the current policymaking context in Irish education.

1.3.3 Current Policymaking Context in Irish Primary Education

This research seeks to understand current policymaking processes in Irish primary education, therefore, it is necessary to consider the context in which policymaking operates. Firstly, this section presents contextual information relating to primary education, relaying recent figures from the Department of Education to paint a picture of the primary school context. Subsequently, the role of the Department of Education as the predominant decision-making body in Irish education is discussed. An examination of the structures of the Department of

Education and the bodies that work under the aegis of the Department of Education provides a basis for further investigation into the dynamics of policy discourse at primary level.

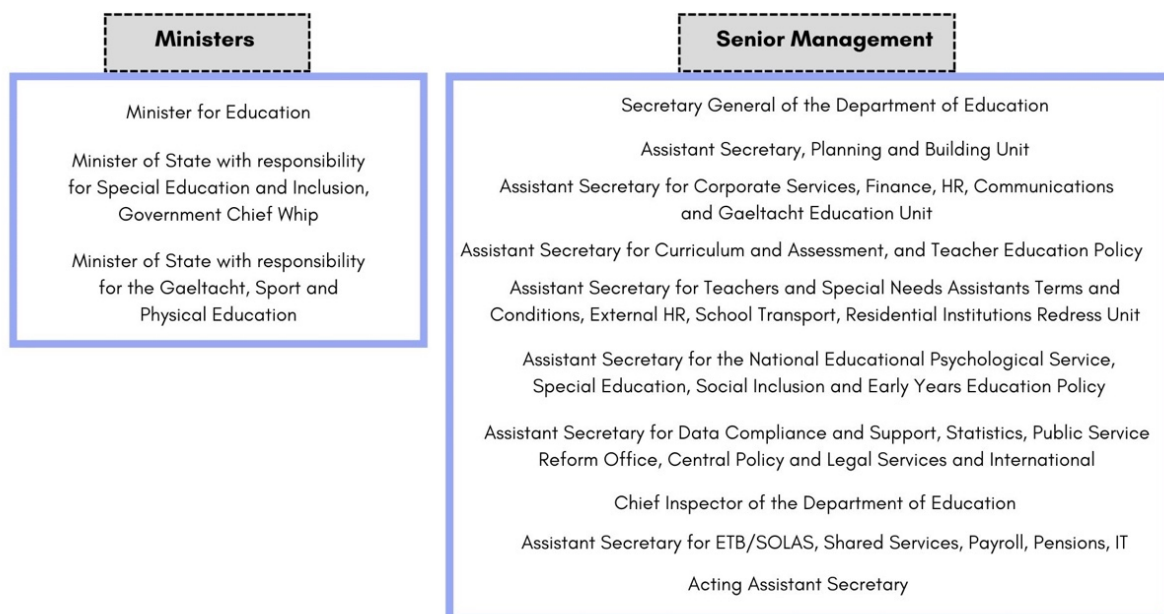
Recent figures published by the Department of Education provide a wealth of information relating to the current primary school context (Department of Education 2023a; Department of Education 2024a). An understanding of this context is essential in this research as it denotes some of the influential factors that currently affect decision-making. The Primary School Enrolment figures gathered from the National School Annual Census 2022/23 indicate that there are approximately 3,097 mainstream schools and 138 special schools in the primary context (Department of Education 2024a). Furthermore, figures from a Statistical Report published by the Department of Education in July 2023 depict that approximately 42% of mainstream schools are considered “small schools” with four mainstream class teachers or fewer (Department of Education 2023a, p.13). Enrolment figures denote high variance ranging from schools with enrolments of four pupils to schools with enrolments in the region of one-thousand pupils (Department of Education 2024a). School ethos is a further variable with the existence of Catholic, Church of Ireland, inter-denominational, multi-denominational, Presbyterian, Muslim, Methodist, Quaker and Jewish schools. However, the historical strength of Catholicism remains evident with approximately 88% of primary schools operating under the Catholic patronage (Department of Education 2024).

While the majority of primary schools in the system are English-medium schools, the system also contains Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools outside the Gaeltacht (Department of Education 2023a). The recently updated identification model for Delivering Equality of Education in Schools (DEIS) means that there are 974 schools with DEIS status in primary education (Department of Education 2022a). The aim of this policy seeks to support pupils at risk of educational disadvantage in both urban and rural areas (Department of Education 2022a). This research has been conducted at a time where education in Ireland is affected by a range of societal factors, including a return to education following a worldwide pandemic and the response to the Russian invasion of the Ukraine (Department of Education 2023a). In fact, the latter has directly contributed to the enrolment of approximately ten-thousand Ukrainian pupils in Irish primary schools (Department of Education 2023a). It is important to consider this information prior to investigation into policymaking processes as this provides a glimpse into the range of policy actors in the school system alone as well as the contextual factors that can influence and shape policy decisions. Furthermore, this data

illuminates the contextual variance of schools within the Irish education system which undoubtedly, presents challenges for both policy design and implementation.

The Department of Education are the leading decision-makers in Irish education. Curriculum development and educational legislation are centrally governed by the Department of Education who exercise “direct and indirect control over most aspects of the system” (Coolahan 2011, p.144). The Department of Education is led by the Minister for Education in accompaniment with the Minister for State with responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion and the Minister of State with responsibility for the Gaeltacht, Sport and Physical Education (Department of Education 2024b). Senior management of the Department of Education also enact leadership positions through the Secretary General of the Department of Education along with a number of Assistant Secretaries from units and divisions across the department (Department of Education 2024b). The titles and roles of the ministers and senior management in the Department of Education are depicted by Figure 1.2.

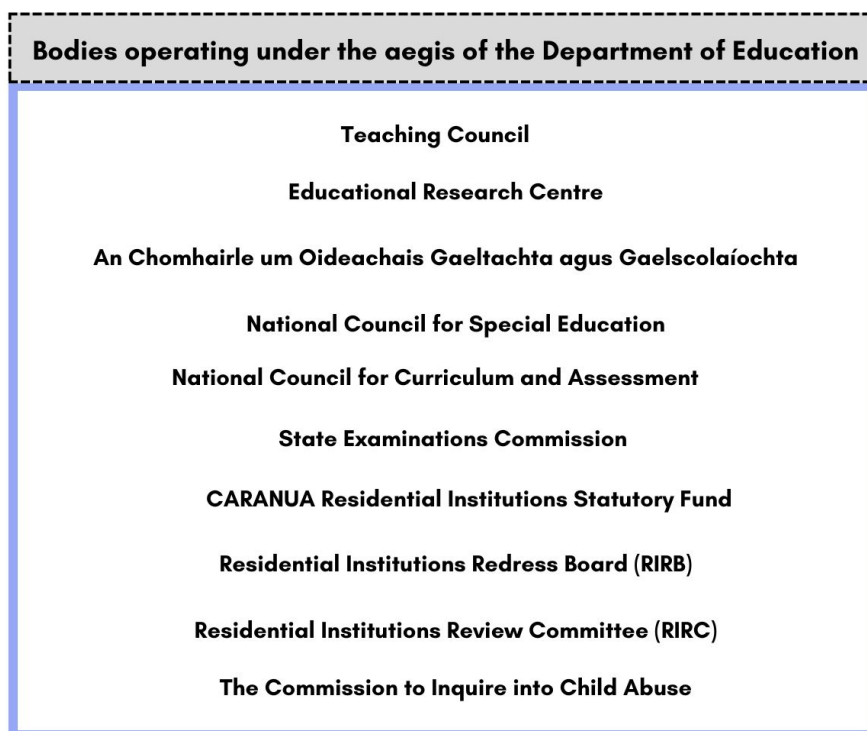
Figure 1.2: Ministers and Senior Management of the Department of Education (Department of Education 2024)



There are a number of units or sections within the Department of Education as demonstrated by an Organisation Chart published in the most recent Annual Report published by the Department of Education in 2021 (Appendix J) (Department of Education 2021b). This chart

captures the different layers within the Department of Education including units for curriculum, policy, data, inspection and finance. One such unit that is indicated on the chart is the Central Policy Unit. This investigation seeks to understand whether policymaking is the responsibility of this unit alone or whether policymaking can occur across a number of sections within the Department of Education. The bodies operating under the aegis of the Department of Education also work in co-operation with the Department of Education as per the terms set out in the Education Act 1998. This research aims to investigate the roles that bodies operating under the aegis of the Department of Education assume in policymaking processes at primary level. The statutory bodies that operate under the aegis of the Department of Education are listed in Figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3: Bodies Operating Under the Aegis of the Department of Education (Department of Education 2024)



This research aims to examine the mechanisms that exist to permit discourse between the Department of Education as the prominent leaders of policymaking and other policy actors in the education system. The methods by which the Department of Education consult with policy actors or stakeholders can vary from the commissioning of consultative groups to collaborate on a given policy to the receipt of advisory positions from educational bodies with stakeholder representation such as the NCCA. Despite calls for wide consultation in education (Apple

2005; Sahlberg 2007; Bodroža *et al.* 2016), no research findings have been published on the processes by which stakeholders contribute to educational policymaking in an Irish context at primary level.

As stated at the outset of this chapter, the current policymaking context in Irish education is characterised by a wealth of change and reform (King and Nihill 2019). Significant changes in educational policy are evident through curricular change as well as in the governance of primary schools (Coolahan *et al.* 2017). Reforms to curricula in primary languages and mathematics, combined with the launch of the new Primary Curriculum Framework within a seven-year timeframe serves as an indication of the pace of change. The aforementioned report published by the IPPN in 2023 identified that schools are “policy overloaded” and calls for policymakers to liaise with school leaders and to establish further supports that enable school leaders to effectively engage in leadership and management duties while also leading learning in schools (Irish Primary Principals’ Network 2023, p.12).

This section has provided an overview into the fundamentals of the policymaking context in Irish education. The contextual factors at play in the primary school context were addressed in combination with an illustration of the role adopted by the Department of Education as the leader in educational decision-making. Importantly, this research seeks to examine the interplay between the Department of Education and the stakeholders in the primary school context. The next section of this chapter outlines the theoretical framework that underpins this research.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This research investigates the experiences of policy actors in relation to policymaking in Irish primary education. Therefore, in order to understand ‘the how’ of policymaking and examine the mechanisms that permit interactions between policy actors, a framework is required to analyse the research findings. This research recognises the need for a conceptual framework to be derived from this investigation that casts a light on policymaking processes in education, pointing to potential improvements that can be made to the prevailing mechanisms. However, in alignment with literature, this research acknowledges the difference between a conceptual framework and a theoretical framework whereby the latter delineates the theories that underpin the eventual conceptual framework (Ravitch and Riggan 2017). A theoretical framework allows for the “relationships” and findings in a study to be situated in the context of “formal

theories” (Crawford 2020, p.38). The articulation of a theoretical framework, therefore, precedes discussion on the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework presented in Chapter Five, examines the findings and conclusions in the context of the formal theories outlined in the theoretical framework (Crawford 2020).

A theoretical framework examines “specific theories” relating to the topic of study and considers how these theories can be used to contribute to a greater understanding of the research phenomenon (Crawford 2020, p.39). Although the analysis of literature is presented in the next chapter, this section discusses three key theories from literature that have been knitted together to form the theoretical framework for investigating educational policymaking. These three theories are the Policy Process Theory (Anderson 2003), Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (2019) and Characteristics of Policy Forums (Fischer and Leifeld 2015). In accordance with the directions for constructing a theoretical framework in literature, this section examines each theory individually before discussing the amalgamation of these theories in the form of the theoretical framework (Crawford 2020).

1.4.1 Policy Process Theory (Anderson 2003)

A range of policy theory is presented in literature in a bid to provide an understanding of the nature of policymaking. Examples of such policy theories include, but are not limited to, the political systems theory, group theory, elite theory and rational-choice theory (Anderson 2003; Portnoi 2016). While literature explains that these theories can be used to understand the policymaking process in greater detail, the limitations of these theories in capturing the totality and complexity of policymaking in the real world are explicated (Anderson 2003).

Firstly, the political systems theory refers to policy that is produced based on the response of a governing power to an identified need. The sentiments of this theory correspond with the definition of policy as a response to a problem (Fowler 2009). However, this theory represents a “highly general” description of policymaking which cannot be used for the purposes of situating the findings of this research (Anderson 2003, p.11). Group theory describes the production of policy whereby decision-making is directed by a guiding group within the policymaking process (Anderson 2003; Portnoi 2016). Central to this theory is the tenet that in order to have influence on policy, individuals need access to the guiding group. Therefore, the apparent influence of a group may be decided based upon the number of members and/or the

economic power. While this theory presents an interesting philosophy by claiming that a guiding group could potentially lead decision-making processes in Irish education, from a critical perspective, it is difficult to encapsulate all that happens in the policymaking process through group theory (Anderson 2003). However, the notion that certain groups can dominate decision-making is investigated in this research irrespective of the policy theory that is examined in greatest detail. Elite theory outlines that those in leadership and political power, considered by this theory to be the elite in society, make the decisions. This theory is best understood in terms of the mantra of “a few govern the many” (Anderson 2003, p.13). Based on the discussion of the policy context in Irish education in the previous section, the Department of Education and associated ministers and bodies would be classified as the elite due to their central role in decision-making (Coolahan 2011). While the elite theory does not form part of the theoretical framework, the notion that policy elite operate within policymaking circles provides considerations for this research. A further theory, the rational choice theory recognises that policy is created in order to appeal to the voters and secure election votes. However, this opening chapter has outlined that although politics yields an undisputable influence on education, it is one of many such sources of influence on educational policy.

All of the above theories are taken into consideration when situating the research findings according to relevant literature (Anderson 2003). However, a broad theory of the policymaking process is required in this research to clarify the path that a policy follows from the articulation of the policy problem to the associated policy implementation. The policy process theory, or policy cycle is presented as such a theory which comprises of the typical procedures and approaches adopted for the purposes of policymaking (Anderson 2003). Variations of the policy process theory or policy cycle are discussed by Portnoi (2016), Luetjens and Mintrom (2016), Jones (1970), Porter (1995) and Smith and Larimer (2009), however, for the purposes of this research, the policy process theory advanced by Anderson (2003) has been chosen as a central theory in the theoretical framework. The policy process theory presented by Anderson (2003) is denoted in Figure 1.4 below.

Figure 1.4: The Policy Process Theory (Anderson 2003)



Problem Identification and Agenda-Setting: This relates to how the policy problems are presented and selected whereby only the chosen policy problems make the agenda. Policy problems are advanced to the policy agenda by virtue of “political advocacy” (Kingdon 1984 cited in Elmore and McDonnell 1987, p.136). Policymakers then consider how to respond to the policy problem based on “the stock of available solutions, by the advocacy of certain solutions and by the resources (money, knowledge, political support and organisational capacity) available to frame solutions” (Kingdon 1984 cited in Elmore and McDonnell 1987, p.136). Political and financial influences are at play from the outset of policymaking processes. Transnational influences can affect what is placed on the policy agenda (Ball 2016). This stage of policymaking involves policy-explaining, whereby the rationale for educational policy is communicated and legitimised (Adams 2016). This process can also be coined “strategic framing” where the story rationalising the need for a specific policy is communicated (Auld and Morris 2016, p.205). Literature explains that the “initial determination about which problems are placed on public agendas and which institutions and individuals actually make decisions are critical in shaping policy outcomes” (Elmore and McDonnell, p.144). This quotation is significant for this research as it suggests that the early stages of policymaking are pivotal in impacting the chosen approach to the policy problem.

Formulation: Once the policy problem has been identified, the policy agenda is established. In the creation of the policy agenda, the potential policy solutions and required actions to respond to the problem are considered (Anderson 2003). The policy solutions or proposals can be both created or borrowed from another jurisdiction. Policy-framing takes place in this stage of the policy process which can be seen as “the interplay between policy creation and response” (Adams 2016, p.301). This stage marks a critical juncture in enabling policy discourse where values are broached, ideas discussed and influences forged (Bell and Stevenson 2015). Undoubtedly, this description of policy discourse indicates the influence of the socio-political context on the development of educational policy. In relation to this research, this is an

interesting consideration as it raises questions regarding who is involved in the discourse space in Irish educational policymaking and how this occurs.

Adoption: This stage of the process involves deciding on the policy solution and the associated course of action. The ‘context of text production’ refers to the choice of policy instrument and the manner in which the policy is mediated to the public (Bowe *et al.* 1992). Policy instruments are the “mechanisms” that convert the aims of policy “into concrete actions” (Elmore and McDonnell 1987, p.134). Literature notes that the discourse surrounding policy is pivotal in shaping the eventual policy solution (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019).

Implementation: This stage is where the policy is put into effect, the “context of practice” whereby sense-making of the educational policy occurs through enactment (Bowe *et al.* 1992). In this stage, the enactors/practitioners of policy harness control over the appearance and practice of policy (Burde 2004). Adams (2016) refers to this as policy-forming whereby policy is constructed at local level by educational practitioners, reverberating with the notion of Lipsky’s street-level bureaucrats (2013). Challenges to the implementation stage can occur when the values and beliefs of policy implementors are not on par with the vision of policy creators (Gleeson and O’Donnabhain 2009).

Evaluation: This final stage of the policy process theory refers to the assessment and monitoring of a policy. At this stage, the policy is evaluated to ascertain the effect that is being observed with reference to the policy problem that was outlined in the early stages of the policy process. If the evaluation stage indicates that amendments are required, this could result in the policy process beginning again.

This theory presents policymaking as a linear process involving discrete stages. As was established earlier in this section, this neat packaging of policymaking into a tidy, linear process does not fully encapsulate the complexities that are in operation throughout the policymaking in the real world (Bell and Stevenson 2015; Luetjens and Mintrom 2016). Furthermore, the policy process does not indicate who holds the decision-making duties within the process (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). The reductionist nature of this theory aside, it does however present a framework from which the story of policymaking in a given context can be unearthed, mapped and evaluated. More specifically, this research is concerned with the first three stages of

Anderson's policy process theory, namely, problem identification and agenda setting, formulation and adoption. While the implementation and evaluation stages are not ignored in this research, the researcher seeks to separate policymaking from policy implementation in line with the suggestion of Bell and Stevenson (2006) on research into policymaking processes. The following questions must therefore be considered with reference to policymaking in the Irish primary context: *How are the policy problems chosen? Why do some policies problems make the agenda and not others? Who participates in the various stages of policymaking? How are the decisions surrounding the policy made?* Consequently, this research focuses on two aspects of Adam's theory in relation to educational policymaking, policy-explaining and policy-framing. The journey of a policy document from draft to publication provides a narrative surrounding the policy rationale and the associated design processes (Adams 2016). The data in this research explores the spaces in which discourse occurs, rendering insights into the influences at play in the policymaking process. There is a lack of policy research surrounding the people, interactions and constructs by which educational policy is created (Ball 2016). Relating to the discourse around policy, it is claimed that there is "a lot more focus on what is written and said, rather than how those statements are formed and made possible" (Ball 2015, p.311). This captures the gap in literature to legitimise the need for this research from an Irish perspective, focussing on the processes that bring policies to light rather than solely focussing on policy documents. The next section outlines the second theory of the theoretical framework, discussing the characteristics of policy forums.

1.4.2 Characteristics of Policy Forums (Fischer and Leifeld 2015)

The processes that facilitate discourse between policy actors in policymaking are a pivotal focal point for this research. Policy forums represent one such method for enabling discourse to unfold in policymaking (Fischer and Leifeld 2015). Policy forums are used to incite policy discourse between policy actors and are described as interactions that occur regularly and have definite boundaries (Fischer and Leifeld 2015). This understanding marks clear separation between policy forums and "one-shot conferences" due to the repeated nature of the interactions (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.365). Policy forums are endorsed as an approach to policy decision-making that enable a range of actors to engage in and contribute to decision-making. Crucially, this research seeks to explore the presence of varying methods of facilitating policy discourse in Irish education, not solely focussing on the presence or lack thereof of policy forums. However, the descriptions relating to the characteristics of policy forums

provide a clear framework that can be used to investigate the characteristics of consultative processes used in Irish educational policymaking. The broad range of policy forum characteristics according to Fischer and Leifeld (2015) are outlined in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Policy Forum Characteristics

Characteristic	Description
Composition	This refers to the collection of policy actors involved in the forum. Policy forum participants can include experts in the policy area or representatives of collective bodies such as “state agencies, interest groups, political parties, private firms, local stakeholder, scientific organisations” (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.372). Different types of actors are included depending on the purpose of the forum. While the involvement of a diverse range of policy actors allows for citizen participation, it is evident that this can also contribute to complexity and complications in terms of communicating.
Size	The size of the forum varies depending on the policy problem. Notably, it is stated that the larger the size of the policy forum, the greater financial expenditure is required.
Organisation and Leadership	Forums can be informal without any perceived rules and can also be formal with rigorous rules and leaders who govern the forum. There are also forums whereby a facilitator mediates between the various policy actors.
Decision-making Mode	This refers to how decisions are made in the forums, whether these decisions are made by consensus/majority verdict or by singular influence.
Degree of Transparency	This characteristic relates to the clear articulation of the reasoning behind a policy decision.
Compliance	This refers to whether the decisions that are made in policy forums have voluntary or mandatory implications for policy actors.
Specificity of the Issue and Time Horizon	Policy forums can be set-up to deal with an immediate policy problem or a long-term policy area.
Exclusiveness	A policy issue is dealt with in one venue alone or across a range of venues.

These characteristics provide a useful metric for investigating the policy mechanisms used in Irish educational policymaking to facilitate policy discourse. For example, the composition of policy actors involved in varying methods of policy discourse enables insight into the notion of ‘elite’ policy actors as well as the policy actors that are side-lined or marginalised (Anderson 2003). Furthermore, the exploration of the exclusiveness of certain policymaking experiences provides clarification on the opportunities afforded to policy actors in the Irish context to engage in policymaking. As displayed in Table 1.1, the leadership and organisation of policy forums can be both formal and informal. This prompts investigations into the formal, publicly recognised methods of policy discourse employed in Irish education as well as the more latent informal mechanisms that can be incorporated. Transparency also interacts with policymaking processes in relation to “openness” regarding policy decision-making (De Marchi *et al.* 2016, p.22). This is critical to this research as it highlights the need for transparent procedures of policymaking in order to communicate the rationale behind decision-making at different stages of the policymaking process.

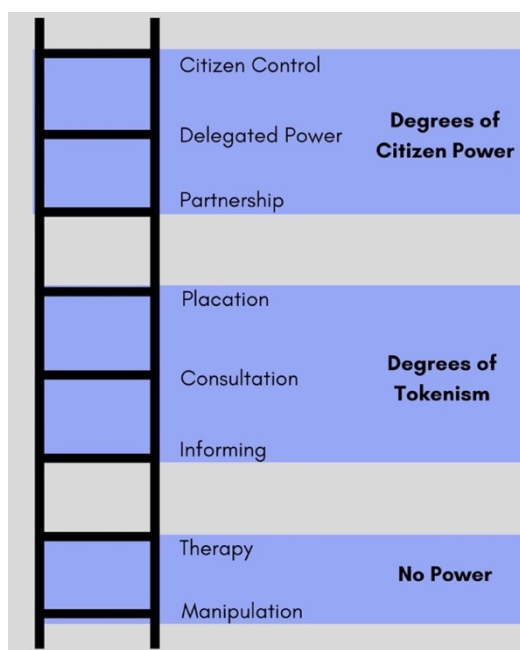
Further analysis suggests that the use of policy forums can challenge the decision-making of those who are in paid positions of power and these forums can then be a “potential backdoor for advocacy”, whereby the involvement of policy actors appears on the surface as participation but ultimately masks legitimacy efforts (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.364). This corresponds to the research finding of Fast (2016) who observed that stakeholders were involved in policymaking for the purposes of legitimising a policy. Policy forums may also be dominated by authoritative voices or those in positions of power. A primary question investigated in this research is the manner in which policy actors engage in dialogue regarding the development of educational policy. This investigation also examines the efficacy of the current mechanisms for policy consultation, ascertaining when and how such consultation takes place. While the above framework provides an understanding of the general descriptors for policymaking interactions, further research is required to investigate participation in policymaking in greater detail. The next section explores the theory of participation and analyses a theory that characterises varying levels of decision-making influence amongst participants in policymaking processes.

1.4.3 Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein 2019)

Examination of literature indicates that policymaking requires public deliberation and legitimation which can be achieved through the participation of policy actors in the policymaking process (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Citizen participation in policy decision-making reflects the democratic values of society (Arnstein 2019). Arnstein provides a framework or “ladder” that outlines varying levels of citizen participation in decision-making and policymaking which was originally designed by the author in 1969 (2019, p.24).

This ladder captures the relative levels of influence that participating citizens have in comparison with those in governance who typically hold the decision-making power. The ladder, therefore, signifies a distribution of power with the eight rungs characterising the power of citizens at each level. The presence of power dynamics in public policymaking is evident in the tensions that arise due to alternate “power differentials” amongst the policy actors involved (Portnoi 2016, p.27). Interestingly, the bottom two rungs of the ladder are described as non-participatory, where the involvement of citizens or stakeholders is for the purposes of an act or a show. This resonates with the aforementioned claim of Fischer and Leifeld who express that policy actors may be involved in policymaking for the purposes of legitimising a policy, becoming a mere part of the “game” (2015, p.370). Involvement at the three rungs on the middle of the ladder is described as tokenism whereas the top three rungs of the ladder constitute relative citizen power (Arnstein 2019). Figure 1.5 illustrates the rungs of Arnstein’s ladder which are discussed individually below.

Figure 1.5: Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation



1. **Manipulation:** At this step of the ladder, citizens are involved in policymaking as a means of gathering support or for the purpose of educating those involved. Involvement at this level is described as a “public relations vehicle” (Arnstein 2019, p.26)
2. **Therapy:** This rung constitutes the involvement of participants aimed at changing their thoughts and perspectives on an issue rather than direct involvement in decision-making mechanisms.
3. **Informing:** Citizens are made aware of their “rights, responsibilities and options” in reference to the decision in question (Arnstein 2019, p.27). However, this level can result in meetings with a lack of reciprocal communication, devoid of avenues for citizen feedback thus establishing a system for unilateral decision-making.
4. **Consultation:** Participation at this level can be perceived as a “window-dressing ritual” whereby, citizens participate but those in power still make the decisions (Arnstein 2019, p.28). This participation is typically measured by the number of stakeholders that engaged in meetings or the number of completed questionnaires (Arnstein 2019).
5. **Placation:** This level notices an increase in citizen influence. A mechanism that can be employed at this level is to choose a small number of representatives of an under-represented group to participate in decision-making process whereby the power remains with the majority.
6. **Partnership:** This rung of the ladder presents a sharing of power and constitutes a joint approach to decision-making. Singular decision-making by those in power no longer takes place at this level.
7. **Delegated Power:** At this level, initial negotiations take place with citizens and thereafter, the decision-making power rests with citizens to decide the outcome.
8. **Citizen Control:** As captured by the title, this level empowers citizens with complete decision-making prowess.

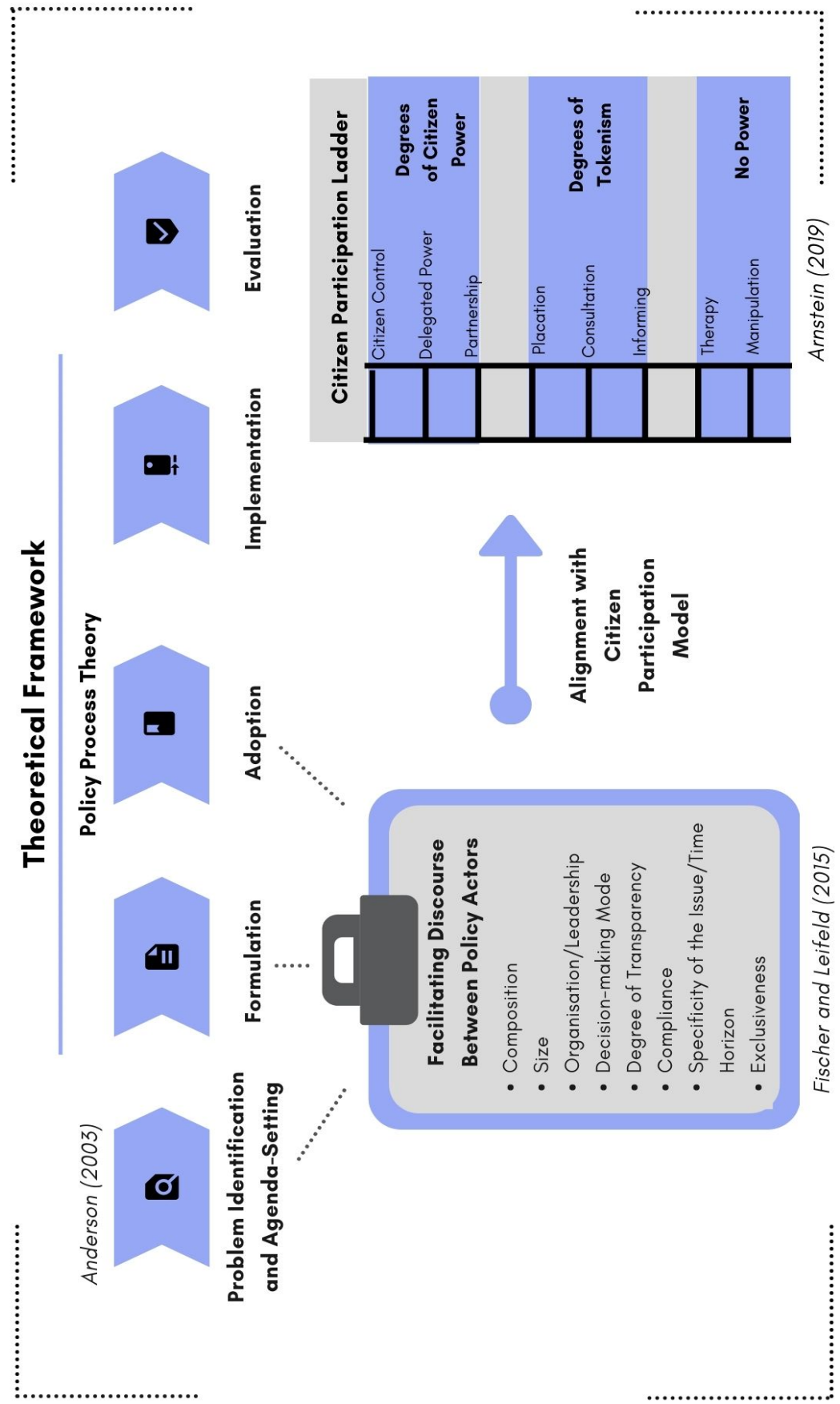
Understandably, descriptions on citizen participation in decision-making cannot always be neatly categorised into eight rungs in every context and that a greater number of rungs could be possible (Arnstein 2019). Connor (1988) interpreted Arnstein’s ladder and amended the rungs on the ladder to describe an alternative approach to citizen participation: 1) Education, 2) Information Feedback, 3) Consultation, 4) Joint Planning, 5) Mediation, 6) Litigation and 7) Resolution/Prevention. Connor (1988) illustrates that the steps of the ladder are progressive, for example, consultation is enacted when it is deemed that the education stage did not generate enough support for the decision and the information feedback did not yield resolutions to the

problem or contribute to greater understanding. In the consultation stage, additional views are considered but not necessarily accepted or employed (Connor 1988). Some of the mechanism for consultation that are identified include “responsive publications”, “planning workshops” and “advisory groups” (Connor 1988, p.253). These citizen participation ladders provide a context for investigation into the involvement of stakeholders in policy decision-making in Ireland. With reference to the Irish context, it is intriguing to note that the term consultation appears in both ladders as a rung that can be classed with low levels of decision-making influence. Given that this is the term that is used regularly in Irish educational policy in reference to the involvement of stakeholders in policymaking, it does summon questions regarding whether consultation with stakeholders in Irish educational policymaking aligns with the understanding of consultation advanced by Arnstein (2019). Conway and Murphy (2013) document the consultation process that took place in the formulation of the Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life Strategy which consisted of four hundred and eighty written submissions and sixty face-to-face presentations. However, this consultation was based off a draft document of the strategy and the consultation timeline was concluded within seven months. The short timeframe here is not suggestive of meaningful consultation. Furthermore, while on the surface, four-hundred and eighty written submissions seem sizeable, this figure does not even represent one per cent of the teaching cohort in Ireland. This research, therefore, seeks to examine the participation of policy actors in Irish educational policy in order to examine how this involvement occurs and the level of decision-making influence that is associated with this involvement.

1.4.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research, displayed in Figure 1.6, has been established by thoughtfully weaving together the three independent theories outlined above (Anderson 2003; Fischer and Leifeld 2015; Arnstein 2019). Each theory has been carefully positioned within a unified framework to align with the aims and objectives of this research. This section outlines an explanation behind this framework and how this relates to this research.

Figure 1.6: Theoretical Framework



While the three theories are all inextricably linked in this theoretical framework, Figure 1.6 captures a logical order for assembling these theories, beginning with the policy process theory, progressing to the characteristics of policy forums and advancing to the citizen participation ladder. Firstly, this theoretical framework begins by concentrating on the policy process theory. The purpose of this research is to understand how policymaking occurs in the Irish context, from the articulation of a policy idea to the resultant publication of the policy. While all five stages of the policy process are illuminated, the first three stages, problem identification and agenda-setting, formulation and adoption are the prominent focal points for this investigation. The data that is gathered in relation to the first three stages of this theory is then subsequently considered in light of the remaining two theories of the theoretical framework. Following on from the policy process theory, the next component of this theoretical framework focusses on the characteristics of policy forums. In essence, this theory from Fischer and Leifeld (2015) assesses the methods by which policy actors are involved in policymaking and how this involvement can vary in terms of composition, size, organisation/leadership, decision-making mode, degree of transparency, compliance, time horizon and exclusiveness. These characteristics are used as a reference point to situate and analyse varying policymaking experiences that arise from data-gathering. Once the means by which policy actors are involved in policymaking have been established, this allows for the findings to be analysed in terms of the levels of participation. Hence, Arnstein's citizen participation ladder forms the final component of the theoretical framework. One of the key objectives of this research is to explore the influence that policy actors have in decision-making as part of policy creation. Therefore, this research uses the participation ladder to adjudge whether experiences shared by policy actors indicate degrees of citizen power, degrees of tokenism or no power.

This theoretical framework provides a critical underpinning for the construction of the research methodology. Furthermore, the specific nature of these theories provides a theoretical backdrop from which the findings and conclusions of this research can be situated and evaluated.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented an introduction to this research by articulating the research rationale and the aims for this investigation. The research question and embedded questions were appraised with reference to policy literature. The educational policymaking context in Ireland was surveyed through an overview of the historical underpinnings of policy development in

Irish education. Furthermore, the current policymaking context was examined with particular reference to recent statistics from the Department of Education. The theoretical framework that buttresses this research was also outlined, referring to three critical theories, namely, the policy process theory, characteristics of policy forums and the citizen participation ladder (Anderson 2003; Fischer and Leifeld 2015; Arnstein 2019). The final section of this chapter provides an overview of the dissertation structure.

1.6 Structure of the Dissertation

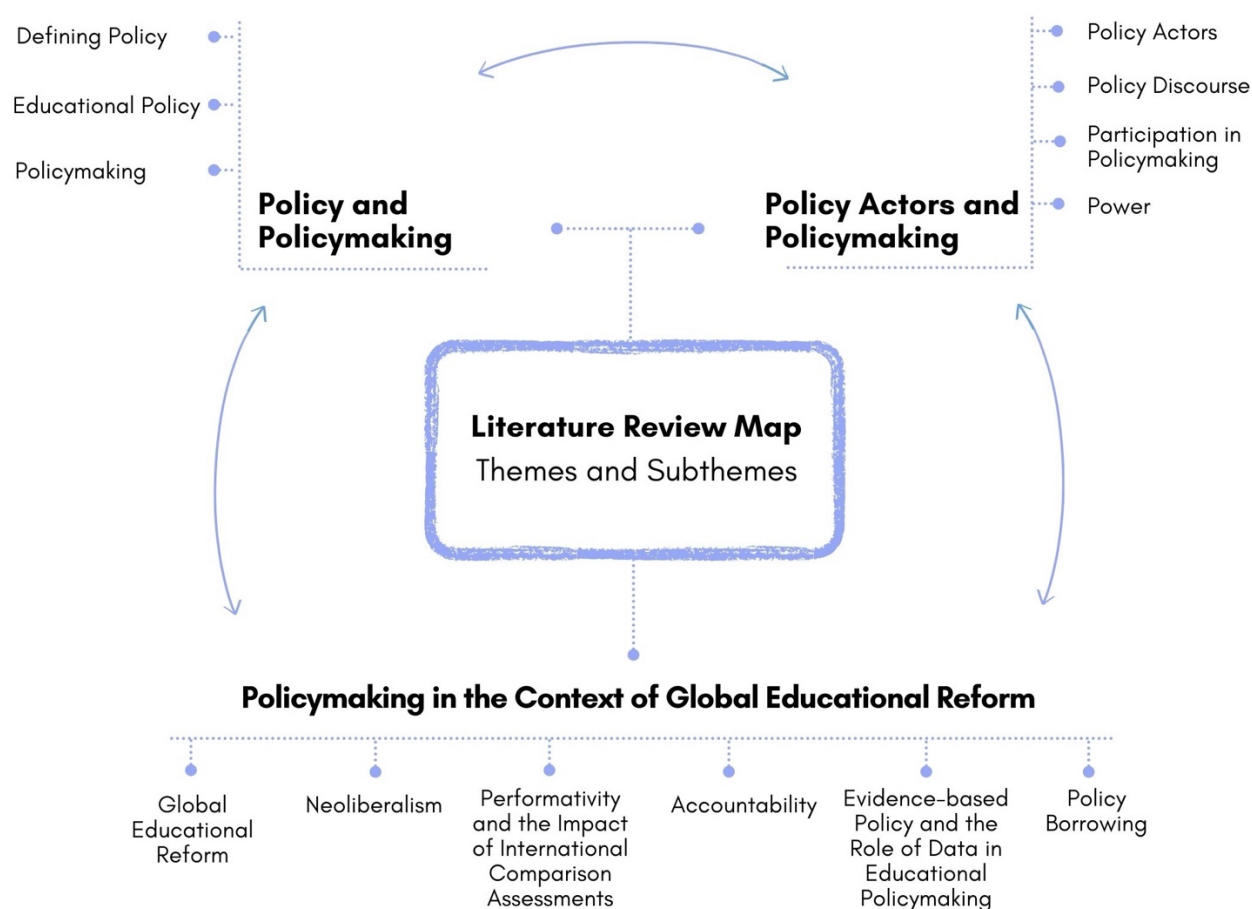
The chapters of the dissertation are now articulated. The opening chapter has outlined an introduction to the research, constituting the research aims and rationale as well as the research context and theoretical framework. The research is further situated by Chapter Two which presents the review of literature for this dissertation. Chapter Two analyses relevant research literature within the field of educational policy and policymaking. The themes explored in Chapter Two include policy and policymaking, policymaking in the context of global educational reform and policy actors. The succeeding chapter details the methodological approach to the research investigation, encapsulating the research design that is facilitated by constructivist grounded theory. Chapter Four presents the research findings emanating from the investigation. More specifically, through the application of constructivist grounded theory, Chapter Four develops an understanding of educational policymaking through the portrayal of key findings arising from the research. Chapter Five addresses the conclusions and recommendations from this research study, clarifying the implications of the study to contemporary educational discourse. Furthermore, as the final chapter of the dissertation, Chapter Five presents suggestions for future policy design as well as illuminating possibilities for further research in this area. Finally, Chapter Five concludes the thesis by presenting a conceptual framework, grounded from research, for improvements that can be made to policymaking processes in Irish primary education.

Chapter Two

2.1 Introduction

The opening chapter of this dissertation has articulated the research aims, outlining the need to provide insight and understanding into the mechanisms that enable educational policy to be devised and designed in the Irish primary context. This chapter analyses the literature and research relating to policymaking, accounting for both national and international discourse. This analysis of literature and research situates and further clarifies the research question and embedded questions. Literature maintains that “we know too little about the design activities that bring policies into being” (Luetjens and Mintrom 2016, p.391). Hence, this chapter provides an overview of key claims from literature and research on the topic of educational policymaking and the ‘design activities’ that bring policies to life. This theoretical lens is used to position the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this research in the concluding chapters. Three themes emerged from the analysis of literature, namely; Policy and Policymaking; Policymaking in the Context of Global Educational Reform and Policy Actors and Policymaking. The themes and subthemes for this chapter are depicted in the Literature Review Map (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: Literature Review Map



Literature and research on the topic of educational policymaking is dominated by references to policymaking that occurs in the backdrop of global educational reform (Lingard 2013; Grek *et al.* 2009; Sahlberg 2007; Portnoi 2016). Hence, this theme of the literature review consumes a significant proportion of this chapter and signals the myriad of transnational influences affecting current policymaking processes. The next section provides an explanation on the search and review process of the investigation.

2.2 Search and Review Process

The literature and research surrounding policy and policymaking is vast and varied. A rigorous search and review process was therefore required to ensure that research and literature was explored that was relevant to the research question and embedded questions of this investigation. Examination of policymaking literature revealed that international literature vastly outweighs domestic literature which further highlights the rationale for research of this

type into the processes of educational policymaking in an Irish context. The online library software Summon, available through the Mary Immaculate College database, was employed as a means of searching for literature that pertained to the research area, enabling the researcher to access an extensive range of books and journal articles. The clarification of the research question and embedded questions provided central focus questions that were used to refine the search and review process. Phrase searching was employed, whereby key phrases emanating from the central research questions were used as a means of advancing the search and review process. The main search phrases that were utilised included:

- Policymaking
- Educational policy
- Stakeholders
- Policy actors
- Policymaking influences

Literature input tables were assembled on each piece of relevant literature which provided a structured approach to analysing and recording both descriptive and interpretive notes on the literature in question. An extract from a literature input table is displayed in Appendix A. This enabled the researcher to take descriptive and interpretive notes on the literature in question. Sixty-three literature input tables were completed in total. An initial analysis was then conducted on each literature input table to identify the key concepts and claims presented in each piece of literature. The key concepts emerging from all literature input tables were then collated in a table. An extract from this table is shown in Appendix B. The next stage required the researcher to further analyse these key concepts, comparing similarities and differences and noting the concepts that were most frequently recurring. The identification of the connections and relationships between these concepts facilitated the creation of the literature review map shown in Figure 2.1 and this enabled the clarification of the three literature themes; Policy and Policymaking; Policymaking in the Context of Global Educational Reform and Policy Actors and Policymaking. These three themes are pertinent to this research and provide a theoretical backdrop to guide research on this complex and intricate topic (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Furthermore, this broad analysis of literature facilitated the identification of key theories relating to policymaking that formed the basis of the theoretical framework outlined in the

previous chapter. The next section of this literature review examines the opening theme of Policy and Policymaking.

2.3 Policy and Policymaking

This first theme of the literature review analyses the relevant research and literature in relation to policy and policymaking. Firstly, the content of this theme begins by surveying the varying definitions of policy. This leads to further exploration of public policy, in particular, examining literature relating to educational policy. The nuances and complexities associated with policymaking are subsequently outlined. Finally, the influential factors to policymaking processes are articulated. While the first theme conveys the relevant research and literature in relation to policy and policymaking, it also clarifies the rationale for the remaining themes of the literature review. Furthermore, the exploration of literature in this opening theme further aids the positioning of the aims, objectives and questions of this investigation.

2.3.1 Defining Policy

This research constitutes an investigation into the mechanisms by which decisions are made in educational policymaking, therefore, it is important to begin by exploring the multiple and varying definitions of policy. Although this research concentrates on educational policy, this opening section of theme one examines the broad concept of public policy, the policy that ubiquitously affects and shapes the lives of citizens (Anderson 2003). This section also outlines the responsive nature of policy and the justifications for policy in society.

2.3.1.1 Public Policy

Policy, in particular public policy, innately shapes and influences modern life through the provision of laws, rules and guidelines that structure life in society (Anderson 2003; De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Policy is outlined as a set of procedures that provides a response to an issue or concern (Anderson 2003; Bell and Stevenson 2015; Fay 1975). In addition to this, policy can be understood as the plan that shapes the required steps in the ascription of targets and objectives (Fay 1975). While this commentary is useful in terms of the description of policy as actions that are goal-oriented, there is a lack of certainty detailing the source and indeed the creators of policy. Literature denotes that policy is typically devised by those in positions of political power (Bell and Stevenson 2015). The policies produced by political powers, including laws and regulations, exemplify the vision of the government which is generally

embodied in formal texts such as policy documents and legislation (Portnoi 2016). Literature outlines a range of policy types that appear in the public domain (Anderson 2003; Lingard and Rizvi 2010). Table 2.1 identifies a variety of policy types that appear in literature.

Table 2.1: Policy Types (Anderson 2003)

Types of policy	Description
Substantive	<i>Policy that refers to the intentions, plans and proposed actions of government</i>
Procedural	<i>Provides instructional direction on how a task/operation should be carried out</i>
Distributive	<i>Policy that provides resources/services to certain groups</i>
Regulatory	<i>This type of policy refers to the imposition of restrictions or limits</i>
Self-regulatory	<i>Policy that imposes restrictions on a group with the additional task that these restrictions are monitored by the group themselves</i>
Material	<i>This type of policy involves the distribution of power or resources</i>
Symbolic	<i>Policy that espouses values, beliefs and motives</i>

Policies considered to be overtly symbolic can lack clear articulation on the practical measures required to enact the policy (Lingard and Rizvi 2010). While this research is focussed on the interactions that occur as part of policymaking, appreciating the different types of policy that can be formulated in public policy is essential in understanding the “form” and “position” that policymakers place on a given policy (Adams 2016, p.2). In designing this ‘form’ and ‘position’, policymakers use the assets of “money, rules and authority” which aid the enactment of their vision and ensure that policies are adhered to by the citizens in society (Elmore and McDonnell 1987, p.133). The sentiments of these broad definitions of policy hint at the political underpinnings of policy while also portraying policy as an instrument of compliance in society. While policy can be regarded as a construct communicated as “text”, attention must also be paid to policy as “discourse”, the process that facilitates the articulation of policy as text (Ball 2015, p.306). This is certainly one of the aims of this research, while the examination

of policy as text forms part of the research methodology, the ultimate aim of this research is to investigate the discursive processes that enable the text to be created. An analysis of literature pertaining to policy discourse is appraised in the third theme of this chapter.

2.3.1.2 Policy as a response to a problem

Policy holds an intrinsic role in society for providing structure, inciting change, influencing progression and answering emerging issues and problems. Literature describes how policy is designed in a bid to combat a particular “problem” (Fowler 2009). Relationally, policy can be introduced to drive growth, change and innovation in an aspect of society that is deemed to be experiencing problems (Portnoi 2016). This responsive nature of public policy means that the creation and time span of a policy vary depending on the problem in question (Wallace 1991). The ebb and flow of society means such problems are not fixed constructs and the demands that instigate policy creation change in reciprocation (Anderson 2003). Policy, therefore, is not a static phenomenon and instead can be considered a changeable and evolutionary concept. This claim is corroborated by the account of the Irish policymaking context outlined in the opening chapter which documented the shifts in educational policy in alignment with societal, cultural and political changes (Figure 1.1). The responsive nature of policy is certainly a focus for this research as there is a need to examine the ‘problems’ that prompt policy development in society and indeed in education.

This section has explored the meaning and necessity of public policy as well as the different types of policy identified in literature. The discussion on the different types of public policy has intimated the dynamics of power in policy creation and implementation. The notion of policy as a response to a problem was also discussed. This is significant in relation to this research as it reinforces the need for research into policy in an Irish context, concentrating on how primary educational policy is devised, which Ball refers to as policy as discourse (2015, p.306). While this section has provided an overview on public policy, the next section concentrates on one domain of public policy through the examination of educational policy.

2.3.2 Educational Policy

Educational policy refers to the domain of public policy that shapes and directs the provision of education (Portnoi 2016; Bell and Stevenson 2015). This section examines educational policy, identifying the spaces in which educational policy. The previous section established

that policymaking is a process that occurs in a world full of change and complexities. In addition to this, the previous chapter highlighted the religious, cultural, political, economic and international influences that have played major roles in Irish educational policy. This exposure of educational policy to an array of influences is not unique to the Irish context as every educational phenomenon must navigate “the crossroads of economic, historical, cultural and political factors” (Alves *et al.* 2012, p.279). Therefore, this section also identifies and discusses a range of different influences on educational policy.

2.3.2.1 The different levels of educational policy

Educational policy exists at different levels, namely, the local level, the provincial level and the national level (Portnoi 2016). Policies at the national level are considered a statement of government and direct educational policy for the entire nation (Portnoi 2016). Policy at the local level is policy that is produced by schools and embodies the presentation of the operating procedures and protocols for individual schools. Policy that is produced by the governing body of a state, region or province is known as provincial policy (Portnoi 2016).

In reference to Irish education, educational policy that is created by government is predominantly produced at the national level. Policies that are formulated at national level in the Irish primary context include legislation, circular letters, curriculum documents, guidelines and frameworks. The Education Act provides that one of the functions of the Minister for Education and the Department of Education is to determine national educational policy. Additionally, section 9(b) provides that one of the functions of a school is to “ensure that the education provided by it meets the requirements of education policy as determined from time to time by the Minister” (Education Act 1998). Therefore, pursuant to these legislative provisions, schools were required to respond to the policy changes introduced by the aforementioned policy creators. The formulation of educational policy at the national level can be interpreted as policy from “above”, suggestive of the perception of policy as something that is decided and passed down to schools from a position of authority (Ball *et al.* 2011, p.7). Similarly, this means of passing policy down to schools can also be described as a top-down approach to policy development (Elmore and McDonnell 1987). Policies at the national level take account of the key priorities for the education system and indicate any areas in which the system is underperforming (Organisation for Co-operation and Economic Development 2019). Furthermore, educational policy must recognise important contextual issues that are relevant

to the system such as changing demographics in society and in student cohorts. This allows for systematic objectives to be set by national governing bodies to commit to short-term, mid-term and long-term objectives for policy development in education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019). This response to key contextual or societal issues captures the reactionary nature of educational policy, whereby educational policy is impacted by a range of political, economic and societal influences, a notion reinforced by the history of Irish educational policy examined in the previous chapter (Adams 2016). This is a significant claim in relation to this research question as it hints at the multiple factors that could influence decision-making in educational policymaking.

Examples of policies at the local level in Irish primary schools include the standardisation of the school year and subject-based policies. Regarding the standardisation of the school year, there is a communication from the Department of Education each year that states when schools must close and schools can then make decisions regarding additional closures. Some local level policies are considered mandatory and schools are responsible for ensuring that these policies are enacted. The legislative and regulative checklist provided to schools identifies the mandatory policies required by primary schools as well as the legislation underpinning the need for this policy (Department of Education 2021c). Educational policy is primarily formulated to serve the national and local levels in Ireland. While it is understandable that there is no provincial level for policy due to the centralised approach to governance in education, there is an absence of an intermediary level between national and local policy in Irish education. Educational policies can be developed for a number of different reasons including professional reasons, domestic political reasons, foreign political influences, the pressure of parents and public, the needs and desires of teachers (Bodroža *et al* 2016, p.355). The succeeding sections further analyse some of these influences with reference to relevant research and literature.

2.3.2.2 Educational policy and political influences

Educational policy and politics interact in numerous ways (Furlong and Kraft 2014). Political influences can influence the position of a given policy on the agenda of policymakers (Anderson 2003). Additionally, political influences can result in the acceleration or deceleration of a given policy in education (Portnoi 2016). Governing institutions can also be influenced by the traditional mechanisms for creating educational policy (Davies 2004). Therefore, the course of action that is decided in response to the policy problem may be

structured in accordance with the default systems for policymaking, what Orland refers to as “the operating procedures” (Orland cited in Plank *et al.* 2009, p.114). Conversely, educational policy may have been introduced by a previous government and changes in public opinion and/or government personnel may call on the need for change in educational policy.

The previous chapter highlighted the influence of key political individuals in leading change in educational policy in Ireland (Harford and Herron 2016; Fleming and Harford 2014; O’Doherty 2014). This resonates with the claim that the vision for educational policy relates directly to what is deemed the purpose of education (Bell and Stevenson 2015). Educational policy can also be influenced by time pressures and unplanned events where policy is required to respond to an immediate need in society (Davies 2004). This prompts research into the mechanisms for policymaking that are currently employed in Irish education and summons further questions regarding the structures that are used to create policy and how respondent these structures are to changes based on the policy problem.

Research into the design of curriculum specifications in a number of jurisdictions reveals that curricular policymaking has “become something of a political battleground” (Looney 2014, p.7). This quotation reinforces the need for research into educational policymaking in an Irish context to investigate the interactions and influence of politics on educational policy

2.3.2.3 Educational policy shaped by moral/ethical influences

Educational policy can also be shaped by moral/ethical influences (Furlong and Kraft 2014). Domestic research into the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions, Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics characterised moral and ethical development in education as the means by which the citizens of a society learn how to interact with one another and ascertain an understanding of the “social and cultural norms, rules, and laws” (Sullivan 2018, p.20). Similarly, the NCCA outline that education in morality and ethics enables pupils to learn about and understand the members of society (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2020). The societal changes that have occurred in Ireland in recent decades is evidenced by the apparent diversity in religious beliefs and denominations in Irish society (Darmody and Smyth 2017). The development of the curriculum in ERB and Ethics, therefore, captures an apt example of how educational policy has been developed for moral/ethical purposes in the Irish context (Furlong and Kraft 2014). Furthermore, this example speaks to the unyielding nature

of change regarding policy and illustrates that policies are not fixed and can evolve in accordance with emerging policy problems and demands.

Participants within the policymaking process, which Ball (2016) refers to as the policy actors, proffer significant influence over decision-making and the eventual policy outcomes. Understandably, policy actors summon a range of backgrounds, understandings, values and perspectives to the policymaking process which ultimately shapes the policy direction (Elmore and McDonnell 1987). Therefore, literature suggests that “policies will always reflect what subjectively matters for those implied in the policy cycle” (De Marchi *et al.* 2016, p.32). This is significant to this research as it captures that policymaking is not a purely objective process and that policy actors impart subjective influence. Notwithstanding the relevance of this statement to this research into policymaking, further research and literature must be explored to ascertain further insight into the identities of policy actors in educational policymaking, the mechanisms by which policy actors participate in the process and the associated influence that policy actors exert on the process. In fact, the mechanisms and structures used to involve policy actors in policymaking are recognised as a critical influential factor in swaying policy decisions (Orland cited in Plank *et al.* 2009). Therefore, a theme of this literature review is devoted to understanding the people behind decision-making in educational policy which coincides with the nature of this research investigation.

2.3.2.4 Educational policy and economic influences

The relationship between educational policy and the economy is one that is frequently narrated in research (O’Connor 2014; Fleming and Harford 2014; Harford and Herron 2016). Reform in educational policy can be instigated due to economic justifications (Furlong and Kraft 2014). Research into educational policy in Serbia indicated that a particular reform sample in educational policy was enforced to positively impact economic progression (Bodroža *et al.* 2016). This evidence promotes the perception that education is viewed as an essential vehicle in driving economic improvement. It must be noted, however, that the research sample from which these findings were generated was relatively small and consisted of teachers, school counsellors and principals. The lack of data from policymakers or representatives in policymaking detracts from the generalisability of these findings.

Education can be considered a critical contributor to success in the market or the “global economy” (Bell and Stevenson 2015, p.146). Literature on the relationship between the economy and education points to the influence that market principles can place on accountability, standards and performance in education (Adams 2016). These market principles concentrate on judging educational output in terms of pupil performance in assessments (Martens 2007). The use of standardised international assessments as a metric for educational performance is well-documented in domestic and international literature (Tobin *et al.* 2010; Portnoi 2016). In fact, a decline in performance in educational assessments can be used as a trigger for educational policy reform. In such circumstances, the results communicate a crisis, legitimising the need for change. A further by-product of the comparison of international educational assessments is policy borrowing, whereby education systems note what is enabling supposed success in other jurisdictions and replicate similar domestic policy initiatives (Portnoi 2016; Lingard and Sellar 2013; Ball 2015). This clarifies that policymaking does not just occur within domestic borders, transnational and global influences can also affect the process (Portnoi 2016). Domestic policy implications can result from global educational policy developments (Ball 1998). The shift towards educational policy that is based on evidence has resulted in the introduction of “new and influential actors in the field of comparative education”, including the OECD through the production of the PISA assessments (Auld and Morris 2016, p.202). This signifies the need for a theme of the literature that situates policymaking within the context of global educational reform and the associated policy influences and also explores the role of evidence and data in educational policymaking. A number of sources in this theme have clearly indicated the influence of the global economy and indeed global educational reform on educational policy and therefore, in order to accurately present and synthesise the range of voices in this area, the next theme of the literature review explores educational policy in the context of global educational reform.

The financial and economic resources available to government constitute a further source of influence in casting decisions relating to educational policy (Davies 2004). Associatively, this alignment of education with market interests has witnessed international educational reform that is guided by market principles (Adams 2016). This type of educational reform has ripple effects and can impact policy developments in other jurisdictions.

The review of literature in relation to educational policy raises questions with regards to how policy is passed down to schools and the mediation between those who create policy and those

who enact policy at local level. Similarly, this analysis of literature also prompts inquiry into the political, ethical/moral and economic influences that shape Irish educational policymaking. In order to delve deeper into how these influences interact with policymaking, the succeeding section of this theme articulates and interprets policymaking definitions and theories. While this is merely a snapshot into the multiple and varied influences on the policymaking process, it does begin to indicate the intricacies and complexities of the process as referenced by a number of researchers (Bell and Stevenson 2015; Hall and Kirwan 2016; Giest 2017).

2.3.3 Policymaking

This section considers the concept of policymaking, critically analysing the definitions and theories that provide an insight into the processes by which a policy moves from a problem or an idea to the resultant implementation. Research explains that more needs to be learned about how policies are decided, constructed, employed and understood (Anderson 2003; Luetjens and Mintrom 2016). As outlined in the opening chapter of this research, this investigation intends to develop a deeper understanding of the policymaking processes in Irish primary education. The examination of policymaking in this section provides a basis for the remaining themes of this literature review which focus on the influence of global educational reform and the role of policy actors in creating educational policy.

2.3.3.1 The messy and complex process of policymaking

Traditionally, policymaking has been viewed as a “linear” process involving the identification of a policy problem, analysis of policy options and clarification of a policy solution (Luetjens and Mintrom 2016, p.393). However, given the claims from the previous sections of this literature review which indicate the multivariate influences that shape policy, the plausibility of such a description must be questioned. In fact, the problematic and complex nature of formulating public policy rejects the contention that policymaking follows a linear path (Anderson 2003). Instead, policymaking is described as a “messy process” that occurs in the real world which is abundant with change and complexities (Bell and Stevenson 2015, p.147). The policymaking process can be further characterised as an “inherently political process involving conflict and struggle among people (public officials and private citizens) with conflicting interests, values, and desires on policy issues” (Anderson 2003, p.1). This description emphasises the intricate and political nature of policymaking, aligning with previous definitions that posit policy as a construct shaped by those in positions of political

power (Bell and Stevenson 2015; Elmore and McDonnell 1987; Portnoi 2016). Further significance of this quotation lies in the revelation of the complex dynamics within policymaking, showcasing the potentially competing motives, beliefs, and philosophies of those involved. A later theme of this chapter investigates the literature pertaining to those involved in policymaking, what Ball (1998) refers to as the policy actors.

Policies are not produced by one process alone, in fact, the policymaking process can vary depending on the policy problem. Policymaking involves numerous decisions over an extended period of time rather than one singular decision (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Literature suggests that the effectiveness of policymaking processes is based on the procedures for public deliberation, relying on active participation, accountability, and legitimation (De Marchi *et al.* 2016, p.32). Here, participation in the policymaking process means that policy actors have a platform and means of influencing decisions in the process. Accountability in policymaking refers to the presence of transparent procedures for decision-making and legitimation equates to the rationalising of the need for policy. In terms of Irish educational policymaking, this research intends to investigate all three facets mentioned above by surveying the transparency of decision-making procedures, the mechanisms of participation and the instruments of legitimation that are currently employed (De Marchi *et al.* 2016).

2.3.3.2 Policymaking theories

A variety of policymaking theories are presented in literature to offer insights into the dynamics of policymaking. These include political systems theory, group theory, elite theory, and rational-choice theory (Anderson 2003; Portnoi 2016). While all theories are considered when situating the research findings according to relevant literature, the broad theory of the policy process advanced by Anderson (2003) forms a critical component of the theoretical framework for this research. The policy process theory, or policy cycle comprises of the typical procedures and approaches adopted for the purposes of policymaking (Anderson 2003). As illustrated in Figure 1.4 in Chapter One, the policy process contains five stages; problem identification and agenda-setting, formulation, adoption, implementation and evaluation. The purpose of this research is to understand how policymaking occurs in the Irish context, from the articulation of a policy idea to the resultant publication of the policy. While all five stages of the policy process are considered in this research, the first three stages, problem identification and agenda-setting, formulation and adoption are the prominent focal points for this investigation.

Investigating the journey of a policy document from draft to publication provides a means of explaining the policy rationale (Adams 2016). This research attempts to understand the spaces in which policy discourse occurs, rendering insight into the influences at play in the policymaking process. There is a lack of policy research surrounding the people, interactions and constructs by which educational policy is created (Ball 2016). This points to the gap in literature to legitimise the need for this research from an Irish educational perspective. In reference to policymaking processes in education, the OECD propose the following key priorities for member states; 1) Refine structures to streamline the decision-making process in education, 2) Set ambitious and measurable targets for the system and 3) Engage a variety of stakeholders (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019). According to an OECD report, providing an account on policy development in Irish education, the targets of the Department of Education are communicated through strategy statements and annual action plans (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020). Recently, the Department of Education also published *Forbairt* which is an annual statement of priorities derived from the Statement of Strategy 2023-2025. These plans set out “structured activity” towards the achievement of goals and are appended with “quarterly delivery dates” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020, p.19). The OECD report suggested that at the end of the 2018 academic year, an “85% achievement rate” was noted in relation to the execution of actions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020, p.19). Based on these findings, this research aims to investigate the structures used for decision-making in Irish primary education, ascertaining the efficacy and expediency of the current structures. Furthermore, in relation to the notion of targets, this research intends to examine if policymaking timelines exist to enable a strategic approach to reaching ambitious system targets. This research also examines how the prevailing policymaking structures permit the involvement of policy actors as effective participation relies on appropriate structures (Harford and O’Doherty 2016).

2.3.3.3 Policy levers

In formulating and adopting policy, policy creators must consider the appropriate policy levers to employ (Giest 2017). Policy levers are the instruments that shape the outcomes and outputs of a policy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019; Gleeson and O’Donnabhain 2009; Giest 2017). In policy formulation, policymakers consider the “policy options”, including the choice of policy instrument for successful implementation (Hall and

Kirwan 2016, p.371). Elmore and McDonnell (1987) present a framework consisting of four types of policy instruments which represent the means by which policy is communicated and enacted. The four instruments include mandates, inducements, capacity-building and system-changing (Elmore and McDonnell 1987). Mandates operate on the basis of compliance, providing the “rules” and conditions for policy implementors (Elmore and McDonnell 1987, p.134). This policy instrument aligns with the perception that change would not occur without enforcement. Inducements refer to the supply of financial resources to the enactors of policy in exchange for the completion of a desired activity (Elmore and McDonnell 1987). Inducements are required when public desire for the change is lacking (Elmore and McDonnell 1987). Whereas mandates enforce change, inducements indicate a transactional relationship between policymakers and policy implementors. Capacity-building is a policy instrument that embodies the investment of financial resources in “material, intellectual or human resources” (Elmore and McDonnell 1987, p.134). Capacity-building emphasises more long-term effects than mandates and inducements. Finally, system-changing involves alterations to the mechanisms of authority inherent to the system (Elmore and McDonnell 1987). The descriptions of these policy instruments denote the critical decision-making that must be factored into policymaking in the choice of policy that is eventually designed. Furthermore, the power dynamics in policymaking are captured through the evidence of mandates as a policy instrument whereby policymakers can enforce a change on the system.

The following questions must therefore be considered with reference to policymaking in the Irish primary context: *How are the policy problems chosen? Why do some policies problems make the agenda and not others? Who participates in the various stages of policymaking? How are the decisions surrounding the policy made?* Consequently, this research focuses on two aspects of Adam’s theory in relation to educational policymaking, policy-explaining and policy-framing. The next section of this theme considers the influential factors that can impact the policymaking process.

2.3.4 Conclusion

This opening theme of the literature review has highlighted some critical points in relation to this research investigation and indeed in relation to the structure of this literature review. Firstly, the examination of the definitions of policy revealed the influence of policy on daily life and therefore, provides a rationale for research into the processes by which such policy is

created. The critical evaluation of the literature in relation to educational policy and the policymaking process indicate that policy can be influenced by a range of different factors both in terms of the identification of the policy problem and in terms of the influences that can present throughout the policymaking process. This has solidified an objective of this research investigation which intends to seek an understanding of the range of influences that interact with Irish primary educational policymaking. Finally, elucidation of the multiple and varied influences on educational policy has also signposted the direction for the remaining themes of the literature review which focus on policymaking in the context of global educational reform and policy actors. The next theme of this literature review examines policymaking in the context of global educational reform.

2.4 Policymaking in the Context of Global Educational Reform

It is evident from the previous theme that there are multiple and varied sources of influence to public policymaking. There is a trend in research and literature suggesting that influences on educational policymaking are not confined to domestic sources (Lingard 2013; Grek *et al.* 2009). According to this commentary, the policy landscape is influenced by “sources beyond the nation as well as within the nation” (Lingard 2013, p.117). This is significant to this research as it captures the sources from outside the Irish education system that could potentially influence educational policymaking. Therefore, this section examines educational policymaking in light of the current trends and associated influences of global educational reform.

2.4.1 Global Educational Reform

The influence of global trends on international education systems is frequently encountered in current educational literature. These global trends are referred to in numerous guises across literature including the globalisation of education systems (Portnoi 2016) and the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) (Sahlberg 2007). This section provides an overview of global educational reform, highlighting some of the trends that are reported across literature.

2.4.1.1 The causes of globalisation

It is reported that international education systems are aligning with global trends in education due to the recognition that education plays an integral role in contributing to economic progression (Auld and Morris 2016; Portnoi 2016)). Hence, education is viewed as a major

contributor to the development of citizens who are capable of partaking in the global knowledge economy. In this regard, education can be viewed through the lens of social efficiency which recognises the need for education to prepare students for the world of work (Labaree 1997). Indeed, the widespread investment of international governments in education underscores the emphasis placed on education in contributing to the economy and indeed society (O'Connor 2014). Globalisation perpetuates the view that success in education equates to economic progression (Labaree 1997). This perception of education was intrinsic to the developments in domestic educational policy in Ireland where sparse educational policy existed until the birth of the Education Act 1998 (King and Nihill 2019). The economic recession in 2008 was also noted as a critical influence to educational policymaking where education was quickly viewed as the vehicle for change and the “way out of the recession” to ensure that Irish students would gain the necessary knowledge and skills to compete in the world of employment (King and Nihill 2019, p.58). To further corroborate these claims on the perception of education as an economic instrument, policy documents such as the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011-2020 cited the need to rekindle “economic prosperity” (Department of Education 2011). Caution, however, must be exercised in attributing the blame of all educational reform to the force of global trends in education (Ball 1998). Such causal links between global trends and all educational reform are referred to as “globaloney”, whereby the process of globalisation can be used to explain “almost anything and everything” (Harvey 1996 cited in Ball 1998, p.120).

2.4.1.2 The role of transnational players

The influential roles of “transnational players” in pushing the agenda for global educational reform is documented in policy literature (Ball *et al.* 2011, p.214). The United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the OECD are all identified in literature as contributors to the dissemination of global trends in education (Ball 2016; Ball 2003; Ball *et al.* 2011). The identification of the OECD as a ‘transnational player’ is noteworthy given that Ireland is one of the member states of this organisation. This raises questions in relation to the influence of the OECD on Irish educational policymaking. The relationship between the OECD and various international education systems is examined in a later section of this theme. The recognition of the role of Europe in spreading global trends is significant in relation to this research given the geographical and political relationship between Ireland and Europe. The influential role of Europe in

contributing to the dispersion of global trends is captured in literature as “Europeanisation” (Grek 2009, p.3). The appearance of terms such as the ‘learning society’ and the ‘knowledge-based economy’ in the educational policies of various countries speaks to this influence from European economic policy (Ball 1998; Gleeson and Donnabháin 2009; Donnelly 2004). These European and transnational players place “policy pressures” on education systems to align with the trends observed in other jurisdictions (Ozga 2009, p.33).

The research project into educational policymaking in Serbia that was cited in the opening theme of this chapter, indicated that an increase in domestic educational reform was witnessed post millennium which was spurred by the desire for economic progression and political influences from Europe (Bodroža *et al.* 2016). This focusses attention towards the influence of European trends in education on the Irish education system. Domestic research into the factors that influenced reform of the post-primary Mathematics curriculum in Ireland, attributed the propulsion of change as a bid to empower students to become citizens that are educationally prepared to contribute and partake in the “global knowledge economy” (Hall and Kirwan 2016, p.379). Similarly, further evidence of the presence of European policy rhetoric can be seen in the following quotation from the Department of the Taoiseach in 2010 which expresses the view for education at the time: “knowledge is the new currency of the innovation economy and our long-term economic success is tied inextricably to human and knowledge capital” (Department of the Taoiseach 2010, p.25). The impact of global and European trends influencing Irish educational policy is evident through these examples and invites further investigation into how these influences rear their head in the policymaking processes in Irish primary education.

2.4.1.3 The impact of globalisation

The impact of globalisation and the influences of global and European educational reform on Irish educational policy is further explored in the succeeding sections of this theme. Literature cites common features of global reforms in education including, the standardisation of education, a mindset adopted by policymakers where the ascription of standards and targets are considered synonymous with improvements in education (Sahlberg 2007). Additionally, education systems enact an increased focus on Literacy and Numeracy, in particular, using assessments from the OECD and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) as the perceived indicators for educational performance

(Sahlberg 2007). Another common feature of global educational reform is the instillation of accountability systems (Sahlberg 2007). This involves evaluation of schools and subsequent consequential measures. Undoubtedly, the true influence of the process of globalisation on a particular education system requires interrogation and research. The following headings, adapted from the global trends outlined by Auld and Morris (2012), Tobin *et al.* (2010) and Sahlberg (2007) are used to examine some of these prominent global trends in education:

- Neoliberalism
- Performativity and the Impact of International Comparison Assessments
- Accountability and New Public Management
- Evidence-based Policy and the Role of Data in Educational Policymaking
- Policy Borrowing

The examination of these prominent trends in global education is necessary in order to situate the eventual findings of this research and to ascertain the influence, if any, of these global trends on the development of educational policy in the Irish context. The next section critically analyses the trend of neoliberalism, investigating what this means in relation to the production of educational policy.

2.4.2 Neoliberalism

The concept of neoliberalism is repeatedly encountered in literature relating to global educational reform (Skerritt 2019 and Ball 1998). Therefore, neoliberalism and the associated interactions with education are investigated in this section. While literature narrates the presence of neoliberalist principles in the adoption of certain policy strategies in education systems across the globe, this section outlines the need to exercise caution in attributing changes to a neoliberalist agenda. Resultantly, this section positions the stance of this research regarding the investigation of neoliberalist tendencies in Irish education.

2.4.2.1 Neoliberalism and education

Globalisation has catalysed the spread of neoliberalism throughout a number of jurisdictions through increased competitiveness (Ball 1998). Arguably, this increased competitiveness between schools and between education systems is reflective of the “dominance of neoliberal principles” in education whereby success is measured through educational performance (Ozga 2009, p.151). Neoliberalism is defined as an approach to governance that is rationalised and

directed by “the ideologies of the market” (Ball 1998, p.122). This definition illustrates the role of the governing body, implementing the actions and constructing the conditions required to enable the country/state to be competitive in the global market. By this understanding, neoliberalism operates on the ideal whereby citizens are prepared to compete in the market and consequently, governance is influenced by market-based and business-related principles. Seemingly, this can be seen through efforts to make a location more “business-friendly” (Apple 2005, p.15). Literature captures this process as the “economisation of education” whereby market-based principles are adopted in educational governance (Spring 2015, p.23). The adoption of these market principles in education is legitimised by the intention to induce improvements to a perceived failure in the system (Boyle *et al.* 2007, p.75).

Understandably, the influence of market-based principles has a resultant impact on educational policy. This can be seen where domestic educational policies can be shaped by international trends and can seek to direct educational reform that is market-oriented and neoliberal in nature (Gillis *et al.* 2016; Ball 1998). The hallmarks of neoliberalism in educational policy are captured through increases in educational governance, competition and choice (Jessop 2007). Consequently, a “scientificity” approach to educational governance is adopted, whereby success and progression is monitored through the introduction of standards and targets and the performance of students in international educational assessments (Moles *et al.* 2019, p.55). Additionally, neoliberalism introduces privatisation into education which refers to the involvement of the private sector in the public sector (Jessop 2007). For example, this could be evidenced by private companies conducting, or funding, research for education. Neoliberalism can clearly affect educational policy and can result in changes to what is taught and indeed what is considered important to teach in a country (Skerritt 2019).

2.4.2.2 The negative effects of neoliberalism on education

Literature refers to the damaging effects that neoliberalism can have on education. The use of consumerist terminology is not a natural bedfellow with education as “schools are not businesses, parents are not consumers, and students are not products” (Skerritt 2019, p.5). Furthermore, an education system that is constantly answering to the demands of the market, places teachers in unenviable positions whereby interest in teaching and learning is replaced by cold gathering of data to account for educational improvements (Moles *et al.* 2019). Although this imagery is undoubtedly exaggerated to portray the ill-effects of neoliberalism,

nonetheless, it serves to illustrate a worrying image, particularly for a country that has always had such high regard for the teaching profession. Additionally, this image is concerning given the pivotal role that teachers play in policy implementation. As described in literature, teachers can act as both “barriers” and “agents” of change in schools (Priestley 2011, p.2). This interaction of policy with classroom practice is also known as “agents' sense-making” and is critical in the implementation of a given policy (Reimer *et al.* 2002, p.388). This further justifies the need for research into the area of educational policy development, in particular to examine the feelings of teachers in relation to current educational policymaking landscape.

Skerritt (2019) and Boyle *et al.* (2007) refer to the market-based ideologies that have swept into Irish education circles, resulting in schools being managed like businesses. This prompts the image of policymakers approaching an educational issue from a business and investment perspective, perhaps comparing educational performance with other countries. Domestic researchers maintain that neoliberalism became apparent in social and educational policy in Ireland since the 1990's (Devine *et al.* 2015). At the time, Ireland was a “fertile ground” for the growth of neoliberalism (Phelan 2007, p.5). Furthermore, it is suggested that neoliberalism has firmly gripped the Irish economic governance since the nineties (Hall and Kirwan 2016). The inviting environment for neoliberalism was copper-fastened by a combination of a reliance on investment from multinational corporations in the 1970's and the birth of neoliberal politics in the United Kingdom (Devine *et al.* 2015). The evidence of cut-backs in public expenditure, tax incentives to encourage businesses and reduction in wages and unionisation provide further evidence for the presence of neoliberalist principles (Allen 2000). It is argued that the influence of neoliberal principles on Irish education has resulted in increases in school autonomy, school self-evaluation and privatisation (Devine *et al.* 2015). Furthermore, while these changes were occurring, the “dissenting voices” to the neoliberalist movement were seen but not heard (Devine *et al.* 2015, p.31). This is compelling with regards to this research investigation as it provokes questions regarding the platforms where voices can be heard in Irish educational policymaking. However, it must be noted that one of the ‘voices’ cited by Devine *et al.* (2015) as a source of opposition to neoliberalism that was not listened to was one of the co-authors, Kathleen Lynch. While this point may be valid, it is difficult to ignore the author's potential subjectivity in the explication of this claim. While there is a growing influence of neoliberalism on Irish educational policy, literature suggests that it is “too early” to assess how these influences will affect the Irish school context (Mac Ruairc 2014, p.26).

2.4.2.3 The complex nature of investigating neoliberalism

Further research into neoliberalism disregards the perceived view of neoliberalism as an all-consuming process that pervades every aspect of society (Ong 2007; Ertas and McKnight 2019). In fact, criticism is raised at the characterisation of neoliberalism as an “economic tsunami” that is powering across continents summoning reform and changing patterns of governance (Ong 2007, p.3). Policy mobility from one location to another does not infer motivations for neoliberalism (Ball 2016). Neoliberalism is disregarded as a “standardised universal apparatus” and is captured as a “migratory technology” that can vary depending on the context in which it presents (Ong 2007, p.5). Neoliberalism is not a fixed construct and can appear in different guises which makes this concept a challenging, if not impractical, pursuit to investigate as part of this research. Furthermore, as outlined in the opening theme of this chapter, educational policymaking is a complicated process amidst an array of political, social and economic influences. While this research can certainly investigate the sources of influence on Irish educational policymaking, it would be improper to infer causal links between neoliberalism and educational reform through “conceptual stretching” (Ertas and McKnight 2019, p.234). Increased accountability measures in education cannot always be traced back to neoliberalism, in some cases, such pressure can come from policymakers and politicians who reason that such accountability measures are justified irrespective of neoliberalist views (Apple 2005, p.20). Additionally, it seems erroneous to assume that policies that aim to empower the future workforce are all neoliberalist at heart. For this investigation, the safer ground exists in identifying the influence of the economy on educational policy in Ireland rather than attributing changes to the perception of a neoliberalist agenda in Irish education. The next section explores the concept of performativity and the impact of international comparison assessments.

2.4.3 Performativity and the Impact of International Comparison Assessments

Performativity is recognised as a further trend in global educational reform (Ball 1998; Ball 2003; Auld and Morris 2016). Performativity is understood as a means of governing whereby targets and standards are employed to monitor, control and direct reform (Ball 1998). This section examines the concept of performativity, discussing how international comparison assessments are used in jurisdictions across the globe as a means of informing educational policy and the limitations that this presents.

2.4.3.1 Culture of comparison

Performativity in education measures success through student assessment results and through the ascription of pre-determined goals or targets set out by a given education system (Ball 2003). This approach to governance can be considered a “steering mechanism”, however, such steering takes place “at a distance” due to rigid accountability systems and modes of comparison (Ball 1998, p.123). Furthermore, this approach to educational governance is identified as a contributor to a culture of comparison between schools and indeed between different education systems (Martens 2007; Ozga 2009). This process can affect policy decision-making whereby educational performance acts as the metric for success and thus becomes the compass for reform. Moreover, the close monitoring of performance in education signifies the presence of market values in educational governance (Adams 2016). Performance-oriented ideals introduce increased mechanisms for monitoring and “surveillance” (Ball 2003, p.219). League tables, assessment reports and national education reviews are all considered methods of educational surveillance whereby “comparison is itself a mode of governance” (Ozga 2009, p.31). Increased transparency can invoke tension in schools due to the impression of increased measures of “scrutiny” and monitoring performance (Boyle *et al.* 2007, p.77).

While domestic educational performance can be measured through school evaluations and student assessment results, literature is unerring in the identification of international bodies, particularly the OECD in contributing to performativity (Ball 2003; Lingard and Sellar 2013; Sahlberg 2007). The OECD are considered a powerful “brand” with assessments like PISA being recognised as the “shop front” for the organisation (Grek 2009, p.27). Therefore, the OECD and their assessments can be understood as major policy drivers. While the OECD concentrate on the economic development of member states, education in respective member states is also a major focus as it is considered an indicator of economic development (Grek 2009; Auld and Morris 2016; Lingard and Sellar 2013). The OECD does not exert executive power over member states, instead a clear governance is exerted through producing comparative data and recommendations for policymaking (Auld and Morris 2016; Grek 2009).

Literature narrates an “international fixation with the best performing education systems” as a result of the production of comparative assessments (Adams 2016, p.167). The use of comparative analysis through the likes of PISA has encouraged research such as ‘Surpassing Shanghai’ which feeds the narrative of education as global competition (Lingard and Sellar 2013). This international fixation with educational performance can subsequently result in

countries adopting policy strategies that are perceived to be working in another location (Sahlberg 2007). This certainly raises questions that this research intends to investigate, particularly with regard to the influence of educational performance in other countries on the direction of domestic policymaking. International assessments, including PISA and TIMSS, contribute to a heightened emphasis on performativity, with the results shaping policy and driving educational reform (Lingard and Sellar 2013; Auld and Morris 2016). The transparency of such assessments and the availability of results and summaries on the OECD website result in governmental intervention to improve the education system and become aligned with perceived ‘best practice’ of other member states. Interestingly, Finland has been identified as a country displaying ‘best practice’, however, Finland has not conformed to the market principles of educational reform that uses international comparison assessments as indicators for success (Sahlberg 2007). Instead, there is an emphasis on teacher and school autonomy, the consensus of a shared vision for education and an absence of high-stakes accountability testing. It is worth noting the irony that the country emulated for its performance in educational assessments, itself does not succumb to the seduction of changing educational policy to achieve success in international comparison assessments. The Looking at our School policy document, referenced in Chapter One, provides a standardised approach to monitoring school performance. While the publication of this document alone cannot substantiate claims that global educational reform has shaped changes in the realm of Irish primary policymaking, this document does, however, prompt the need for inquiry into the policymaking process and the associated influences from beyond domestic borders.

2.4.3.2 The unfavourable effects of performativity in education

Dissenting voices to the concept of performativity are prevalent in educational literature (Sahlberg 2007; Bank 2012; Auld and Morris 2016; Portnoi 2016). For example, criticism is levelled at the lack of contextualisation in international comparative assessments (Sahlberg 2007). Although comparisons can be drawn between PISA scores, the education systems and curricula of members may be completely different (Adams *et al.* 2016; Bank 2012). PISA does not gather and analyse information on all contributory factors to educational performance and therefore it is difficult to infer relationships between actions and success (Gillis *et al.* 2016). Performativity-based reforms in education can result in the adoption of private sector principles which have “both a social and interpersonal dimension” that can negatively affect schools and staff (Ball 2003, p.223). One such example expressed that is referenced by a number of

researchers surrounds the manufacturing of data and the completion of actions with the sole intention of meeting performance standards (Ball 2003; Lingard 2013; Saunders 1999). This communicates the notion of measuring for measurement's sake, bringing to mind what Ball terms the great "spectacle" for inspection, whereby a performance is manufactured to satisfy a requirement (2003, p.222). Research into the area of School Self-Evaluation as a means of school improvement in the United Kingdom, identified the dangers of using School Self-Evaluation as a latent accountability and performativity measure in schools, concluding that this would merely result in "cosmetic" improvements (Saunders 1999, p.421). These claims are pertinent to this research as both suggest that performance-based policy can result in flawed implementation. Furthermore, performance-directed educational reform can result in a divergence from collaboration to "competition" within the organisation (Ball 2003, p.218). Strict standards-based reform with rigid accountability structures in schools serve to "erode teacher autonomy" and change the true meaning of teaching and learning (Priestley 2011, p.2).

This section has outlined the influence of performativity on educational policy and has also analysed the role of the OECD and the associated studies of educational achievement in contributing to trends in educational reform. The next section of this theme examines accountability in education.

2.4.4 Accountability

A further trend in global educational reform outlined in literature is the increase of accountability measures in respective education systems (Portnoi 2016; Apple 2005; Sahlberg 2007). This section outlines how accountability and governance in education are affected by trends in global educational reform.

Accountability can be understood as an adherence to laws and rules, abidance to standards of professionalism and procurement of results (Anderson 2005). An adherence to laws and rules signifies how those working within the education system are governed by laws and policies. The example of the Education Act 1998 outlined in the first theme of this literature review constitutes a piece of legislation that summons accountability in Irish education. An abidance to standards of professionalism speaks to the agreed norms and practices that exist in education. In the Irish context, the standards outlined in the Looking at Our School policy document provides an overview of the expectations in individual and collective practice for school

practitioners (Department of Education 2022). Increased mechanisms for accountability in education can be associated with the instillation of business management methodologies (Ball 1998; Lindblad and Samuelsson 2015). This is referred to in literature as New Public Management or New Managerialism which can result in heightened measures of accountability and the use of performance indicators to adjudge progression (Donnelly 2004, p.353). The discourse or values behind this type of management places an emphasis on products and outcomes and thus requires thorough accountability measures.

2.4.4.1 Accountability and educational policy

Although accountability measures in Ireland are described as “less high-stakes” than England due to the absence of high-stake consequences to Whole School Evaluations and standardised testing, further domestic research captures the ill-effects of increasing accountability measures in Irish educational policy (Conway and Murphy 2013). As alluded to in the rationale for this research in Chapter One, Moles *et al.* (2019) conducted research into the concept of teaching in Ireland. More specifically, this study explored the interactions between teachers, school management, the inspectorate and teacher education. The purposive research sample consisted of fifty-four teachers who had taken part in a part-time Masters in Education (mentoring) programme (Moles *et al.* 2019). The data was collected using an online anonymous survey to allow freedom of expression and reduce “power dynamics” between the researchers and participants (Moles *et al.* 2019, p.8). Systematic coding of the qualitative data was the approach used to analyse the data. One of the themes generated from data analysis indicated feelings of oppression amongst teachers, with “with little or no affordances for dialogue in discursive policy gaps” (Moles *et al.* 2019, p.11). This finding indicates the need for improvements in the provision of spaces for dialogue in policymaking. The relationship between teachers and other policy actors, including school management and the inspectorate was characterised as a “rigid hierarchy of power relations” (Moles *et al.* 2019, p.12). This notion of power dynamics as part of policymaking is examined in greater detail in the final theme of this chapter. While these findings provide insights from Irish teachers, the limitations of the methodology do not allow for generalising the findings due to the relatively small sample size and the fact that all participants had experience of the same Masters in Education programme.

Accountability also interacts with policymaking processes in relation to “openness” and “transparency” regarding policy decision-making (De Marchi *et al.* 2016, p.22). This is critical

to this research as it highlights the need for transparent procedures of policymaking in order to communicate the reasoning behind decision-making at different stages of the policymaking process. This research consults policy documents and interview data from participants who have experience of partaking in the policymaking process. The employment of these data-collection instruments is used in a bid to provide “transparency” in the policymaking procedures, identifying the accountability practices at play in Irish educational policymaking (De Marchi *et al.* 2016, p.22). Understandably, accountability measures are necessary in education systems across the globe, however considerations are required in the form and appearance of these measures (Apple 2005). The need for “voice” and “participation” of educational stakeholders is considered pivotal in shaping future educational accountability (Apple 2005, p.27). The third theme of this literature review, therefore, examines the ideals of stakeholder involvement, voice and participation in educational policymaking. The succeeding section of this theme explores evidence-based policy and the role of data in educational policymaking.

2.4.5 Evidence-based Policy and the Role of Data in Educational Policymaking

Evidence-based policy is identified in literature as a further trend in global educational reform (Tobin *et al.* 2010; Ozga 2009; Giest 2017; Ball 2003). Evidence-based policy is described as policy that is directed, informed and reinforced by data (Tobin *et al.* 2010). This section outlines the literature relating to evidence-based policy, describing the types of data collected and analysed in educational policymaking as well as the pitfalls of over-reliance on particular data forms.

2.4.5.1 Evidence-based policy in education

Policy that is evidence-based is legitimised by a data-based rationale (Tobin *et al.* 2010; De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Regarding education, the provision of such a rationale for a policy denotes the place for evidence-based policy in introducing educational reform (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Data can be used to add rigour, efficiency and precision to policies and that data can be used to predict the suitability and performance of a particular policy which is termed policymaking innovation (Giest 2017, p.370). Evidence that is used to inform policy should be “purpose-built” and grounded in rigorous and valid research methodologies (Tobin *et al.* 2010, p.17). Evidence can be defined as:

expert knowledge; published research; existing research; stakeholder consultations; previous policy evaluations; the Internet; outcomes from consultations; costings of policy options; output from economic and statistical modelling

(De Marchi *et al.* 2016, p.27)

Notably, the type of evidence used in policymaking can be affected by how easily this evidence can be obtained which points to the suggestion that policymakers revert to easily accessible data as the preferred source of evidence (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Policy problems are commonly presented using data that provides a “benchmark” for comparing current circumstances to those previously recorded in the country or those currently recorded in other countries (Elmore and McDonnell 1987, p.145). Educational policymaking is witnessing an apparent over-reliance on the use of student assessment outcomes to navigate a policy direction (Adams 2016). Although both qualitative and quantitative evidence may be used to aid policymaking, it appears that quantitative evidence such as assessment results are preferred as they are considered more scientifically rigorous and reliable (Tobin *et al.* 2010; De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Concerns over the sole use of evidence relying on student achievement data are expressed in literature, conveying how the simplicity of gathering this evidence can render it a preferred form of policymaking information (Brighthouse *et al.* 2018). Evidence to inform policymaking needs to be gathered from a number of sources (Luetjens and Mintrom 2016), including information relating to financial resources, political support and opposition and previous and/or related policy strategies (Elmore and McDonnell 1987). Literature suggests that “in education not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts”, as it is not possible for quantitative measurements to capture all of the nuances of education (Lynch 2007 cited in Gleeson and O’Donnabháin 2009, p.41). This raises queries with regards to Irish educational policymaking and the mechanisms by which information is gathered and analysed most frequently.

2.4.5.2 Using evidence to control policy design

The goal of evidence-based policymaking is to use data as a means of establishing “quality”, “equality” and “control” in designing policy (Tobin *et al.* 2010, p.17). By this definition, policymakers can use data to control evidence-based policy (Tobin *et al.* 2010). This is significant as control here can be interpreted as control over decision-making in the policymaking process whereby evidence is used to legitimise policy decisions and impact subsequent policy implementation. Evidence is captured as the construct that is required to “inform” the policy, however, it is the values that “drive” the policy (Brighthouse *et al.* 2018,

p.39). This claim invites questions about what informs and drives Irish educational policy. While the sentiments of a previous section on performativity would suggest that data can be used to both inform and drive educational reform, this research aims to investigate whether this appears to be the case in current Irish educational policymaking. Furthermore, the shortcomings of evidence-based suggest that information can be distorted, altered and skewed based on the subjective interpretations of data amongst those involved in policymaking (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Literature refers to the process of “policy-churning” whereby the policy space is dominated by learning from repeated unsuccessful reforms, signifying policy-based evidence rather than evidence-based policy (Jessop 2007, p.285). Different interpretations may exist amongst policy actors in relation to how evidence should be collected which can add further complexity to the policy process in outlining the values to drive the policy.

The PISA assessments that are produced by the OECD provide a database that is used by education systems, governments and policymakers to influence policy decision-making (Gillis *et al.* 2016). Resultantly, policymakers can use PISA data to legitimise the rationale for educational policy (Grek 2009; Hall and Kirwan 2016; Lingard and Sellar 2013). In fact, policymakers can choose to “use or misuse” the OECD data to legitimise educational policy (Bank 2012, p.208). This is an interesting perspective on the role of data in the creation of educational policy and connects with the work of Tobin *et al.* (2010) who suggest that policy can be pre-conceived and the data generated around the policy can be utilised as a reinforcement to buttress the policy rationale. The construction of educational policy fixated on data and numbers that enables comparison with international counterparts affirms the concept of ‘policy as numbers’ (Lingard 2011). Therefore, this research intends to examine if and how PISA assessment data is currently used in Irish primary policymaking.

2.4.5.3 Transferring research into policymaking

Evidence-informed policy supports the process of transferring research from “production” to “use”, thus informing decision-making as part of policymaking process (Iftimescu *et al.* 2019, p.1). The completion of educational research from colleges, universities and higher educational institutions can also be used to inform educational policy (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). A study was conducted in Romania to investigate the role of research in contributing to educational policymaking and the factors that influence the translation of research into policymaking (Iftimescu *et al.* 2019). The qualitative research study recruited thirteen participants,

completing “semi-structured in-depth interviews” as the means of data-collection (Iftimescu *et al.* 2019, p.5). The participants consisted of policymakers from educational bodies at the national and local levels in Romania and representatives of national institutions in the field of Romanian education such as the World Bank and the Institute of Educational Sciences (Iftimescu *et al.* 2019). Data analysis was completed using line-by-line coding under constructivist grounded theory. The findings illuminated that while policymakers universally commended the importance of research-informed policy, a clear gap exists between educational research and its use in policymaking (Iftimescu *et al.* 2019). A lack of synergy between researchers and policymakers emerged as a finding, highlighting the absence of a system to enable the effective and productive transfer of research. Barriers to this research transfer include the political and somewhat immediate nature of policy decision-making as well as a lack of funding for research projects (Iftimescu *et al.* 2019). It must be noted that these barriers have been identified by the research sample, which includes policymakers and representatives of institutions but does not include any other stakeholders or educational practitioners. Iftimescu *et al.* (2019) clarify that in order to effectively inform policy decision-making, research is required in the early stages of the policy cycle. This research invites questions in relation to the role of research in policymaking in the Irish primary education system. The role and positioning of research in policymaking processes is, therefore, examined in this research. The sources of research are also investigated to identify the primary means of research gathering that is used to inform policy decisions. It is evident that collaboration and communication is required between policymakers and research institutions (Iftimescu *et al.* 2019). This research further investigates the transfer of research into the formulation of Irish primary educational policy. The final section of this theme discusses policy borrowing in the context of global educational reform.

2.4.6 Policy Borrowing

Policy borrowing is a further trend of global educational reform (Ball 2016; Fast 2016; Ball *et al.* 2011). Policy borrowing refers to the movement of policy between different locations (Fast 2016; Ball 2016; Ball *et al.* 2011). Policy borrowing at the national level involves “borrowing and copying bits and pieces” from other countries (Ball 1998, p.5). Policy borrowing requires governing bodies to pick and choose policy strategies from other jurisdictions. Understandably, this results in similarities in the educational policies that are in operation in different locations (Adams *et al.* 2016; Donnelly 2004). Evidence from research into the procedures behind

educational policymaking in Israel, identified that policymaking was directly influenced by policy borrowing, referring to policy borrowing as “policy diffusion”, suggesting that trends in global educational reform enabled policy to ‘diffuse’ and move between countries (Fast 2016, p.59). This research intends to investigate if Irish educational policymaking is influenced by the policy practices of other countries. This section explores the definitions and claims in relation to policy borrowing that appear in research and literature. Additionally, this section also delineates the perceived causes and associated implications of policy borrowing.

2.4.6.1 The causes of policy borrowing

Policy borrowing occurs due to the structuring of policy based on what is perceived to be successful or “what works” in another location (Ball 2003, p.222). The accumulation of positive assessment results in a particular location can often cause other countries to take note of the policies that are deemed to be contributing to these positive outcomes (Auld and Morris 2016; Ball 2003; Gillis *et al.* 2016; Fast 2016; Ozga 2009). Once again, this speaks to the emphasis placed on a performative culture across international education systems. International educational assessments administered by the OECD imbue a culture of comparison in relation to educational performance, what is referred to in literature as “a club of competitive nations” (Ozga 2009, p.34). In this sense, the OECD proffers assessment data that policymakers can use to direct policy change while also taking learnings from the practices of countries attaining high-performance in the assessments. This can result in policymakers making “causal inferences”, adopting and borrowing ideas from what appears to be succeeding in other jurisdictions (Gillis *et al.* 2016, p.132). This reference to competitiveness between countries is significant as it is suggestive of the power and influence that these assessment results can hold in influencing educational policy in member states. Furthermore, literature points to the OECD as a supporter of policy borrowing as captured in a document produced by the OECD in 2013 after the PISA 2012 results entitled ‘PISA 2012 Results – What Makes Schools Successful’ which states “more countries are looking beyond their own borders for evidence of the most successful and efficient policies and practices” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2013 cited in Auld and Morris 2016, p.210). This statement signifies the influence of the OECD on education through the provision of guidance and direction to member states. While the OECD has no legal or financial control over any members, it still yields undisputable influence over international educational policy through the power of comparison and is considered to be a powerful “brand” in education (Grek 2009, p.25). This

research investigates the influential factors involved in educational policymaking in Ireland and therefore, explore the influence, if any, that is exerted from international agencies and/or organisations such as the OECD.

A further cause to policy borrowing that is identified in research and literature refers to the influence of policy networks in breathing life to the process of policy borrowing and enabling the transfer of policy strategies and ideas (Fast 2016; Ball 2016; Hall and Kirwan 2016; Ball *et al.* 2011; Moles *et al.* 2019). Policy networks are spaces that enable policy discourse and facilitate interactions between policy actors (Ball 2016). The policy actors that interact in these networks can consist of local/domestic policy actors, representatives from global organisations and global players in educational policy such as the OECD (Ball 2016). Arguably, the representation of policy actors from global institutions can contribute to the transfer of policy across country borders (Ball *et al.* 2011). Through these policy networks, new policies are developed and policy problems and proposed solutions are presented (Ball 2016; Ball *et al.* 2011). Certain “nodal actors” are recognised as pivotal to policy mobility as they link different sectors and transfer ideas (Ball 2016, p.544). This is significant for this research as it suggests that certain policy actors play crucial roles in the policymaking process. Furthermore, this finding invites consideration into how such a policy network would operate if the nodal policy actor was to withdraw participation. This raises questions with regards to Irish policymaking as to the identity and influence of ‘nodal actors’ in the formulation of Irish educational policy. Indeed, the focus of this research is to uncover the space in which Irish primary educational policy is formulated by identifying the groups and individuals involved and the mechanisms of the policy discourse that are employed.

Research into the movement of policy within and beyond the borders of the nation in the Indian Education system found that global policy actors exerted influence on educational policy with a marked increase in market-oriented ideologies (Ball 2016). Individual policy actors partaking in policy networks can be influenced by international trends and can seek to direct reform that is market-oriented and neoliberal in nature (Gillis *et al.* 2016). Notably, a limitation to research into the operation of policy networks is that policy networks are ever-evolving entities and bearing this in mind, the moment that the research is published, it is “already out of date” (Ball 2016, p.562). This is a thought-provoking recognition and signifies the ever-changing nature of policymaking, reinforcing the need for research into Irish educational policymaking in order to keep abreast with changes and evolutions in policymaking practises.

2.4.6.2 *The negative implications of policy borrowing*

Although policy borrowing is completed in an attempt to improve a perceived weakness in a given education system, the process of plagiarising policy can have negative implications. Policy borrowing can ignore and side-line the “important cultural and contextual influences” that can exist within the application of a policy within any school system (Adams *et al.* 2016, p.166). Considerations of context can often be ignored in order to package a particular policy strategy that will attend to a given problem. Additionally, the notion of transplanting what has worked in another location and expecting it to yield similar results immediately is overly simplistic (Auld and Morris 2016). This concept is referred to in literature as “policy magic” which connotes an irrational theory that the success of a policy in another locations means that it should magically work once applied in a different setting (Ball 1998, p.124). This approach to directing educational policy also places the interests of the market at the centre of reform efforts by concentrating on educational performativity and international comparison (Ball 1998; Gillis *et al.* 2016).

Clearly, policy borrowing is a prevailing practice in education systems across the globe. Therefore, caution is required in transferring policy from one location to another with considerations needed for the shape and implementation. Policy is enacted through local operating procedures, therefore due consideration to contextual factors needs to be heeded in borrowing policy from any location (Fast 2016). Additionally, deliberation and scrutiny are required when aligning success with educational performance (Adams *et al.* 2016). This expresses the understanding in a given context, it cannot be assumed that results in educational performance are solely reliant on a singular policy. Policy borrowing should see the reflection of “design principles” from a successful policy strategy from other education systems rather than the wholesale adoption of the actual policy (Adams *et al.* 2016, p.173). The various interactions and influences in the development of a given policy are investigated by tracing the policymaking process of a given policy from the articulation of the policy problem to the resultant implementation (Ball 2016). Research of this kind reveals what Ball refers to as the “paths and pipelines” through which policy is developed (2016, p.552).

In relation to the Irish context, the moves towards learning outcomes-based curricula at primary level intimate signs of policy borrowing due to the “ubiquitous” nature of this development in international curricula (Priestley 2016, p.3). Resultantly, this research wishes to further examine any other indications of policy borrowing that are present within the Irish primary

policymaking context. This section has examined the definitions and claims in relation to policy borrowing and how this appears in education systems across the globe. The alleged causes to policy borrowing were identified with reference to relevant literature. Finally, the negative implications of policy borrowing and the considerations for policymaking were outlined.

2.4.7 Conclusion

This theme of the literature review has critically analysed the research and literature in relation to global educational reform, identifying some of the prominent global trends in education. Firstly, the trend of neoliberalism in governing education systems was appraised which revealed the rise of market-oriented ideals in education. The literature in relation to performativity was then examined indicating the influence of international assessments from organisations such as the OECD in contributing to educational comparison between countries. A further global trend in education that was surveyed was the changes in accountability in educational governance and the associated implications for educational policy, teachers and schools. The increasing presence of evidence-based policy in global educational reform was also delineated which allowed for discussion on the role of evidence in the process of policymaking. Finally, the trend of policy borrowing and the associated implications in the field of education were analysed. This research uses the literature in relation to these global trends in education to investigate the influence, if any, of these trends on the process of policymaking in Irish primary education. As this theme identified the critical role of policy actors and transnational players in the development of educational policy, the next theme of the literature review examines the research and literature surrounding the role of policy actors in educational policymaking.

2.5 Policy Actors and Policymaking

The first theme of this literature review explored the meaning of policy, revealing the theories that attempt to encapsulate the policymaking process. Examination of literature indicates that policymaking requires public deliberation and legitimation which can be achieved through the participation of policy actors in the policymaking process (De Marchi *et al.* 2016, p.32). The participation of policy actors in policymaking provides a platform for policy actors to state their position on a given policy and attempt to influence policy decision-making (Davies 2004; Ball 2016). Literature and research also divulge that in influencing decisions and contributing

to policymaking, policy actors summon a range of backgrounds, understandings, values and perspectives to the policymaking process (Elmore and McDonnell 1987). This is significant to this research investigation and calls for a more extensive review into the discourse surrounding policy actors and participation in the policymaking process which navigates the direction of this final theme. Furthermore, the second theme of this literature review which outlined global trends in educational reform, clarified the critical role that policy actors can play in the evolution and transmission of trends in educational policy (Ball 2016; Gillis *et al.* 2016). Therefore, this theme analyses literature in relation to policy actors, participation of policy actors in policymaking and the dynamics of power in the processes of policy creation.

2.5.1 Policy Actors

As outlined in the opening theme of the literature review, in accordance with the terminology used by Ball (2016), this research uses the term policy actors in reference to any group and/or individual that is involved in the policymaking process.

2.5.1.1 Policy actors in education

Policy actors in education can include politicians, members of government, practitioners, stakeholders, “interest groups” and/or “scientific experts” (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.364). The use of interest groups is an interesting choice of phrase and brings to mind how the involvement of certain groups or individuals may vary depending on their vested interests in the policy at hand. Moreover, the presence of scientific experts in the policymaking process signifies the use of data, aligning with the ideals of evidence-based policy explored in the previous theme (Giest 2017). Policy actors such as “foreign consultants”, “domestic experts” and “professional societies” can also partake in policymaking processes (Bodroža *et al.* 2016, p.356). Notably, the term expert appears once again here and significantly, this research finding also points to the involvement of voices from outside domestic borders. This echoes the messages from the previous theme which identified the influence of international organisations such as the OECD on the development of educational policy and the contribution to global trends in educational reform.

Analysis on the development “a new mathematics discourse that focused on market-led education” in Irish post-primary education, captured the range of policy actors that interact with policymaking processes (Hall and Kirwan 2016, p.366). This analysis drew on a range of

policy developments leading to the changes to post-primary mathematics education in 2010 through the introduction of the Project Maths syllabus (Hall and Kirwan 2016). This depiction of policy development denoted the dynamic and politically charged nature of the interactions between a range of policy actors, including the media, the Department of Education, the Higher Education Authority, academics, the Irish Universities Association and business/industry interests. Notably, a conclusion from this analysis expresses that influential players to policymaking came from “outside education”, identifying the economic influences to policymaking (Hall and Kirwan 2016, p.388). This one policymaking example hints at the range of policy actors in operation within the Irish education system as well as the varying levels of power and influence operating within this space (Arnstein 2019).

2.5.1.2 Educational stakeholders

The clarification of policy actors outlined above identifies that policy actors can include stakeholders. Stakeholders are recognised as citizens or “agents of democracy” that bring their understandings, perspectives and values to bear through policy discourse (De Marchi *et al.* 2016, p.16).

Educational stakeholders are recognised as “individuals or groups with an interest in the success of schools” and indeed education in general (Bae and Stosich 2018, p.8). Educational stakeholders can, therefore, include pupils, parents, families, teachers, school leaders, teacher unions, professional development advisors, curriculum officials, local school boards and/or members of the inspectorate members from business organisations and other members of the public (Bae and Stosich 2018; Pont and Viennet 2017). The involvement of stakeholders in the formulation of educational policy speaks to a concept known as “consensus-seeking”, where the opinions of stakeholders are sought on a policy problem in a bid to find a solution that achieves a balance between a wide range of perspectives (De Marchi *et al.* 2016, p.16). Stakeholders are therefore viewed as participators in the policy process rather than the creators of policy, a responsibility which typically lies with the governing body of education (Anderson 2003; De Marchi *et al.* 2016; Fischer and Leifeld 2015; Bae and Stosich 2018). The need for transparency in the relationship between stakeholders and decision-making is promoted in literature, suggesting that this is critical in building and maintaining consensus (Dente 2011 cited in De Marchi *et al.* 2016). This is noteworthy in relation to this research as it calls into question the interactions between decision-makers and stakeholders in Irish educational

policymaking as well as the transparency of these interactions. This claim also speaks to the communication and feedback processes in relation to policy discourse that are fundamental in building support for a given policy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019).

Referred to as a powerful brand in education in the previous chapter, the OECD promote the involvement of stakeholders in the production of educational policy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019). An OECD report published in 2019, *Education Policy Outlook 2019: Working Together to Help Students Achieve their Potential*, encourages stakeholder involvement in educational policy as a policy priority. The report identifies the importance of strengthening coherence in education systems to develop a shared vision in member states (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019). While the involvement of stakeholders in educational policymaking in member states is acknowledged, the call for the establishment of “formal mechanisms for ongoing engagement from early on in the process” is recommended (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019, p.24). This is appended with a further recommendation to establish mechanisms that allow the “feedback” from stakeholders to be collected as part of policymaking processes (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019, p.24). The report requested member states to identify evidence of inequality in the formulation of educational policy and take measures to ameliorate this issue (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019). Notably, the report recommended the inclusion of student/pupil voice in policymaking due to the recognition of this stakeholder as one of the underrepresented in educational policymaking (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019). The engagement of stakeholders in the process of decision-making was identified as a policy priority in twenty-four OECD countries.

Research into educational policymaking in Serbia, concluded that negative impacts were observed in implementation due to a lack of stakeholder involvement in policymaking (Bodroža *et al.* 2016). While the findings of this international research were obtained using a thorough research design, it must be noted that the empirical evidence was gathered from the implementers of policy rather than the creators of policy. This connotes the limitations to this research as the results are very much from the view of practitioners and the voices of numerous participants in the policymaking process are not present. Hence, this research investigation seeks the involvement of a range of policy actors in order to provide an informed insight into

the policymaking process in Irish primary education. This study investigates the range of policy actors that operate within Irish policymaking circles, revealing the stakeholders and ‘interest groups’ involved. Additionally, this research intends to uncover the means by which policy actors communicate and uncover the ‘formal mechanisms’ that are used in Irish education.

2.5.1.3 The goals of policy actors

Policy actors all bring their own beliefs, perspectives and goals into the policymaking process which can have an influence on decision-making (Ball 2016). A critical component of the theoretical framework for this research is the characteristics of policy forums, the mechanisms by which discourse is facilitated between policy actors in policymaking (Fischer and Leifeld 2015). Policy actors operate and interact within a policy discourse space which is facilitated through multiple discursive mechanisms including the conduction of workshops, conferences and meetings (Ball 2016). Importantly, policy actors can be involved in the policy process but might not have equity in decision-making and contribution (Portnoi 2016). The sentiments of this claim are examined in greater detail in later sections of this theme which explore the concepts of participation, power and decision-making.

Policy actors partaking in policy forums can have varying goals and pursuits (Fischer and Leifeld 2015). Such goals may include some of the following:

- **Solve Policy Problems:** Policy actors are engaged in policymaking processes in a bid to find a solution to an identified issue or concern.
- **Assert Individual Policy Positions:** Some policy actors may wish to push their own policy agenda which could result in their individual gain. Once again, this relates back to the belief systems and philosophies of policy actors (Ball 2016).
- **Legitimation:** This is typically encountered when the creators of policy seek participation from policy actors for the purposes of justifying the need for the policy. An interesting statement offered by the researchers captures how in this situation, policy actors are “merely part of the game” (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.370). These sentiments resonate with some of criticisms to the partnership model in Irish education outlined in Chapter One. These criticisms labelled policymaking as a device that concealed inequality and promoted the agenda of the policy elite in Irish education (Devine *et al.* 2015).

- Visibility and Reputation: This goal refers to the recognition that accompanies participation in the formulation of policy.
- Agenda-Setting: This embodies the goal whereby the involvement of policy actors advertises the policy problem and brings this to the attention of the public.
- Reduction in Uncertainty and Learning: Engagement with policy actors allows for the transfer of ideas, opinions, insights and knowledge on the policy area.
- Networking and Trust-Building: This goal represents the intention amongst policy actors to build relationships by liaising and collaborating.

This framework is significant for this research which focuses primarily on the roles of policy actors in Irish educational policymaking. Taking the legitimisation goal as an example, this goal brings to mind questions regarding the involvement of policy actors in Irish policymaking for the purposes of justifying a policy. Therefore, this investigation seeks the insights of participants to assess whether they felt that their involvement in developing a policy was meaningful. Furthermore, the visibility and reputation goal evokes further questions on the political motivations of policy actors in the public eye advertising engagement with a certain policy development.

While the involvement of policy actors in education is widely promoted, such a range of voices can add further “complexity” in the policy process due to the addition of another source of information (Giest 2017, p.370). Additionally, the interactions of policy actors in the policymaking process can result in tension whereby groups and/or individuals may clash due to differing perspectives and beliefs (Anderson 2003). This resonates with the “contentious” nature of policymaking outlined in the opening theme (Fast 2016, p.35). In order to develop an understanding of the policymaking process, researchers need to obtain interview data from the critical players within the policymaking process which can provide substantial information and insight into the process (Anderson 2003). Correspondingly, the completion of interviews with actors involved in the policymaking process gleans insights that are not found in official reports and policy documents (Fast 2016). The above appraisals are a rationale for using interviews as a means of conducting research into the area of policy formation.

This section has explored an understanding of the term policy actors as well as exploring the role of educational stakeholders. The influence that policy actors can exert on policymaking

was discussed as well as an articulation on the goals that drive policy actors to take part in policymaking. The concept of policy discourse is discussed in the next section.

2.5.2 Policy Discourse

As outlined in the opening theme of this literature review, policy can be regarded as ‘text’ and ‘discourse’ whereby policy as text refers to the policy product that is developed and policy as discourse relates to the dialogical processes that enabled the policy to emerge (Ball 2015, p.306). This research intends to investigate the discursive processes that facilitate the production of educational policy in the Irish primary context. Therefore, this section concentrates on the literature and research pertaining to the meaning of policy discourse. Through this exploration of policy discourse, attention is given to the means by which policy discourse takes place. Furthermore, the processes of consultation in Irish educational policymaking are examined as an approach to generating policy discourse.

2.5.2.1 The rationale for policy discourse

Policy is not established in an objective environment, rather, subjective perspectives, beliefs, experiences and understandings of policy actors influence policymaking (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Interactions, discussions and “discourses” shape the development of educational policy (Bell and Stevenson 2015, p.147). In fact, it is “the discursive moments” in policymaking that enable feedback, facilitate clarification and ultimately add structure and meaning to the policy being created (Adams 2016, p.2). According to the definitions of policymaking examined in this chapter, enabling policy actors to engage in discursive processes is a key tenet of policy creation and provides an opportunity for “concerns”, opinions, “values” and ambitions to be communicated (De Marchi *et al.* 2016, p.19). Policy discourses are influenced by the values of policy actors (Bell and Stevenson 2015) as the values of policy actors are critically important in shaping policymaking (Fowler 2009; Ball 1998). The centrality of the belief systems of practitioners is a key piece in the puzzle of educational policymaking (Gleeson and O’Donnabhain 2009).

Policy actors represent a range of backgrounds, and in theory, should bring varied perspectives to the policymaking process (Ball 2016 and Elmore and McDonnell 1987). By this definition, policy discourse can open policymaking up to the sharing of diverse views and perspectives which can both enrich and complicate policymaking processes (Conway and Murphy 2013).

Literature speaks of the indisputable influence of the values of policymakers in impacting the development and progression of a policy (Elmore and McDonnell 1987). This claim is noteworthy as it hints at the privilege afforded to policymakers in a top-down system of policymaking whereby their values guide decision-making. This captures the need for research into the mechanisms by which policy actors participate in policymaking and the associated influence that policy actors hold in this process. While this research does not seek to investigate the individual values of the policy actors that are interviewed as research participants, the research does intend to investigate the reasoning behind decisions in the policymaking process. Hence, research is required to illuminate the range of interactions that take place in policymaking and the resultant effect this has on policy creation.

2.5.2.2 Policy forums

The discourse space through which the interactions of policy actors can be facilitated is referred to in literature as policy forums (Fischer and Leifeld 2015). Policy forums are used to incite policy discourse between policy actors and are described as interactions that occur regularly and have definite boundaries (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.365). This understanding marks clear separation between policy forums and “one-shot conferences” due to the repeated nature of the interactions (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.365). Policy forums are endorsed as an approach to policy decision-making that enable a range of actors to engage in and contribute to decision-making. The characteristics of policy forums, outlined as a core component in the theoretical framework for this research, can be used to investigate the characteristics of consultative processes used in policymaking (Figure 1.6). The broad range of policy forum characteristics according to Fischer and Leifeld (2015) include composition, size, organisation/leadership, decision-making mode, degree of transparency, compliance, time horizon and exclusiveness. These characteristics are used as a reference point to situate and analyse varying policymaking experiences that arise from data-gathering.

2.5.2.3 Consultation

A further term encountered in literature in relation to policy discourse is consultation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020). Consultation in education typically involves representation from a range of stakeholders including “national bodies representing school administrators and patrons, teachers’ unions, school principals, parents and students, as well as non-governmental advocacy bodies” (Organisation for Economic Co-

operation and Development 2020, p.18). The varying methods used for consultation in Irish education represent approaches to enabling policy discourse. Consultation with education stakeholders is an important element of the Irish education system (Department of Education 2024c). The methods by which the Department of Education consult with policy actors or stakeholders can vary from the commissioning of consultative groups to collaborate on a given policy to the receipt of advisory positions from educational bodies with stakeholder representation such as the NCCA. The aforementioned OECD report on Irish educational policy in 2020 explained that consultation is completed in Irish education for “most major policy developments and all those regarding curriculum and assessment” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020, p.18). This description of consultation as a form of policy discourse in Irish education invites questions regarding how decisions are made surrounding the inclusion of consultation in a policymaking timeline. Furthermore, the range of policy actors that can participate in consultation prompts investigation into the decision-making processes surrounding the selection of policy actors to partake in consultation. While the degree to which the consultation methods employed in Irish education facilitate effective policy discourse, it is important to note that this research does not confine the investigation on policy discourse to consultation processes as interactions between policy actors also take place outside the consultation space (Fischer and Leifeld 2015). The next section examines the concept of participation in policymaking.

2.5.3 Participation in Policymaking

The opening section of this theme has established the range of policy actors that can partake in the processes of policymaking. Participation in policymaking encompasses the active involvement of policy actors in all stages of policymaking processes (Arnstein 2019). This section explores the literature pertaining to the concept of participation of policy actors in policymaking processes. The benefits of meaningful participation of a range of policy actors in policymaking are surveyed as well as the negative implications associated with inadequate efforts to actively involve policy actors in decision-making.

2.5.3.1 Meaningful engagement with policy actors in educational policymaking

Educational policymaking relies on the feedback and insights generated from those at the forefront of educational practice to shape education (Apple 2005). Therefore, educational policymaking needs participation from a range of policy actors in order to allow voices to be

heard (Apple 2005). Research findings from a study in the United States of America that investigated stakeholder involvement in educational policymaking indicate that those in positions of power control the levels of stakeholder involvement in policymaking (Bae and Stosich 2018). The research was conducted through the completion of interviews with forty-two participants who were involved in the policymaking processes in their respective states and “who represented a diverse array of positions and organizations” (Bae and Stosich 2018, p.9). Documentary analysis was also completed through analysing educational policy documents. The findings indicated that the involvement of stakeholders in policymaking yielded positive results as participants felt that their insights and opinions were sought on the policy problems (Bae and Stosich 2018). An example of educational reform in California captured how the involvement of educational stakeholders resulted in progressive discourse and the processes of consultation were perceived to be balanced. The stakeholder meetings brought together a diverse range of participants including special interest groups who proffered their thoughts on the policy area. The research findings also revealed that state leaders noted the pertinence of stakeholder involvement for generating support for the policy (Bae and Stosich 2018). Based on this research, Bae and Stosich provide the following recommendations for the involvement of stakeholders in policymaking (2018, p.12):

- Engage stakeholders early in the policymaking process: Stakeholder involvement allows for a range of voices to be heard on policy issues and facilitates the “sharing of community values and concerns” (Bae and Stosich 2018, p.12). This involvement can also generate support for the policy and aid policy enactment. Engaging stakeholders early in the policymaking process also allows for influence towards decision-making. This finding also correlates with the aforementioned recommendation from the OECD to involve stakeholders in the onset of policy design (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019).
- Create structures to bring together diverse stakeholders: Inviting a diverse range of stakeholders allows for a presentation of varying opinions whereby understanding, acceptance, concessions and agreements can be forged.

While the findings of this research and the choice of data-collection instruments provide thought-provoking considerations for this research, the absence of detail relating to data analysis and quality assurance procedures weaken the validity of this research. However,

further research in Finland displayed similar findings whereby positive results were observed through the involvement of teachers and principals in educational policy development in the 1990s (Sahlberg 2007). This involvement enabled educational practitioners to see that their perspectives were valued and welcomed and this contributed to buy-in regarding educational reform (Sahlberg 2007). Clearly, consensual decision-making is central to educational policymaking in Finland where the voices of policy actors are permitted to be heard.

2.5.3.2 Reaching the voices in the school community

The use of school participation councils in Mexico is identified in literature as an effective means of involving school communities in policymaking (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019). These councils have representation from teachers, school leaders, parents, former students and union representatives (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024). The boards operate from school level to national level meaning there is a representative body for stakeholders in policy design. The benefits of involving stakeholders in policy design through mechanisms like participatory boards is evident in the communication of the policy objectives and the building of understanding and agreement surrounding the policy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019). Concomitantly, negative implications can be seen where policy actors feel they are not effectively involved in policymaking and have no ownership in decision-making (Bodroža *et al.* 2016). This can contribute to feelings of being “neglected” and “side-lined” from the policymaking process (Bodroža *et al.* 2016, p. 356). Additionally, policy actors can experience feelings of “oppression” where a lack of involvement in policymaking connotes a lack of influence (Moles *et al.* 2019, p.65). This powerful and emotive terminology demonstrates the need for participation and consultative processes in educational policymaking (Moles *et al.* 2019).

The example of involving voices from the school community in policymaking in Mexico exposes some of the shortcomings in Irish policymaking relating to the participation of policy actors. In particular, these examples demonstrate “that between the private individual level and the national level is the level of community”, a reality that has been “forgotten” in Irish policymaking (O’Connor 2014, p.195). The development of *Bringing Education Alive for our Communities on a National Scale* (BEACONS), a project being led by the Teaching Council in association with funding from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform,

demonstrates a commitment to enhance communication between the local community and the national processes of consultation (Teaching Council 2022). The establishment of structures such as BEACONS that furnish connection loops between the local community and the national policymaking processes might indeed, provide a solution to the aforementioned desire for increased policy actor participation in Irish education. Furthermore, the need to develop the mechanisms of enabling improved mechanisms for the representation of pupil/student voice in Irish education is highlighted in literature (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019). This compels the need for research into the mechanisms that are used to engage stakeholders in Irish policymaking.

The recognition of the need to enhance the reach of pupils' voices in Irish society has received greater attention since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. The subsequent formation of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, amendments to the constitution in 2012 to favour the rights of the child and more recently the publication of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making 2015-2020 mark the efforts to enable pathways for the voice of the child (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2019). Notably, the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making sets out four priority areas of action, one of which clarifies the aim of ensuring that "children and young people will have a voice in decision-making" in education (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2015, p.3). Lundy's Model of Participation is outlined as a conceptualisation of Article 12 in the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making 2015-2020 (NCCA 2019). This model presents four domains, namely, space, voice, audience and influence. According to this model, children should be afforded the space to express their voice as well as the opportunity for their voice to be listened to and acted upon appropriately. Recent developments at post-primary level certainly confirm the strides taken to achieve this goal through the updated composition of the NCCA council to include representation of the Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU) (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2022). Based on this development, this research investigates the place afforded to the voice of pupils at primary level in Ireland. While the legislation articulates the right for children to participate in decision-making, the meaningful application of this in education systems is challenging (Ring and O'Sullivan 2016). However, this is a "non-negotiable right" and education systems must "find ways" to include the voices of children in policy discussions (Ring *et al.* 2021, p.32). The meaningful inclusion of pupil voice in decision-making can benefit pupil learning and

development as well as making the concept of democracy in education visible (Ring *et al.* 2021).

2.5.3.3 Ladder of citizen participation

Citizen participation in policy decision-making reflects the democratic values of society (Arnstein 2019). As referenced in the presentation of the theoretical framework for this research, Arnstein provides a framework or “ladder” that outlines varying levels of citizen participation in decision-making and policymaking which was originally designed by the author in 1969 (2019, p.24). This ladder captures the relative levels of influence that participating citizens have in comparison with those in governance who typically hold the decision-making power and forms the third theory in the theoretical framework for this research (Figure 1.6). The rungs of the ladder from the bottom to the top include manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control (Arnstein 2019). This research, therefore, seeks to examine the participation of policy actors in Irish educational policy in order to examine how this involvement occurs and the level of decision-making influence that is associated with this involvement. In accordance with Arnstein’s reflections, it may be possible for this research to identify additional rungs of the ladder that could be added in order to encapsulate citizen participation in the Irish educational context.

2.5.3.4 Challenges to participation in policymaking

The involvement of a range of policy actors in policymaking presents challenges. Such involvement can simultaneously enhance and restrict the decision-making powers of governing bodies (Portnoi 2016). This dichotomy is notable for this research as it depicts the influence of policy actors on the policymaking process, whereby involvement can both legitimise and challenge the decisions of government. The opening section of this theme commented on the multitude and variance of policy actors that can operate within the policymaking process. However, the involvement of a range of diverse voices on a project bears similarities to the story of the Tower of Babel whereby the speaking of different languages contributes to confusion (Connor 1988). Furthermore, the involvement of a diverse array of stakeholders can interfere with the analysis and interpretation of evidence (Giest 2017). The term “complexity” is used to describe this involvement which can render mistakes and delays to the policy process (Giest 2017, p.13).

The stage at which certain policy actors are involved in the policymaking process can affect their relative influence on the policy problem (Luetjens and Mintrom 2016). Often stakeholders are involved too late in the policymaking process when the problem has already been identified and potential solutions have been shaped and proposed (Luetjens and Mintrom 2016). This aligns with the conception of structured consultation outlined by Arnstein (2019) and Connor (1988) whereby the input of stakeholders is very much controlled. Notably, participation in policymaking can be obstructed by political and financial factors such as the cost to facilitate the participation of policy actors in decision-making (Iftimescu *et al.* 2019). An unwillingness can exist amongst governing bodies to partake in consultative processes with policy actors due to the financial costs of facilitating meetings, conferences and/or workshops (Arnstein 2019). While enabling such consultative processes requires financial clout, it also consumes time, extending what Wallace (1991) refers to as the policy timeline. This research, therefore, seeks to survey the decisions that are made regarding consultation and the involvement of policy actors in the policymaking process in Irish primary education, investigating if common procedures exist for including policy actors or if the procedures alter depending on the policy problem. This section has invited questions in relation to influence and power in operation within policymaking circles, therefore, the next section examines literature in relation to power and decision-making.

2.5.4 Power in Policymaking

The terms power, influence and decision-making are present throughout research and literature pertaining to policymaking (Gaventa 2006; Portnoi 2016). Power is believed to be ever-present in human interactions, shaping the world and society at large (Gaventa 2006). By this understanding, power, can manifest in policymaking processes. The concept of ‘policy as discourse’ presents the acknowledgement that discursive processes are the foundation for policy creation (Ball 2015). Therefore, this research seeks to develop an understanding of policy discourse in a bid to provide an understanding into the functioning of power within the policy process. While policy documents are used in this research methodology for interview preparation and informative purposes, the primary focus of this research is on policy discourse and how this occurs at Irish primary level. As a result, this research does not solely focus on what is “written” in policy documents, but the processes that enabled these written words to be formulated (Ball 2015, p.311). This section discusses the interactions of power and decision-

making in the policy process. Furthermore, a framework for analysing power and influence in policymaking is examined (Gaventa 2006).

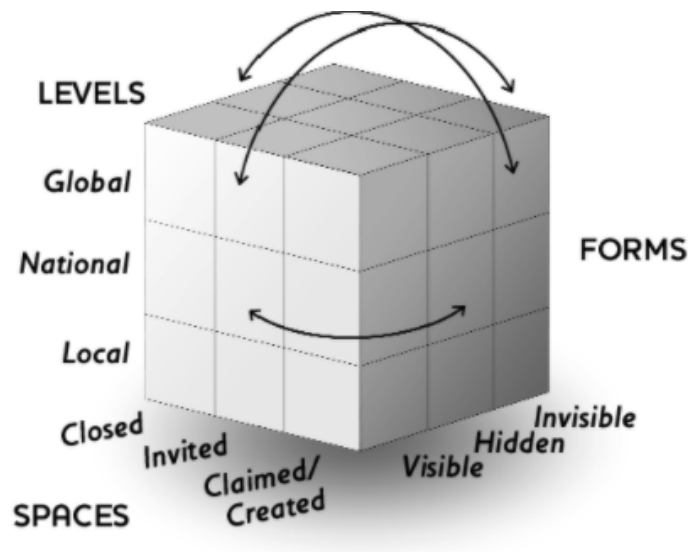
2.5.4.1 Dominant voices in policymaking

A range of policy actors can influence decision-making in the policy process and the relative power of policy actors can vary depending on the policy problem (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). The decision-making processes relating to educational policymaking are reflective of the norms and values of the government (Lingard and Rizvi 2010). In public policymaking, tensions can arise due to alternate “power differentials” amongst the policy actors involved (Portnoi 2016, p.27). In fact, the term “conflict” is used to describe policymaking discourse due to the political factors at play between policy actors (Portnoi 2016, p.25). Policymakers in positions of power can manipulate decision-making in favour of their choice through the presentation of information (Elmore and McDonnell 1987). Subscribing to this expression, it appears that only certain policy actors may be operating in what Bowe *et al.* (1992) refer to as the context of influence whereby contribution and input into decision-making is accepted. Dominant voices in the policymaking process can contribute to other voices being side-lined or silenced (Gaventa 2006; Bell and Stevenson 2015; Elmore and McDonnell 1987). This is significant to this research as it communicates the idea that certain policy actors can yield greater decision-making power on a policy problem.

2.5.4.2 Gaventa’s Power Cube

Gaventa (2006) presents a theoretical framework by which power can be understood and represented in different forms. Firstly, power can be viewed as something that is held by actors and power can also be considered in terms of “relationships and discourses” (Gaventa 2006, p.23). Although citizen participation in the development of policy is becoming more commonplace, the extent of inclusion is heavily influenced by the “power relations” that pervade these interactions (Gaventa 2006, p.23). Terms such as ‘shared approach’ and ‘partnership’ which can be used to describe these participative processes, often concealing inequalities in power and decision-making between policy actors (Gaventa 2006). In order to fully comprehend participation in policymaking, research and analysis of power relations are required. Gaventa’s power cube provides a framework for power analysis as denoted in Figure 2.2 below.

Figure 2.2 Gaventa's Power Cube



The power cube is an extension of the three dimensions of power presented by Lukes (1974), namely, decision-making, non-decision-making and shaping desires. The power cube captures the interrelationship between the forms, spaces and levels of power, each of which are discussed next.

- Spaces:** Gaventa conceptualises that the “opportunities”, “moments and “channels” where citizens can participate in policymaking and influence decision-making (Gaventa 2006, p.26). Accordingly, power typically lies with the creator of the space. It is within these spaces where power relations operate and are classified as closed, invited and claimed/created. Closed spaces refer to situations where decision-making is closed and there is no participation from citizens. The invited space represents a space whereby citizens are invited to partake in decision-making by those in power. These spaces can be singular consultation events or regular interactions. Claimed/created spaces constitute interactions that take place outside of the institutional policy domain as the spaces are ‘created’ by citizens and social actors.
- Levels:** These are the “arenas” or “places” in which interactions between policy actors occur (Gaventa 2006). Participation in policy decision-making and associated power relations can occur at global, national and local level. Consideration needs to be paid to the power relations at the global level and how this affects national and local

interactions. This reflects the content of literature and research explored in the second theme of this literature review which articulated the global trends in educational reform and pointed to the influence of transnational players in educational policy.

- **Forms/Visibility of Power:** Gaventa (2006) theorises that different forms of power can exist in the levels and spaces of decision-making. Firstly, visible power represents the tangible aspects of power in policy including the rules and operating procedures of decision-making. Secondly, hidden power relates to a type of power where control is exerted through the choice of participants who get to partake in the processes of policy decision-making. Additionally, power is hidden through the setting of the policy agenda. This research aims to provide transparency in terms of how policy actors are recruited to partake in policymaking and in terms of how the policy agenda is devised. Invisible power references an approach to decision-making that attempts to change the beliefs and perspectives of participants, this may also involve concealing information from stakeholders.

Gaventa (2006) recommends that further research be conducted into how power relations manifest in policymaking, suggesting that an increase in citizen participation can only come from generating an understanding of the power dynamics that exist within a jurisdiction.

A clear example of power outlined in the review of the Irish educational policymaking context in Chapter One was the dominance of the Catholic Church. The tentative nature of policymaking at this time was due to the dominance of the Catholic Church which created a barrier to progression (Harford and Herron 2016). The remnants of Catholic Church power remain to be witnessed, particularly as approximately 88% of primary schools are still Catholic church-owned and church-managed in a private partnership with the State who play a subsidiary role in education (Department of Education 2024). Understandably, national policymaking has progressed since the 1950s, however, this serves as an indicator to the influence that a group and/or individual policy actor can exert on the decision-making in policy development. While Gaventa's power cube does not form part of the theoretical framework for this research, the theory is used as an analytic tool for this research in order to situate the research findings. The research and literature relating to the interactions between policy actors in the Irish context are now explored through examination of the partnership model in Irish education.

2.5.5 Conclusion

This theme of the literature review has examined the research and literature relating to policy actors and the policymaking process. Firstly, this theme identified the range of policy actors that can partake in the policymaking process. This allowed for consideration into the involvement of citizens in policy decision-making which was evaluated through the citizen participation models presented by Arnstein (2019) and Connor (1978). Through examination of the citizen participation model, it is clear that this research seeks to examine the participation of policy actors in Irish educational policy in order to examine how this involvement occurs and the level of decision-making influence that is associated with this involvement. The concept of policy forums advanced by Fischer and Leifeld (2015) was also appraised in this theme. Relationally, the characteristics of policy forums presented by Fischer and Leifeld (2015) are used in this research as a means of investigating the characteristics of consultative policymaking processes. Finally, through articulation of interactions between policy actors, the concept of power was critically analysed which allowed for examination of Gaventa's Power Cube (2006).

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has delved into three interweaved themes of policy and policymaking, policymaking within the context of global educational reform and the role of policy actors. In discussing these themes, a multifaceted understanding of the complex dynamics shaping educational policy processes has emerged. Policymaking is characterised as an intricate, nuanced and complex process that interacts with an array of policy actors as well as a multitude of further influences. The influential factors affecting educational policy explored in this chapter included the influence of society, religion/ethics, the economy, politics and the media. Furthermore, the influence of transnational players in education was demonstrated through articulation of the effects of global educational reform and Europeanisation (Grek *et al.* 2009). The chapter has underlined that policymaking in education is not confined to domestic borders and international influences have an impact in various forms. Finally, the discussion on policy actors has illuminated the diverse array of policy actors that can interact with policymaking processes. The analysis of these themes has provided a theoretical framework for this research that is used to situate the research findings. Furthermore, this chapter has provided a number of considerations for the methodological structure of this research which is outlined in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the research methodology for this study is presented and discussed. Furthermore, this chapter uses relevant literature and research to support the decisions made in relation to the research methodology. The opening sections outline the research problem, the embedded questions and the research design. This allows for clarification on the research paradigm and the research design. This chapter also examines data collection, data analysis, ethical procedures and quality assurance.

3.2 Research Problem

This section provides a summary of the research problem, alluding to elements from the opening two chapters of this dissertation in order to illuminate the motivation behind the research question. More specifically, this section references some of the key contextual factors to policymaking in Irish education addressed in Chapter One, highlighting the methodological implications for this research. This section also refers to a number of key claims arising from the review of literature in the previous chapter and how this influenced the research design. The question that guided this research inquiry asked: *‘What can be learned about policymaking processes in Irish primary education based on the experiences of policy actors who have engaged in decision-making processes?’*. Crucially, this research question sought to unravel the multi-varied experiences of a range of policy actors and attempt to build a picture of how educational policy is created in the Irish primary context. Prior to further explication on the methodological structure of this research, the influences which informed the research design are examined.

The pivotal role of the Department of Education as the leading decision-makers in Irish education was highlighted in the opening chapter. In fact, the creation of educational policy on a national scale is very much governed by the Department of Education who exercise “direct” and “indirect control” over developments in the education system (Coolahan 2011, p.144). This position of power held by the Department of Education in Irish educational policymaking became a critical consideration in this research, ultimately swaying methodological considerations in relation to design and data collection. In order to develop an understanding of policymaking processes, it was clear that data would have to be gathered from individuals

working in the Department of Education with experience of engaging in policymaking. The hierarchical structure of the Department of Education also presented considerations in terms of accessing a range of individuals with varied experiences of policymaking, including ministers, members of senior management, policy officials as well as members from some of the bodies working under the aegis of the Department of Education.

The development of the partnership model in Irish education was also discussed in Chapter One and this again, had implications for the design of this study. Criticisms directed at this approach to policymaking captured latent inequalities of power in operation within the so-called partnered approach to policy construction (Harford and O’Doherty 2016; Devine *et al.* 2015; King and Nihill 2019; Gleeson 2004). Some descriptions of partnership in literature suggest elements of tokenism whereby true decision-making power rests with the typical decision-making body in the Department of Education and certain voices remain side-lined and silenced (Devine *et al.* 2015). This criticism influenced the direction of data collection, confirming the need for input from a range of policy actors in the education system. Data collection, therefore, had to balance the pursuit of information from individuals with direct decision-making experiences in education with those who interacted with policymaking processes but did not assume decision-making roles. Consequently, the research problem required a balanced and rigorous approach to sampling in order to respond to these contextual factors.

The analysis of literature also highlighted a research gap or “unexplored area” (Corbin and Strauss 2008, p.22), undoubtedly piquing “curiosity” into the complex and complicated nature of how policy is formulated in Irish primary education (Flick 2018, p.22). One quotation underlined the politically charged nature of creating policy as well as the prevalence of oscillating power dynamics through the interactions of policy actors, stating: “politics and power differentials have an impact on the conflict that is inherent in the terrain of the policymaking process” (Portnoi 2016, p.125). The reference to inherent conflict prompted questions into the presence of such tension in the ‘terrain’ of policymaking in the Irish context. In order to investigate such a question, two important lines of inquiry were required. Firstly, investigation was needed to establish the policy actors involved in policymaking processes in Irish education. Secondly, investigation needed to unearth the processes used to enable the involvement of policy actors in policymaking. It is important to clarify that due to the nature of the research question, this research focussed on the formulation rather than the

implementation of educational policy. While the implementation of educational policy involves sense-making through policy enactment at the local level by practitioners (Anderson 2003), this research instead focussed on what happens in policymaking prior to implementation.

Regrettably, a lack of policy research exists relating to the people, interactions and constructs by which educational policy is created (Ball 2016). An example of research into Irish educational policymaking explored in the previous chapter investigated the interactions that took place in the development of post-primary mathematics education (Hall and Kirwan 2016). This research revealed the complex web of policy actors and power relations that operate within the policymaking space (Hall and Kirwan 2016). The fact that this research was conducted at post-primary level accentuates the need for research into the appearance of policy discourse at primary level.

The title for this dissertation is derived from the research question that guides this entire study and focuses on:

Policy Actors' Experiences of the Decision-making Processes in Irish Primary Educational Policymaking 1990-2023: A Continuum from a 'Cosy Consensus' to a 'Fight in the Ditch'. The tagline of a 'cosy consensus' and a 'fight in the ditch' has been formed from participants' responses which are examined in greater detail in the next chapter. The next section outlines the embedded questions of this research, clarifying the nature of each question in accordance with a policy research framework (Bryman and Burgess 1994).

3.3 Embedded Questions

The embedded questions for this study are outlined below and clarify the focus and objectives for this investigation. Bryman and Burgess (1994) suggest that in policy research, the questions that are posed can belong to four broad categories, namely, contextual, diagnostic, evaluative and strategic. This theoretical lens was carefully considered in constructing the embedded questions and therefore, each embedded question is presented with reference to the aforementioned categories.

1. *How are educational policy problems presented, defined and decided at Irish primary level?*

This question aligns with the contextual and diagnostic categories of Bryman and Burgess (1994). The contextual category refers to an identification of the “form and nature” of the systems that are currently employed in educational policymaking. The diagnostic elements of this question relate to developing an understanding of “why” certain decisions are made in relation to educational policymaking and indeed, what are the factors influencing and informing these decisions (Bryman and Burgess 1994, p.174). In the previous chapter, Bowe *et al.* identified three distinct areas of policy development, namely, “the context of influence, the context of text production and the context of practice” (Bowe *et al.* 1992 p.172). This embedded question, therefore, delves into the context of influence in Irish educational policy, endeavouring to illuminate the triggers that enact the development of educational policy. Literature also pointed to the influence of assessment data garnered from international comparison assessments such as those produced by the OECD which sway decisions around policy problems and policymaking in general (Adams 2016; Lingard and Sellar 2013; Portnoi 2016; Sahlberg 2007). This propelled the need to investigate the indicators that are used to inform decisions around policy problems in Irish primary education. In effect, this embedded question concentrated on the initialisation of educational policymaking, focussing on the items that make it to the policy agenda and the justifications for such decisions (Anderson 2003).

2. *Who are the policy actors that are involved in decision-making surrounding the formulation of Irish primary educational policy?*

Once again, this question belongs to the contextual and diagnostic categories (Bryman and Burgess 1994). From a contextual perspective, this question sought to identify the participants involved in educational policymaking in Ireland. The diagnostic aspect of this question concentrated on the ‘why’, ascertaining the rationale behind the inclusion of such policy actors in the Irish context. The use of the term ‘policy actors’ in the question refers to any individual or group that interacts with the processes by which educational policy is created (Ball 2016). According to a report published on behalf of the OECD, potential stakeholders in policy design may include teachers, principals, professional development advisors, curriculum officials, parents, local school boards and/or members of the inspectorate (Pont and Viennet 2017). In a similar vein, this research aimed to construct a list of the policy actors that are involved in Irish educational policymaking processes. The previous chapter discussed how reform in education has introduced a number of different agencies and organisations to the education arena (Ozga

2009). The mark of “transnational players” on educational policy can be seen through the involvement of agencies such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the OECD (Ball *et al.* 2011, p.214). In fact, contemporary educational literature overwhelmingly signals the position of strength afforded to the OECD in influencing global educational policy (Grek 2009; Harford and O’Doherty 2016; Lingard 2013). Therefore, this question aimed to reveal the prominent actors, groups and/or agencies involved in Irish educational policymaking, ascertaining if such international organisations are in fact critical policy actors in the formulation of educational policy in Ireland.

3. What mechanisms exist to permit discourse in the decision-making surrounding the formulation of Irish primary educational policy?

In this question, policy discourse refers to the interactions that take place between policy actors as part of informing educational policy. While this question concentrated on the contextual aspects of facilitating educational policy discourse, there was also an evaluative element to this embedded question. An evaluative question in policy research involves “appraising the effectiveness of what exists” (Bryman and Burgess 1994, p.174). Therefore, this question sought to adduce the factors that successfully promote balanced and meaningful discourse in educational policymaking. Relatedly, this question also sought to understand the factors that serve to impede and undermine policy discourse within the current policymaking procedures. Literature indicates that policy research can too often be pre-occupied with “policy as text” rather than “policy as discourse” (Ball 2015, p.306). Policy as text is embodied through policy documents and legislation, however, such text is created as a result of policy discourse, the process that facilitates the articulation of policy (Ball 2015). In reference to the Irish context, the partnership model espouses the sentiments of policy discourse, a construct that can be traced back to social and economic developments in the 1980s (Harford and O’Doherty 2016, p.39). The nature of this doctrine of partnership boasts an “inclusive, consultative and democratic approach to policy development” (Harford and O’Doherty 2016, p.41). This research aimed to uncover how this partnership is manifested in policymaking processes. Furthermore, this question concentrated on the “operating procedures” and interactions that occur in the process of policy discourse in Irish primary education (Orland cited in Plank *et al.* 2009, p.114).

4. *How could the mechanisms for decision-making in Irish primary educational policy formulation be improved?*

This fourth embedded question is classified as strategic as it aims to add “new theories, policies, plans or actions” to the policy formulation field (Bryman and Burgess 1994, p.174). The gap in research into educational policymaking at primary level in Ireland, as evidenced in the opening chapters of this dissertation, provides a strong rationale for the inclusion of this embedded question. Rolfe *et al.* (2001) present a model for reflection that hinges on three simple questions: *What? So what? Now what?* In essence, the first two questions in this reflective model are satisfied by the first three embedded questions which target the acquisition of information on the research problem, focussing on the processes of policy initialisation, the identification of policy actors and the mechanisms that permit policy discourse. The third and crucial element to the reflective model asks ‘*now what?*’ which signals the need for the fourth embedded question to use the information obtained by the first three embedded questions to provide conclusions and recommendations on improvements that are required in Irish educational policymaking procedures. In their research into the development of educational policy, Bell and Stevenson (2015) queried the balance of power in the decisions made around educational policy. Some of the questions that structured their inquiry focussed on the “dominant voices” and the “side-lined” voices in educational policy development, aligning with the intentions of this research (Bell and Stevenson 2015, p.146). Interestingly, Devine *et al.* describe partnership and consultation in educational policy development as a “cloak” that can be used to provide the appearance of collaboration and ultimately conceal inequality in decision-making (2015, p.7). This research aimed to investigate the manner in which voices are heard in the policymaking process and evaluate if and how improvements could be made to facilitate policy discourse.

3.4 Research Paradigm

Following the articulation of the research problem and the embedded questions, this section delineates the paradigm which framed this research inquiry. Firstly, the ontology and epistemology are respectively outlined, leading towards a justification for the selection of the social constructivism paradigm for research into the intricate and complicated topic of policymaking (Bell and Stevenson 2015; Anderson 2003; Hall and Kirwan 2016).

The research paradigm is expressed as the “basic set of beliefs” that constitutes the direction, organisation and deployment of the research undertakings (Guba 1990, p.27). The research

purpose must act as “the guiding principle” in establishing the research paradigm (Cohen *et al.* 2007, p.3). Similarly, the research paradigm hinges on the beliefs and views of the researcher (Creswell 2006). Therefore, it is essential to share the ontology and epistemology of the researcher which acted as the bedrock for the paradigm of this research. Corbin and Strauss describe ontology as a person’s views on “the nature of the world” that they wish to study (2008, p.5). These views innately shape the methodology chosen by the researcher (Corbin and Strauss 2008). From an ontological standpoint, the researcher views the world as a busy, ever-changing and complex place. Additionally, the researcher believes that such complexity means that no single reality can exist and instead, the nature of the world is formed from “multiple socially constructed realities” (McMillan and Schumacher 2014, p.14). Consequently, the methodology for this research had to be flexible in order to provide understanding on the complex phenomenon of policymaking, accounting for the different experiences and realities of the participants in this research (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

Epistemology concerns the production and acquisition of knowledge (Flick 2018). The epistemology of the researcher attests that the world is a complex site for knowledge acquisition, whereby “empirical knowledge” is gained through individual experience (Corbin and Strauss 2008, p.viii). Aligning with the description provided by Creswell, it is the assertion of the researcher that meaning, understanding and insight are generated from experience (Creswell 2006). Therefore, this research needed to seek out individuals with a range of different experiences in order to contribute knowledge and understanding to the field. Crucially, the research design had to allow a space for participants to recount their experiences of policymaking in the Irish primary education context and thus permit empirical knowledge on the research area to emerge.

As a teacher, the researcher experienced the challenge of attempting to understand and enact policy on an individual basis in the classroom. The experience of managing teaching and learning while also juggling policy priorities challenged the researcher’s view that learning can always occur through independent experience. Instead, the researcher learned of the importance of communication with other colleagues in relation to managing policy as a core aspect of school-life. In working as a facilitator for the support services in education, the researcher had experiences of witnessing the sense-making that is required in policy implementation. It is the belief of the researcher that such sense-making requires collaboration and meaningful discussion in schools in order to bring a policy to life. These experiences have

undoubtedly shaped the research paradigm which communicates that learning takes place through a combination of experience and meaningful discourse with others. While the researcher has had experience of policy implementation and facilitating sense-making in policy, the pursuit of knowledge around the research topic is primarily driven by the lack of any policymaking experience at national level.

In keeping with the ontology and epistemology of the researcher, the social constructivism paradigm was employed in this research. The social constructivism paradigm operates on the conceptualisation that the researcher acquires understanding through the varied perspectives of the research participants (Cohen *et al.* 2007; Leedy and Ormrod 2005). The choice of the word varied here is important and speaks to the need for a diverse representation of policy actors in the research sample. A fundamental position presented through this paradigm is that understanding is forged through interaction with others, hence, the adoption of this paradigm sought to gain understanding of educational policymaking through discourse with participants who had varying experiences within the policymaking space. Importantly, social constructivist research examines the “processes of interaction among individuals”, which is a crucial facet of this investigation given that interactions are fundamental in policy discourse (Creswell 2006, p.21). The term “constructivist” operationalises the subjective nature of this paradigm, capturing the integral role of the researcher in assembling, interpreting and presenting the research data (Charmaz 2014, p.14). Thus, the researcher aimed to interpret meaning from the views of others, in line with the researcher’s ontological views. Boyland explains that social constructivist research by nature has implications for eventual research findings due to the lack of universal interpretations of the same phenomenon:

As individuals live in the world of their personal reality each interprets that reality in their own way leading the researcher towards building a diverse and complex socially constructed landscape that profiles the collective experience in terms of individual knowledge, actions and beliefs, and personal experience: without any sense of universality (2019, p.30).

Accordingly, this research recognised that the intricate nature of this research problem, coupled with the need for diversity in terms of research participants meant that the research findings would be varied, rich and representative. The research problem in question required the collection of data from participants with alternative views on the same reality in a bid to tell

the story of educational policymaking processes from multiple perspectives. Following on from the discussion on the research paradigm, the next section outlines the research design.

3.5 Research Design

The social constructivist paradigm of this research permitted the employment of a qualitative research design combined with the application of constructivist grounded theory. In this section, a rationale for a qualitative research design is provided and a description and justification for the employment of constructivist grounded theory is also outlined.

3.5.1 Qualitative Research Design

This section justifies the selection of a qualitative research design for this investigation. Firstly, clarification of the research paradigm has identified the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the researcher which capture the complexity of the world in which the research phenomenon operates. The aforementioned claims of Hall and Kirwan (2016) depict that such intricacy and complexity is equally evident in the world of educational policymaking. This research topic required a research design that facilitated insight into such complexity, hence the use of qualitative research which has the potential to provide description, detail and understanding on a complex phenomenon (Creswell 2006; Huberman *et al.* 2014).

Qualitative research was used in order to develop a theory which, in this case, equated to building a theory on the mechanisms of decision-making in Irish primary educational policy formulation (Creswell 2006, p.40). As stated, in the outset of this dissertation, this research aimed to inform the policymaking space. This suited the choice of qualitative research as research of this type enables the exploration of previously unconceived insights which can be used to inform the policy process (Sadler 1985 cited in Plank *et al.* 2009). The qualitative design enabled rich and varied insight into the contextual factors of educational policymaking in Ireland. Literature alludes to the shortcomings of quantitative research in illuminating the contextual factors at play with regards to educational policy (Tobin *et al.* 2010). Furthermore, qualitative research was conducted in a bid to glean the perspectives of policy actors that could not be sourced in official reports and policy documents (Fast 2016; Creswell 2006; Huberman *et al.* 2014).

This research aimed to provide “enlightenment” on the mechanisms of educational policymaking in Ireland. Therefore, it was essential that the research methodology was designed to enable the collection of meaningful and relevant data (Lingard 2013, pp. 113-119). Qualitative inquiry seeks “rich insight” into how participants make sense of their reality (Flick 2018, p.x). Qualitative research also concentrates on the lived realities of participants and crucially enables the collection of data that accounts for context (Flick 2018, p.xi; Huberman *et al.* 2014, p.9). Essentially, a qualitative research design provided a structure that facilitated insight into educational policymaking in Ireland by listening to participants who had experience of this phenomenon. This research focused not only on the prominent voices in policymaking but also provided a space for discussion on the marginalised voices from the decision-making processes in policy formulation (Creswell 2006).

Finally, a qualitative research design was selected due to the “flexibility” that it afforded in terms of data collection (Huberman *et al.* 2014, p.11). Corbin and Strauss outline the range of data collection tools that can be used as part of qualitative research including interviews, observations, newspapers and documents (2008, p.27). The range of data collection instruments used in this research proved invaluable in contributing to the rigour and validity of the research through enabling the triangulation of data.

3.5.2 Constructivist Grounded Theory

In line with the qualitative nature of this research, constructivist grounded theory was used to structure the investigation. More specifically, the constructivist grounded theory method developed by Charmaz (2014) was adopted for the purposes of this research. This section examines the concept of grounded theory, noting another research method that was considered and disregarded. Additionally, the origins and development of grounded theory are appraised and the rationale for applying the constructivist grounded theory developed by Charmaz to this research is also articulated.

Grounded theory, originally developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967, is described as a qualitative research method where the researcher develops a description or theory of a social phenomenon (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Creswell 2006). Bryman and Burgess (1994) detail the integral role of the researcher in grounded theory through the completion of iterative cycles of gathering and interpreting data. Charmaz recognises that although different

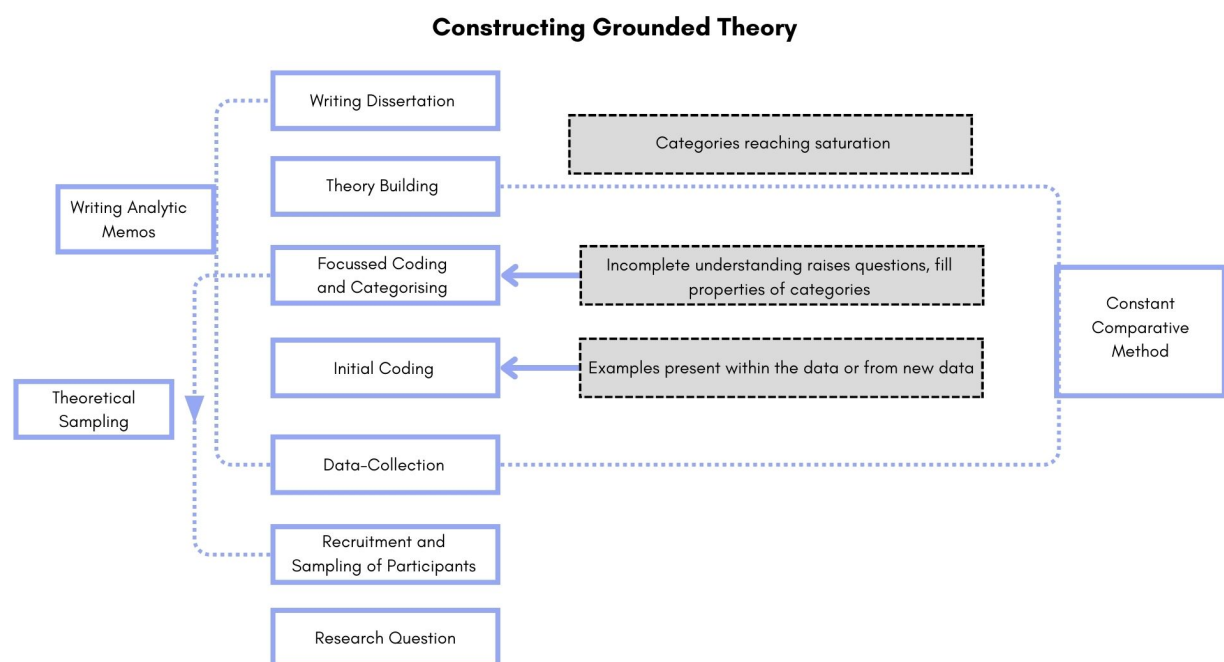
versions of grounded theory exist, in general, grounded theory uses “inductive logic” and “rigorous comparative analysis” in order to develop theories and deepen understanding of the research problem (2014, pp.14-15). The use of grounded theory is promoted in order to provide an “explanation” on the research problem and thus develop a theory that emanates from data (Flick 2018, p.14). As discussed, the research and embedded questions contain strategic elements, whereby the research aims to add “new theories” and understanding to the processes of educational policymaking (Bryman and Burgess 1994, p.174). Hence, the choice of research design aligned with the aims of the research questions and sought to develop a theory or understanding of the mechanisms by which decisions are made regarding educational policy. Phenomenology was considered as an approach that would enable close scrutiny of the research problem (Hays and Singh 2012; Flowers *et al.* 2009). However, Creswell explains that whilst phenomenology permits the explanation of experience from participants, grounded theory “moves a step beyond description” by generating a theory (2006, pp.62-63).

Grounded theory has been adapted and altered on a number of occasions since its inception which has contributed to at least five different versions (Flick 2018). These versions include adaptations to grounded theory by Strauss, Glaser, Charmaz and Clarke respectively. Flick counsels that researchers can choose the grounded theory version that suits their research question, adding that the differing philosophies of these versions should be carefully considered as part of this decision (2018). Constructivist grounded theory is the version of grounded theory that was chosen for this research due to the alignment of the social constructivist paradigm with the underlying philosophies of constructivist grounded theory. Similar to the aforementioned claims of Bryman and Burgess (1994), Charmaz also recognises the central role of the researcher in grounded theory, however, a significant divergence of constructivist grounded theory is the emphasis placed on “the subjectivity of the researcher’s involvement in the construction and interpretation of the data” and how this must be acknowledged reflexively throughout the research inquiry (Charmaz 2014, p.14). As Flick aptly explains, there is a distinction between discovery and construction whereby “researchers do not simply find insights in the field but actively search for them” (2018, p.11). The employment of constructivist grounded theory provided clear guidelines to ensure reflexivity in this research which proved essential in generating valid and reliable findings.

Grounded theory presents definite systematic procedures for the completion of research (Creswell 2006), however, constructivist grounded theory provides flexible, non-prescriptive

guidelines and strategies (Charmaz 2014, p.3). Charmaz (2014) contends that constructivist grounded theory is not a linear process as data collection, researcher reflection and data analysis occur concurrently. A visual representation of the constructivist grounded theory research design is shown in Figure 3.1. While this visual representation has been created by the researcher, it is entirely based off the content and diagrams presented by Charmaz (2014). This figure captures the inter-connected nature of data collection, data analysis and reflective measures in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014).

Figure 3.1: Visual Representation of Constructivist Grounded Theory Research Design



In general, the stages of constructivist grounded theory can be understood by the seven blue blocks arranged in a vertical column in Figure 3.1, namely, research question, recruitment and sampling, data collection, initial coding, focussed coding, theory building and writing the dissertation. However, as shown in this figure, connections, and expansions on certain stages are also required to fully comprehend this research method. Constructivist grounded theory begins with the research question, which by its nature dictates the recruitment of participants. This leads to data collection and subsequent data analysis measures such as initial and focussed coding. Notably, an arrow is shown to connect focussed coding and categorising back to the recruitment stage. This connection denotes the use of theoretical sampling, an approach to sampling whereby the selection of research participants is guided by the information gleaned from early stages of data analysis. Another blue bracket is shown on the left of the figure to

indicate that analytic memos are noted by the researcher once data collection begins and this continues until the dissertation has been written. The grey boxes on the right of the figure denote the guidelines for data analysis using the constant comparative method. Once the categories from coding reach saturation, the theory is constructed and the research is written. While this provides a brief summary on the stages of constructivist grounded theory, further explanation is provided in the succeeding sections on data collection and data analysis.

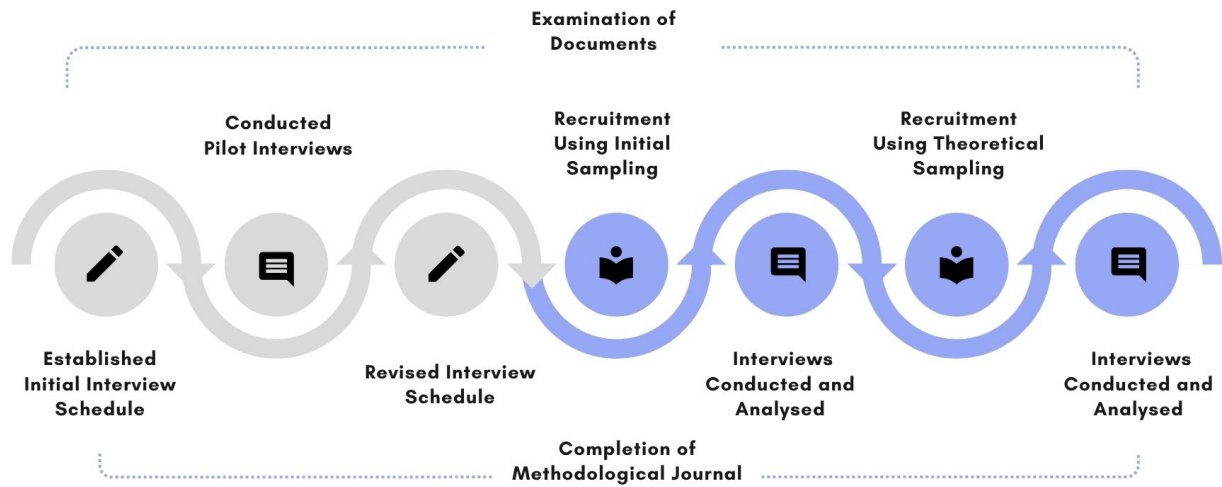
3.6 Data Collection

This section describes the details pertaining to data collection in this research. Firstly, an overview of data collection is provided with reference to the timeline and the data collection instruments used in this research. Subsequently, an explanation is proffered on the data management procedures in this study.

3.6.1 Data Collection Overview

A variety of data collection instruments can be employed for the purposes of qualitative research (Charmaz 2014; Corbin and Strauss 2008). Flick (2018) proposes that in constructivist grounded theory, the research problem dictates the data collection instruments that are required. This research problem sought understanding of the mechanisms surrounding decision-making in Irish primary educational policymaking. Therefore, the data needed to provide information on the research question and embedded questions. This required information to be gathered from individuals with experience of policymaking in the Irish primary context. The aforementioned lack of domestic research on educational policymaking ruled out the sole reliance on research by documentary analysis (Fischer 2006). Resultantly, the data was collected through the use of interviews, documents and a methodological journal. Figure 3.2 displays the data collection timeline which has been divided into two main stages, the preparatory stage and the operative stage. The steps of the preparatory stage are highlighted in grey and the steps of the operative stage are depicted in blue.

Figure 3.2: Data Collection Overview



As illustrated in Figure 3.2, the preparatory work in advance of data-gathering involved the development of an interview schedule, the completion of pilot interviews and the revision of the interview schedule. This preparatory stage began in February 2021 and concluded in April 2021. Once the interview schedule had been revised, the operative stage commenced in April 2021 through the initiation of recruitment using initial sampling. This stage witnessed the recruitment of further participants using theoretical sampling and the eventual completion of data collection and data analysis in December 2022. The operative phase took considerably longer than originally anticipated due to the nuanced nature of recruitment for this research topic. Furthermore, the operative stage took place during the Covid19 pandemic which added complications in terms of availability of participants and cancelling/postponing of interviews. In alignment with the research paradigm, data analysis was conducted at the same time as data collection and this also extended the period of data collection. Once data collection had concluded, a final process of data analysis was completed to build the theory on policymaking processes in Irish primary education. The examination of policy documents was completed for the entirety of the preparatory and operative stages. Similarly, the use of a methodological journal was employed for the duration of this research. Each data collection instrument is examined respectively in the succeeding sections.

3.6.2 Interviews

Charmaz (2014) proposes the use of interviews in grounded theory as a means of providing illumination on the research problem. This research adopted intensive interviewing as a means of collecting qualitative data (Charmaz 2014). Intensive interviewing is a “gently guided

conversation that explores a person’s substantial experience with the research topic” (Charmaz 2014, p.56). This type of interview seeks the recruitment of participants who have lived experience of the research topic. Intensive interviewing involved asking questions of an open-ended nature in order to acquire comprehensive insights and meaningfully reveal the thoughts and reflections of participants (Charmaz 2014). Examples of open-ended questions used in this research are listed in the sample interview schedule (Appendix G).

The open-ended nature of intensive interviewing gave the researcher freedom to inquire about “unanticipated areas of inquiry” that arose in the field (Charmaz 2014, p.56). Furthermore, the flexibility of intensive interviewing allowed for interaction between the researcher and interviewee (Charmaz 2014). This flexibility was particularly pertinent in this research given the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter One which aimed to capture a range of policymaking experiences and differing levels of engagement, participation and influence (Anderson 2003; Fischer and Leifeld 2015; Arnstein 2019). In essence, the interviewer was attempting to understand the topic while also getting an insight into the experience of the interviewee. Therefore, spoken words, gestures, facial expressions, and conveyed and implicit emotions were all part of the interpretation of intensive interviewing (Charmaz 2014). The methodological journal, which is discussed in the next section, was a critical instrument in recording verbal and non-verbal communication. Furthermore, the use of the journal for continuous reflection throughout data-gathering enabled the researcher to refine the skills of interviewing and reflect on effective approaches used to facilitate rich discussion. This approach to completing interviews balanced structure with an open-ended nature that suited the purposes of this research. While it was originally anticipated that the interviews would be conducted in-person, the completion of research during the Covid-19 pandemic altered this plan. Instead, the interviews were conducted using Zoom.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) capture the intricacies and skills required in interviewing, therefore, pilot or “practice interviews” were completed in preparation for intensive interviews (Charmaz 2014, p.60). Prior to this, an initial interview schedule was devised based on a comprehensive analysis of literature pertaining to educational policymaking. Subsequently, two pilot interviews were completed with one male participant and one female participant who both had experience of engaging in policymaking in Irish education. The interview schedule was edited and revised based on the reflections and analysis from the pilot interviews (Charmaz 2014; Corbin and Strauss 2008). One such edit included the addition of a brief introduction to the

research at the beginning of the interview, prior to asking any questions. This was done to clarify that the focus of the research was on national educational policymaking as one participant in the pilot interview consistently referred to examples of implementation challenges. An additional change was made to a question that asked: *what works well in policymaking and how can policymaking processes be improved?* Although this question is core to this research, the manner in which it was worded was abrupt and general. The question was, therefore, amended to focus the participant's answer on their own experiences: *As you look back on your experiences, what have you learned about the policymaking process, what works well and what could be improved?*. Further examples of questions that were used in the finalised version of the interview schedule included: *Could you tell me about your experiences of being involved in educational policymaking? What do you consider to be some of the influences that shape educational policy at primary level?* A sample interview schedule from this research can be accessed in Appendix G.

While flexibility was afforded through the interview schedule, rigid consistency was maintained in preparing for the interviews, constructing the interview guide and conducting the interviews (Charmaz 2014). A clarification of the measures taken in these three stages is now outlined.

Preparing for the Interview: This stage required the researcher to become knowledgeable on the research area. In making contact with the participants about taking part in the interviews, some participants made reference to specific policymaking experiences that they would like to discuss. Therefore, it was incumbent on the researcher to become familiar with the educational policy documents that corresponded to interviewee experiences of policymaking as this enabled informed, “current” and “conversant” interactions (Charmaz 2014, p.59). Furthermore, the completion of a literature review on policymaking combined with an analysis of the policymaking context in Irish education in the opening chapters aided the researcher in preparing for data collection. These measures were an important pre-requisite to intensive interviews in order to ensure that the appropriate language and terminology was used in the field. This terminology was also used to form some of the interview questions (Charmaz 2014).

Constructing the Interview Guide: A rationale for the use of intensive interviewing is the flexibility that the interview guide affords the researcher (Charmaz 2014; Flick 2018). Intensive interviewing recognises the interview guide as a “flexible tool to revise” with

experience (Charmaz 2014, p.62). Therefore, the researcher learned from the pilot interviews and indeed every subsequent interview in the field and adapted the interview guide accordingly. The interview guide provided cues and direction to the researcher in facilitating discussion and probing on the research topic. In constructing the questions, the theoretical framework was used to ensure that questions would provide information relating to policymaking procedures, the facilitation of policy discourse and the associated levels of participation of policy actors (Anderson 2003; Fischer and Leifeld 2015; Arnstein 2019). The questions were open-ended in nature, enabling the interviewee to share their experience and also reveal insights into the research problem. The timing of certain questions was important in this research, therefore, initial, intermediate and ending questions were used (Charmaz 2014, pp.66-67). The initial questions eased participants into the interview while the intermediate questions enabled the interviewer to dig deeper into the research problem. The ending questions were framed to allow participants to reflect on their experiences, supplement any preceding responses and provide insights into potential improvements required in policymaking processes (Appendix G).

Conducting the Interview: While an intensive interview might be characterised as conversational, the nature of this type of interview means that difficult questions may be asked that would not arise in an everyday discussion (Charmaz 2014, p.68). Consequently, respect and sensitivity towards the interviewee were inherent to this interview style (Charmaz 2014 and Flick 2018). The interviewer used “observational and social skills” and subsequently controlled the flow and pace of the interview (Charmaz 2014, p.69). The interviewer referred to the interview guide but also improvised and sought further information or clarification on statements from the interviewee. Rubin and Rubin contend that “richness is evoked by encouraging the interviewee to elaborate” and deliver the desired “detailed answers” (2005, p.134). This flexibility in approach to interviewing enabled this research to uncover insights into the mechanisms of educational policy formulation and describe the associated processes of policy discourse (Ball 2015). Interview summaries were also shared with participants as part of member-checking in order to ensure the reliability of the data (Guba and Lincoln 1985).

It is important to note that the use of interviews formed the predominant method of data collection in this research. While the use of a methodological journal and the use of documents are examined in the next sections, greater detail has been afforded to interviews in this chapter due to the prominence of this data collection method in this research.

3.6.3 Methodological Journal

A methodological journal was used in this investigation as it is an integral tool in constructivist grounded theory research (Charmaz 2014). As indicated in Figure 3.2, the methodological journal was used for the duration of data collection and data analysis. This data collection instrument was pivotal in this research for a number of reasons. Firstly, the methodological journal provided a structured space for researcher reflections during the preparatory and operative stages of data collection (Figure 3.2). In particular, the methodological journal dovetailed with the completion of interviews as reflections were completed before and after each interview and notes were also documented in the journal during interviews. Sample reflections from the methodological journal are captured in Table 3.1. Additionally, Appendix H depicts the journal prompts used for reflection at various stages of this research.

Table 3.1: Sample Reflections from the Methodological Journal

<p>Pilot Interview 1</p> <p><i>Post-Interview Reflection</i></p>	<p><i>At the beginning of the interview, the participant did not fully understand that the focus for this research was on policymaking at the national level and how this affects schools rather than policymaking at the school level. Amendments will be needed to the communication in advance of the interview in addition to changes to the introduction to the interview before asking any questions to participants. While the questions were open-ended and did yield insight, amendments will be needed to the phrasing of the initial questions for participants who may have had multiple experiences of policymaking.</i></p>
<p>Participant E Interview</p> <p><i>Pre-Interview Reflection</i></p>	<p><i>I am looking forward to investigating the similarities and/or differences in responses between participants in the initial sample and the theoretical sample. In this interview, I am keen to further examine the different sources of influence that can interact with decision-making in educational policymaking at Irish primary level. Based on the reflections from the last interview, I am conscious that in my role as interviewer, I need to provide adequate time to the interviewee to fully respond to a question even if this means leaving brief silences before moving on with a new question.</i></p>
<p>Journal Entry During Data Analysis</p> <p><i>Analytic Memo</i></p>	<p><i>A common thread across the first four interviews is the emphasis on the role of the Irish National Teacher’s Organisation (INTO) in the process of policymaking. Although reference to wide consultation is made in the interviews, a commonality is present in the inference to the INTO as a key player and indeed a strong player. This will be investigated through further interviews and also through recruiting INTO members that have experience of involvement in educational policymaking.</i></p>

The methodological journal was also critical in recording researcher reflexivity during the investigation (Finlay 2002). In line with the social constructivist paradigm for this research, Corbin and Strauss (2008) indicate the integral role held by the researcher in research of this nature. This recognition of researcher influence is also a critical component of constructivist grounded theory research (Charmaz 2014). Finlay (2002) promotes reflexivity as a method of acknowledging, evaluating and monitoring the researcher's role in the investigation. Therefore, the methodological journal was incorporated throughout the research study as a means of documenting researcher reflexivity (Engin 2011; Saldaña 2016) and observing researcher insights, thoughts and reflections (Briggs and Coleman 2007). Finally, the methodological journal was used to document analytic memos as a fundamental component of constructivist grounded theory research (Charmaz 2014). As indicated in Figure 3.1, analytic memos were recorded from the beginning of data collection until the eventual writing of the dissertation. Table 3.1 provides a sample journal entry containing an extract from an analytic memo, an explanation on the construction of analytic memos is provided in the data analysis section of this chapter.

3.6.4 Documents

Documents were also used as a method of data collection for this research. Flick endorses the use of documents in grounded theory research as a source of "rich data" (2018, p.38). A further rationale to the inclusion of this data collection method in this research was referenced in Chapter Two whereby a research investigation on educational policy used documents as a key source of information, triangulating this data with interview data from policy actors (Grek 2009). Charmaz states that documents for qualitative research can embody a range of forms including, photographs, policy documents, newspaper articles and webpages (2014, p.45). Scott (1990) recommends that documents should be chosen for research based on "credibility", "authenticity", "representativeness" and "meaning" (1990, p.6).

It is important to note that the use of documents in this research did not constitute the use of documentary analysis. Instead, a range of documents were examined in interview preparation, in situating research findings and in establishing conclusions and recommendations. For the purposes of this research, both elicited and extant documents were analysed (Charmaz 2014). Elicited documents are materials that are produced for the purposes of the research such as reflections, notes or journals (Flick 2018 and Charmaz 2014). A methodological journal was

the primary elicited document that was used in this research as a means of documenting reflections and analytic memos (Charmaz 2014). Extant documents are materials used in research which are not created for the purposes of the research in question (Flick 2018; Charmaz 2014). A range of extant documents was analysed for the purposes of this research. Firstly, government publications were analysed including legislation, circulars and guidelines published from the Department of Education. The webpage of the Department of Education was also analysed as well as newspaper articles relevant to the realm of educational policy. The analysis of relevant policy documents informed the researcher in preparing for interviews and also allowed for comparative analysis between documents and the interview data (Charmaz 2014). The next section provides an overview of the research participants and the approaches to sampling.

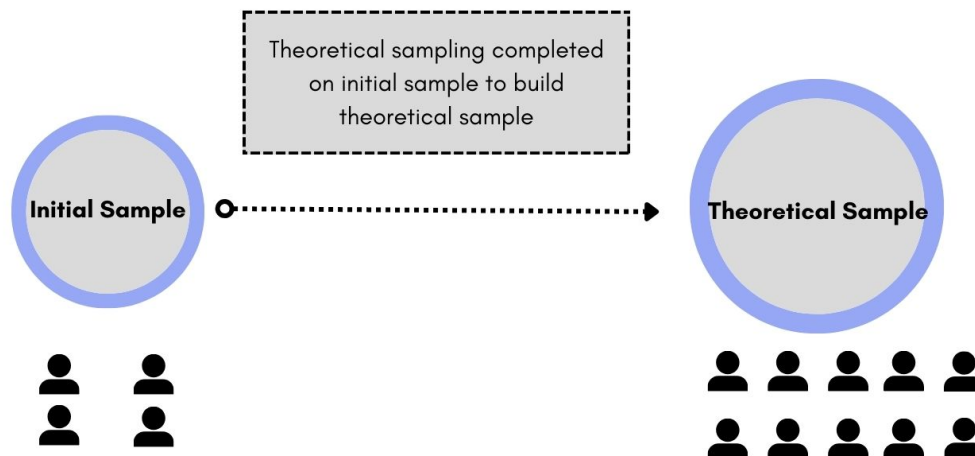
3.7 Research Participants

Participants for this research were chosen based on the insights, understandings and experiences that they could share in light of the aims of the investigation. Therefore, the research sample included participants who had “experience” of contributing to the policy formulation process (Orland cited in Plank *et al.* 2009, p.114). Importantly, the paradigm for this research ensured that varied experiences of policymaking were investigated in order to build a theory of policy creation from multiple perspectives (Cohen *et al.* 2007; Leedy and Ormrod 2005). This section outlines the approaches used in establishing the research sample. Additionally, general information is provided in relation to the varied policymaking experiences of the participants in this research.

3.7.1 Initial Sampling and Theoretical Sampling

In congruence with the constructivist grounded theory research design, two types of sampling strategies were employed, initial sampling and theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2014). The research sample consisted of fourteen participants in total, with four participants in the initial sample and ten participants in the theoretical sample. Figure 3.3 displays an overview of the approach to sampling in this research.

Figure 3.3: The Initial Sample and the Theoretical Sample



Initial sampling is based on the criteria set by the researcher in relation to the research problem before entering the field (Charmaz 2014; Flick 2018). This involves constructing the “boundaries” and therefore, initial sampling is “purposive” and “strategic” in nature as participants are chosen for a specific purpose (Huberman *et al.* 2014, pp.31-32). In order to build the research sample and begin fieldwork, the criteria for initial sampling involved the recruitment of participants who had direct experience of leading policymaking processes in education (Charmaz 2014; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Coyne 1997; Glaser 1978). This criteria was developed on the recommendation that initial sampling in grounded theory should begin where the phenomenon occurs (Coyne 1997). This meant that the research would begin by concentrating on participants who had held decision-making positions regarding educational policymaking and the resultant data from these interviews would then be used to guide the next phase of recruitment. More specifically, this criteria for initial sampling focussed on the recruitment of participants from the locus of decision-making in Irish education, namely, the Government of Ireland and the Department of Education. Charmaz (2014) views initial sampling as a “point of departure” (p.197), a starting point in the process of data collection and analysis. Consequently, the data collection phase of this study began through the recruitment of participants using initial sampling in line with the constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2016; Flick 2018).

As indicated in Figure 3.3, the completion of interviews with the four participants in the initial sample enabled the process of theoretical sampling to build the theoretical sample (Charmaz 2014). While initial sampling kickstarts the recruitment processes in constructivist grounded

theory, “theoretical sampling guides where you go” following the recruitment of the initial sample (Charmaz 2014, p.197). Theoretical sampling hinges on the iterative nature of data collection and analysis in constructivist grounded theory by using the emerging data to guide the recruitment of participants (Charmaz 2014; Flick 2018). Theoretical categories and codes that were interpreted from data in the early stages of data collection acted as a compass for further data collection. Charmaz expresses that the rationale behind theoretical sampling is to “obtain data to help you explicate your categories” and to add to the emerging theory (2014, p.198). Once no new data emerged in relation to the research categories, then the categories were branded as “saturated” and theoretical sampling concluded (Charmaz 2014, p.213). Importantly, theoretical sampling was not focussed on increasing numbers of participants in the sample, rather it was driven by the theory emerging from the data (Huberman *et al.* 2014, p.33). Theoretical sampling advanced the stages of analysis while also focussing on data collection which was central in building a theory to explain the complicated processes of policymaking. Theoretical sampling also summoned systematic and regular checks into the data collection and data analysis processes.

3.7.2 The Research Sample

Literature alludes to a lengthy directory of policy actors that could potentially be involved in policymaking including but not limited to teachers, principals, professional development advisors, curriculum officials, parents, local school boards and/or members of the inspectorate (Pont and Viennet 2017). While decisions around the criteria for initial sampling directed the beginning of data collection, it was important that theoretical sampling guided the remainder of the sample by following the emerging codes and categories (Charmaz 2014). This adherence to theoretical sampling meant that the researcher could not anticipate the direction that sampling would take thus reducing the influence of the researcher in shaping the research sample (Breckenridge and Jones 2009). The research sample consisted of fourteen participants in total, with four participants in the initial sample and ten participants in the theoretical sample (Figure 3.3). The size of this sample was guided by the procedures in relation to theoretical sampling and saturation as outlined in the previous section. Furthermore, the quality of interviews in this research was preferred to the quantity and this sample size allowed for in-depth interviews (Kvale 1996). Information relating to the policymaking role(s)/experience(s) of participants in this research sample are displayed in Table 3.2. While efforts were made to strive for gender balance, the directions of theoretical sample and the availability of suitable

participants resulted in a research sample containing nine females and five males. The gender of each participant has not been identified in Table 3.2 for the purposes of anonymity. It is important to note that the information relating to some specific job titles and policymaking experiences in the table have been generalised for the purposes of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. While a number of participants had multiple policymaking experiences, Table 3.2 denotes the prominent policymaking role held by each participant. Other policymaking experiences of certain participants are referred to in general terms in Chapter Four, these experiences are not depicted in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: The Research Sample

Participant	Policymaking Experience	Recruitment
Participant A	Minister for Education	Initial Sample
Participant B	Minister for Education	Initial Sample
Participant C	Minister for Education	Initial Sample
Participant D	Secretary General of the Department of Education	Initial Sample
Participant E	Leadership/Management Role in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment	Theoretical Sample
Participant F	Leadership/Management Role in the Irish National Teachers' Organisation	Theoretical Sample
Participant G	Leadership/Management Role in the Teaching Council	Theoretical Sample
Participant H	Leadership/Management Role in the National Parents' Council	Theoretical Sample
Participant I	Leadership/Management Role in the Educational Research Centre	Theoretical Sample
Participant J	Education Centre Director	Theoretical Sample
Participant K	Policy Officer in the Department of Education	Theoretical Sample
Participant L	Teacher	Theoretical Sample
Participant M	Leadership/Management Role in the Irish Primary Principals' Network	Theoretical Sample
Participant N	Teacher/Principal	Theoretical Sample

The initial sample comprised four participants, Participants A-D, whereby each participant had unique experience of holding high-ranking positions in the field of Irish educational policymaking. The emerging theoretical codes from data analysis were used to guide theoretical sampling and a further ten participants were recruited to form the theoretical sample (Participants E-N). The next section of this chapter details the measures taken in relation to data management.

3.8 Data Management

All data in this research has been stored and analysed in accordance with the Rights of Individuals under the General Data Protection Regulations. It is the responsibility of the researcher to produce “high-quality accessible data” (Huberman *et al.* 2014, p.50). The data collected in this research investigation has been stored electronically on an encrypted memory device in a locked file. All interview recordings were completed using a recording device. The interview recordings were directly transferred to the encrypted memory device upon completion of the interview and subsequently deleted from the recording device. The interviews were transcribed within forty-eight hours of completion and all voice recordings on the memory device were then deleted. All participant data was anonymised and was only identifiable through the use of pseudonyms. The code sheet with the names of participants and associated pseudonyms was stored on a separate encrypted memory device (Flick 2009; Creswell 2009). Only the researcher and supervisors had access to the data.

In line with MIC Records Retention Schedule for Research Data Findings, all data relating to research findings will be stored for a duration of five years following the completion of data collection and subsequently archived. In line with the MIC Records Retention Schedule for Postgraduate Research, all other data relating to the study will be stored for five years following submission of the thesis and subsequently destroyed.

3.9 Data Analysis

A range of qualitative data was collected for this study, therefore, rigid and rigorous data analysis was required in order to provide “coherence” and “structure” to the emergence of findings from this investigation (Bryman and Burgess 1994, p. 176). The iterative nature of data collection and analysis in constructivist grounded theory meant that decisions surrounding

data collection were made based on emerging categories from the researcher's analysis and interpretations (Flick 2018). Consequently, this called for all data to be analysed "in a methodical manner" in order to constitute authentic, rigorous, valid and reliable research findings (Attride-Stirling 2001, p.386). Data analysis for this study adhered to the guidelines presented by Charmaz (2014) for constructivist grounded theory research. Accordingly, three stages of coding were used, including, initial coding, focussed coding and theoretical coding (Flick 2018; Charmaz 2014). The constant comparisons method was also employed during each of the stages of coding whereby the researcher compared codes for "similarities and differences" (Charmaz 2014; Corbin and Strauss 1994, p.73). These comparisons and interpretations were documented through the use of analytic memos (Charmaz 2014). This section outlines the stages of initial, focussed and theoretical coding as well as detailing the process of documenting analytic memos.

3.9.1 Initial Coding

Coding involves "the aggregating of text into small categories of information" (Creswell 2006, p.184). Huberman *et al.* indicate that coding involves assigning descriptive "labels" to a statement or intimation from research data (2014, p.71). Charmaz explains that in constructivist grounded theory, coding represents a method for sorting data through the application of a label that "summarises" the piece of data (2014, p.111). Initial coding constituted the first steps taken by the researcher in making sense of the data. While at this stage the researcher was open to the direction of theory development, in line with the research paradigm, the researcher recognised that coding hinged on subjective interpretations and therefore, this was monitored reflexively (Charmaz 2014). The initial codes used in this research were concise, describing codes as "actions" rather than general terms or categories (Charmaz 2014, p.116). These initial codes were temporary and were used as early indicators for "gaps and holes" in the research that resultantly directed further data collection measures (Charmaz 2014, p.118).

Charmaz recommends using line-by-line coding as a practice for initial coding in order to uncover understanding of a problem or process (2014, p.125). Line-by-line coding was used in this research and required the researcher to label each line of the transcript where possible using gerunds as the description (Flick 2018). The researcher also used in-vivo coding in the initial coding stage, whereby, the language used by the interviewee became the name for the code (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Huberman *et al.* 2014). Similarly, initial codes were also used to

indicate clear emotional expressions by research participants. This was particularly important in this research given the pursuit of the embedded questions and the aim to uncover levels of influence, power and participation in policymaking (Gaventa 2006; Arnstein 2019). Examples of initial codes used in this research are identified in Table 3.3 below.

Table 3.3: Examples of Initial Codes

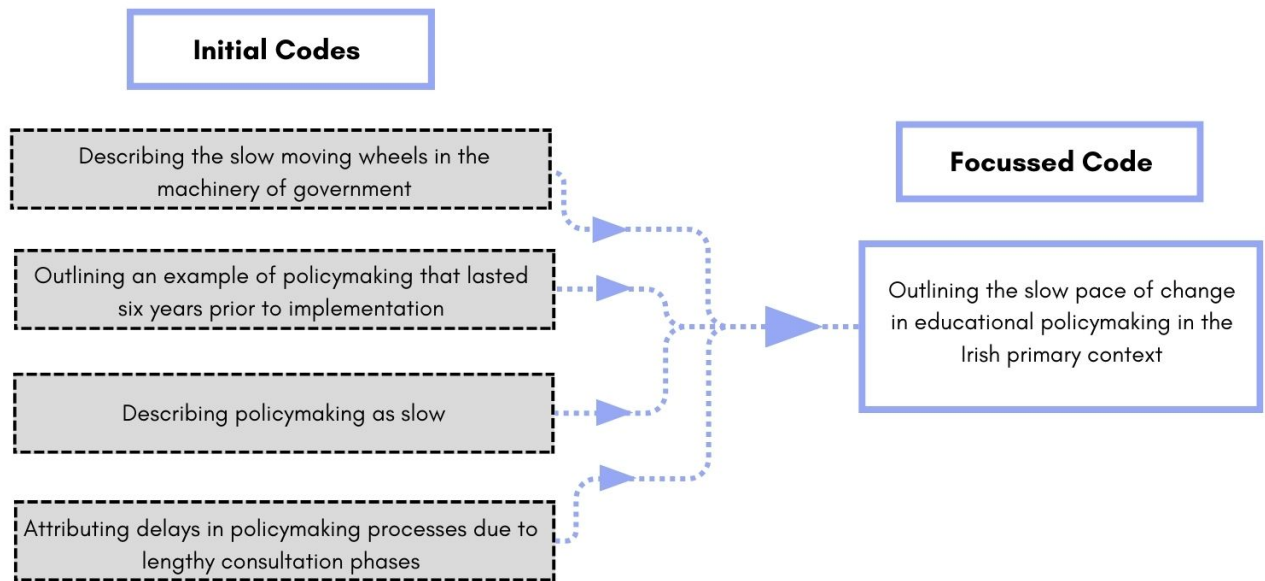
Sample Initial Codes	Participants													
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
<i>Observing reactions to policy in the media</i>														
<i>Acknowledging the need for research into policymaking</i>														
<i>Emotion: Participant conveying strong feelings towards the need for a range of voices to contribute to policymaking</i>														

The next section discusses the progression from initial coding to focussed coding.

3.9.2 Focussed Coding

The next stage of coding used in this research was focussed coding. This stage of coding required the researcher to build on the work completed during initial coding and further analyse the data through the constant comparison method. More specifically, focussed coding involved the identification of the most commonly recurring initial codes and/or the “most significant” initial codes (Charmaz 2014, p.138). These codes were then used to “sift through” the data more deeply in order to begin to categorise and conceptualise meaning and understanding (Charmaz 2014, p.138). During this stage, the researcher was constantly comparing initial codes, assessing which codes best captured the data and which codes would best serve as focussed codes. Figure 3.4 identifies the relationship between a selection of initial codes and the over-arching focussed code.

Figure 3.4: Focussed Coding Sample



The recurrence of focussed codes was recorded across all of the interviews as shown in Table 3.4. This table denotes three focussed codes that arose in the process of data analysis and indicates the recurrence of these codes across the fourteen interviews. This thorough process of checking for similarities across all interviews aided the process of theoretical coding which is outlined in the next section.

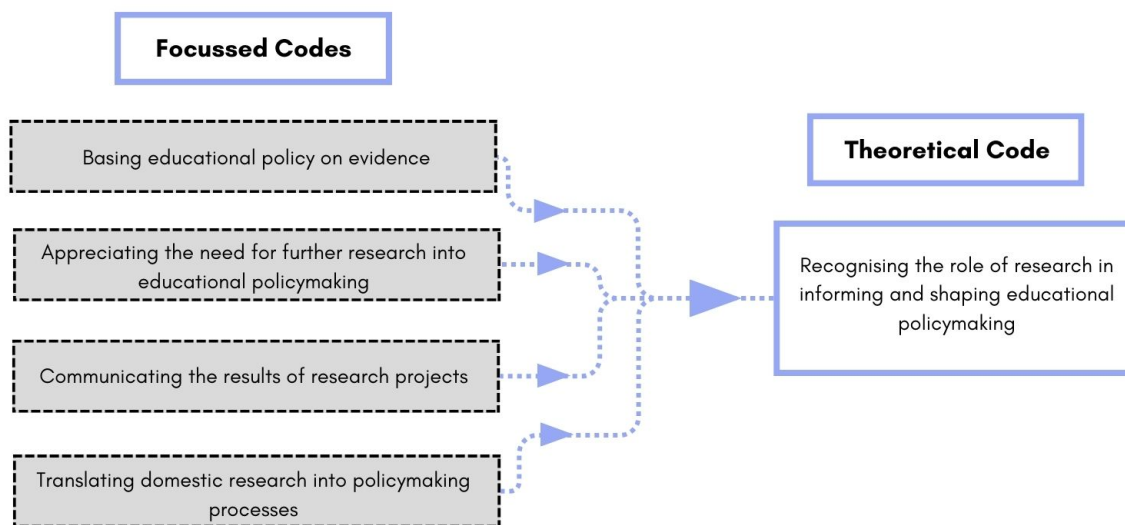
Table 3.4: Documenting the Recurrence of Focussed Codes Across the Data Sample

Sample Focussed Codes	Participants													
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
<i>Responding to unexpected changes in society with educational policy</i>														
<i>Identifying the political factors that affect policymaking</i>														
<i>Referring to the financial factors that influence policymaking</i>														

3.9.3 Theoretical Coding

Theoretical coding follows on from an initial and focussed coding. The rationale behind this stage of the coding process is to build theory from the focussed codes. Theoretical coding involves examining the focussed codes and illustrating the possible connections and relationships present within the coded data. Charmaz insists on the importance of permitting theoretical codes to emerge from the data in order to add “precision” and “clarity” to the research findings (2014, p.151). Figure 3.5 demonstrates the development of a theoretical code from focussed codes.

Figure 3.5: Developing Theoretical Codes



3.9.4 Analytic Memos

As denoted in Figure 3.1, analytic memos were employed in this research investigation once data-gathering began. The process of compiling analytic memos enabled the researcher to keep notes, explore relationships between data, ask questions and identify areas where further data collection was required. In constructivist grounded theory, analytic memos are described as a critical bridge between data-gathering and the publishing of the research findings (Charmaz 2014). Through the production of analytic memos, some codes emerged as significant categories in the development of theories which influenced theoretical sampling. In the completion of interviews for this research, the researcher witnessed non-verbal cues and behaviour from the research participants which provided “analytic ideas” and were recorded in the form of analytic memos (Charmaz 2014, p.111). For the duration of this research, analytic memos were recorded in the methodological journal. An example of an analytic memo is displayed in Table 3.1 which denotes a variety of methodological journal entries.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations for this research were all consulted in line with the guidelines and information provided by the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). The adherence to these guidelines ensured that this research was completed to the necessary legal, ethical and academic standards (Mary Immaculate College 2024). Maintaining the welfare of the human participants involved in this research was integral in influencing the methodology of this research as well as the publishing of findings, conclusions and recommendations. Therefore, ethical issues were considered at every stage of this research study. The process of applying for ethical approval through MIREC enabled the researcher to carefully reflect on the research methodology, ensuring that appropriate measures were taken to minimise ethical risks. The ethical approval for this research is identified in Appendix K. Firstly, this section outlines the ethical considerations taken in the recruitment of participants for this research. This is followed by a review of the risk management procedures employed for the duration of this investigation.

3.10.1 Entrée to Site and Setting

Participants for this research were identified and selected based on the insights, understandings and experiences that they could share in light of educational policymaking in the Irish primary school context. This section details the steps taken in recruiting participants for this research.

Firstly, letters of recruitment were sent to the prospective participants via email (Appendix D). In general, the majority of email addresses for the participants in this research were available online given the public nature of engaging in policymaking processes. In the case where individual email addresses were not available online, the researcher sent a recruitment email to a general group/organisation email with the request that it could be forwarded on to individuals in line with General Data Protection Regulations. Corbin and Morse (2003) explain that the researcher has an ethical responsibility to ensure that participants are informed about the research before consenting to participation. Therefore, information sheets (Appendix E) were included as an attachment to the recruitment letters to inform potential participants about the study. In line with MIREC guidelines, the information letters also provided a point of contact for any further information that was required and explained that participants would have the right to withdraw from the research at any point. The information sheets outlined both the risks and benefits to partaking in this research (Hewitt 2007; Cohen *et al.* 2007). Hewitt (2007)

captures the necessity of informing participants about the benefits and research purpose to ensure the participants see a valid rationale for engaging in the study. Table 3.5. identifies the explanation of the research benefits and risks which were shared with participants in the information sheet.

Table 3.5: Information Sheet Risks and Benefits

<p>What are the benefits of this research?</p>	<p><i>It is hoped that the data gathered from participants will (a) provide understanding on the current processes of educational policymaking (b) identify how educational policy topics/problems are presented, defined and decided (c) provide insight into the policy actors that are involved in the formulation of educational policy (d) generate an understanding about how policy actors are involved in policymaking and (d) contribute rich insight into the mechanisms of policymaking, contributing to future educational policymaking.</i></p>
<p>What are the risks of participating in this research?</p>	<p><i>The researcher is aware of the sensitive nature of the research topic of educational policymaking. Therefore, all research data will be anonymised through the use of pseudonyms and every effort will be made to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of research participants at all times.</i></p>

Participants were then given their own time to make their informed choice and thus the decision-making power rested with them (Corbin and Morse 2003). Participants that responded positively were subsequently contacted via phone call and/or email to organise a suitable date and time for the interview. The researcher then organised the arrangements for the online meeting and a confirmation email was sent to participants with the details of the interview. This email also contained an attachment to a consent form (Appendix F) which participants signed in the event that they wished to proceed with the interview. The combination of the information sheet and consent form ensured that the participants were fully aware of what participation in the research involved (Corbin and Morse 2003). On the day of the interview, prior to initiating data collection, the researcher revised the points from the information sheets

with the participants. The researcher acknowledged the signing of the consent form and ensured that the participant was willing to continue with permission to voice record the interview.

3.10.2 Risk Management Procedures

Fox and Stutchbury (2009) contend that researchers have a responsibility to adhere to ethical regulations. This section details the risk management procedures adopted for this research as part of upholding ethical standards (Corbin and Morse 2003).

This research examined the area of educational policymaking which was identified in the literature review as a politically sensitive area (Portnoi 2016; Bell and Stevenson 2015). The interplay of “politics and power differentials” as part of policy formulation can contribute to inherent tension (Portnoi 2016, p.125). Consequently, this research had the potential to confront such tension, particularly given the nature of the research objectives which aimed to reveal the interactions between policy actors as part of policymaking. The evaluative and strategic aspects of this inquiry probed at the factors that successfully promote balanced policy discourse, identifying not only on the prominent voices in policy formulation but also spotlighting the side-lined or “silenced voices” from the decision-making processes (Creswell 2006, p.40). The nature of these guiding questions capture the politically sensitive complexion of this research. This meant that there was the possibility of obtaining politically sensitive data in this research which presented the need for risk management procedures in the collection and presentation of data (Corbin and Morse 2003).

Firstly, in line with the research paradigm, open-ended questions were used in order to acquire comprehensive insights and meaningfully reveal the thoughts and reflections of participants on the intricate topic of policymaking (Charmaz 2014). This approach permitted participants to answer the questions based on their own interpretations rather than feeling that specific questions were imposed in relation to a particular policy development. This flexibility in interview questions meant that the limits of discussion were not explicitly defined (Corbin and Morse 2003; Hewitt 2007). While the open-ended nature of intensive interviews as part of constructivist grounded theory presented a risk to the consistency of data collection, this risk was reduced through the consistent use of initial, intermediate and ending questions to frame the interviews (Charmaz 2014). Corbin and Strauss (2008) capture the intricacies and skills required in interviewing. Pilot interviews were used in this research as a means of developing

interview skills and refining the use of open-ended questions in an interview, what Flowers *et al.* refer to as “learning in practice” (2009, p.63). Each pilot interview acted as a “small-scale methodological test” for both the interviewer and the interview questions (Kim 2011, p.191). Once the interviews had been completed, interview summaries were shared with participants as part of member-checking in order to ensure the reliability of the data (Guba and Lincoln 1985).

As outlined in an earlier section of this chapter, the researcher made every effort to protect the identities of participants in this research through acquiring informed consent and ensuring ethical procedures were routinely followed. The researcher ensured that each interviewee fully comprehended what participation in this research required (Corbin and Morse 2003). In accordance with MIREC guidelines, participation in this research was made on a voluntary basis and all participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All research data relating to human participants was anonymised through the use of pseudonyms and was only accessible to the researcher and research supervisors (Flick 2009; Creswell 2009). The data collected in this research investigation was stored electronically on an encrypted memory device in a locked file. The nature of this research into educational policy meant that a participant could potentially be identified through their unique experience with the policymaking process, for example, a Minister for Education who initiated a certain policy at a given time. This required commitments to confidentiality in the sharing of information in this investigation. As indicated in Table 3.6, the commitment to confidentiality and anonymity was communicated through the informed consent process along with an explanation on how the research data would be used in the publication of findings.

Table 3.6: Communicating Ethical Use of Data through Informed Consent Process

<p><i>How will the information be used/disseminated?</i></p>	<p><i>The answers from your interview will be combined with that of the other participants in this study and used to form the results section of my thesis. The answers you provide in your interview may be included in the thesis in the form of direct quotations, paraphrasing and/or summarised points. Your anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured at all times through the use of pseudonyms.</i></p>
<p><i>How will confidentiality be kept?</i></p>	<p><i>All information gathered will be anonymised through the use of a pseudonym for each research participant. Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality to ensure that participants are not identifiable through the presentation of data from this research.</i></p>

In particular, the researcher focussed on the research sample and the presentation of research findings which constitute the two main areas whereby information pertaining to participants is shared (Pascale *et al.* 2022). Importantly, this research recognised the distinction between confidentiality and anonymity (Kaiser 2009). Confidentiality seeks to keep all research information private whereas anonymity seeks to hide the identities of the research participants (Saunders *et al.* 2015). This research exercised efforts to enhance confidentiality by anonymising research participants. However, simply anonymising the identities of participants through the use of pseudonyms does not ensure complete anonymity because “the research results are full of ethnographic detail that could be used to identify research participants” (Surmiak, 2018, p.3). Consequently, this research had to ensure efforts were made to remove identifying information from the research sample and findings while also maintaining the validity and credibility in the eventual results and conclusions (Saunders *et al.* 2015; Pascale *et al.* 2022). In summarising the research sample, the researcher exercised “data reduction” by withholding identifying information on the specific titles/roles, ages and gender of participants (Pascale *et al.* 2022, p.5). In the presentation of findings, general references are made to some of the particular policymaking experiences and roles of participants in relation to educational policymaking. Furthermore, in the presentation of findings, particular policy documents cited by participants in this research were not included in the published findings. Instead, a general description was provided on the type of policy in question without revealing any critical details. Once again, any references to times or dates were also removed. These measures were taken

in an effort to “safeguard” participants through minimising the risk of a data breach and ensuring every effort was made to uphold the privacy and confidentiality of participants (Corbin and Morse 2003, p.349).

A further ethical issue pertained to the constructivist grounded theory research design which placed pivotal ethical responsibilities on the researcher with regard to the interpretation of data (Bryman and Burgess 1994; Charmaz 2014). Charmaz explains that the role of the researcher in data interpretation must be acknowledged and monitored reflexively throughout the research inquiry (Charmaz 2014, p.14). The use of reflexivity in this research enabled the researcher to consistently evaluate his role in the investigation. Therefore, the researcher recognised that his assumptions and beliefs could present ethical issues with regards to data analysis (McMillan and Schumacher 2014). A methodological journal was incorporated throughout the research project as a means of documenting researcher reflexivity (Engin 2011; Saldaña 2016). The consistent use of reflection prompts before and after interviews as well as during data analysis, enabled reflexivity to become an ever-present component of this research (Appendix H). These measures enabled the researcher to acknowledge and avoid undue influences in a bid to ensure researcher integrity (Engin 2011). While the researcher has beliefs and assumptions in relation to the research topic, the researcher has not had first-hand experience of engaging in policymaking processes and therefore, embarked on this research with an open-mind and free of any conflicting interests. As outlined in Chapter One, the researcher was completing this research on policymaking due to the opportunity that was made available in Mary Immaculate College. Mary Immaculate College were continuously supportive and invested in this research, permitting the researcher to take his own stance and position on the direction of the research inquiry. The integrity of the research was reinforced through “sensitivity” in data analysis which required the researcher to check his own thoughts, beliefs and assumptions and deeply analyse the data to ensure the problem was viewed through the eyes of the participants (Corbin and Strauss 2008, p.32). Finlay (2002) promotes reflexivity as a method of acknowledging, evaluating and monitoring the researcher’s role in the investigation. This recognition of researcher influence is a critical component of constructivist grounded theory research (Charmaz 2014). The combination of the measures outlined above served to minimise the ethical risks presented by this research investigation. The next section discusses the limitations of this research.

3.11 Research Limitations

The methodological structure of this research yielded rich and varied findings which are presented in the next chapter. However, the methodology did present limitations to this research. This section outlines the limitations encountered as part of this investigation into educational policymaking.

Firstly, the social constructivist paradigm concentrated on the pursuit of understanding from multiple perspectives. As a result, the research findings do not present one universally accepted truth about policymaking, instead the findings advance theories from multiple interpretations (Boyland 2019). These multifaceted findings, however, reflect the complexity of the research topic and speak to the “messy” narrative of policymaking (Moles *et al.* 2019). The constructivist grounded theory research design presented a further limitation to this research through the requirements upon the researcher to play a central role in data collection and data analysis (Bryman and Burgess 1994; Charmaz 2014). The commitment to ensuring this role was completed in an ethically responsible and methodologically rigorous manner required meticulous effort and planning on behalf of the researcher. The completion of reflections, reflexive notes and analytic memos as an integral part of this research design took considerable time. Notwithstanding the benefits this work had in terms of validity and reliability, these commitments certainly added to the lengthy duration of data collection and analysis in this research.

In keeping with the research methodology, the research sample was relatively small, containing fourteen participants in total. The decision regarding the number of participants was made due to the preference of interview quality over interview quantity (Kvale 1996). While this relatively small sample allowed for comprehensive data analysis to be conducted, undoubtedly, further enlightenment on educational policymaking would be obtained from the completion of interviews with other policy actors that did not feature in this study. Table 3.2 indicates that the research sample had representation from the Government, the Department of Education, the NCCA, the Teaching Council, the INTO, the IPPN, the National Parents’ Council, the Education Centre Support Ireland, the Educational Research Centre, teachers and school leaders. While this sample contained a range of policy actors in the Irish education system, certain policy actors did not take part in this research such as representatives from the OECD, the National Council for Special Educational Needs (NCSE), the Inspectorate, school management bodies, primary school pupils and primary school parents.

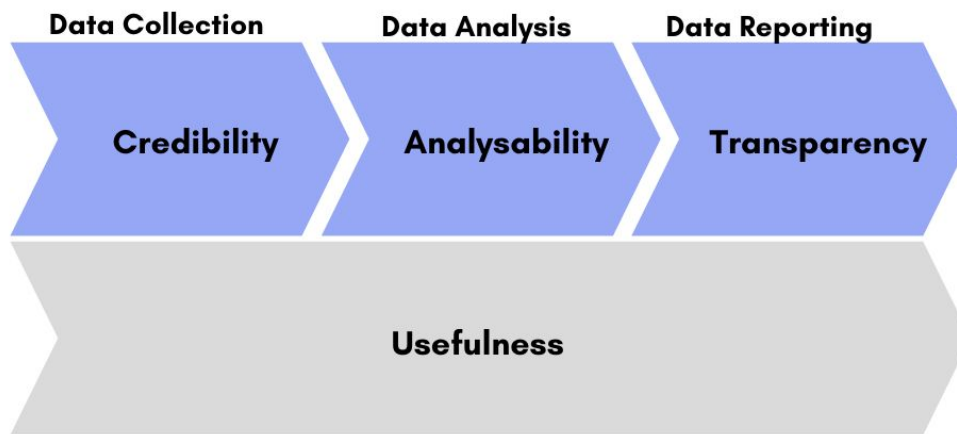
Efforts were made to recruit a number of these policy actors for this research, however, these attempts were unsuccessful. The voices of pupils were not involved in this research due to adherence to initial and theoretical sampling whereby participants needed to have direct experience of engaging in policymaking processes (Charmaz 2014). While efforts were made to strive for gender balance, the directions of theoretical sample and the availability of suitable participants resulted in a research sample containing nine females and five males. Furthermore, the small sample size meant that only a small number of certain policy actors were interviewed, for example, only two teachers took part in this research compared to three Ministers for Education.

While at the outset of this research, it was anticipated that the interviews would be conducted in-person, the completion of research during the Covid-19 pandemic meant that face-to-face interviews were not an option. Resultantly, all interviews and pilot interviews were conducted using Zoom. This presented limitations in terms of the interpretation of gestures, facial expressions and conveyed/implicit emotions as part of intensive interviewing (Charmaz 2014). Furthermore, online communication limited the ability to engage in informal conversation as a means of building rapport before the interviews. However, the completion of interviews using online communication allowed participants to engage in conversation from a location of familiarity such as their homes or places of work. Furthermore, completing interviews under these conditions meant that the interviewer and interviewee had a high level of privacy to discuss the research topic. It is the assertion of the researcher that this degree of familiarity eased participants into the interview process. This was important in this research given that constructivist grounded theory promotes the need to make interviewees feel comfortable and relaxed when completing intensive interviewing (Charmaz 2014). The steps taken to ensure the quality of this research investigation are accounted for in the next section.

3.12 Quality Assurance

This section relays the approaches used in this research to maximise quality assurance and generate trustworthiness (Guba and Lincoln 1985). Using the Total Quality Framework Approach for qualitative research advanced by Roller and Lavrakas (2015), this section outlines the steps taken to ensure credibility, analysability, transparency and usefulness (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6: A Total Quality Framework Approach to Qualitative Research (Roller and Lavrakas 2015)



The latter component of this framework, usefulness, was a decisive factor in applying this model to this research as it dovetails aptly with the aims of this research to meaningfully contribute to the policymaking space in the Irish primary context. Importantly, this framework does not solely focus on the measures taken to ensure quality in data collection but also emphasises trustworthiness in data analysis and reporting.

Credibility refers to the completeness and accuracy of the research data (Roller and Lavrakas 2015). Firstly, this was achieved through the use of a sample size appropriate for constructivist grounded theory research (Charmaz 2014). The use of theoretical sampling in recruiting this research sample denoted that the researcher did not claim to know where to source all the pertinent data at the beginning of data-gathering (Breckenridge and Jones 2009). Additionally, triangulation of data methods ensured that data was collected using intensive interviews, documents and a methodological journal (Cohen *et al.* 2007). The validity of interviewer questions was enhanced through the wide analysis of literature, the use of pilot interviews and the framing of beginning, intermediate and ending questions. Member-checking was also practised whereby interview summaries were shared with participants following the interview in order to ensure the reliability of the data (Guba and Lincoln 1985). Participants had the opportunity to revise this information and make any amendments and/or additions. One participant in this research made an amendment to their interview summary by adding further information on a particular policy experience that they discussed.

The analysability of this research was ensured through the rigorous approach to data analysis (Roller and Lavrakas 2015). Three stages of coding were used initial coding, focussed coding and theoretical coding (Flick 2018 and Charmaz 2014). The constant comparisons method was also employed during each of the stages of coding whereby the researcher compared codes for “similarities and differences” (Charmaz 2014 and Corbin and Strauss 1994, p.73). These comparisons and interpretations were documented through the use of analytic memos (Charmaz 2014). Reflexivity was also employed using a methodological journal. Finlay (2002) promotes reflexivity as a method of acknowledging, evaluating and monitoring the researcher’s role in the investigation. This recognition of researcher influence is a critical component of constructivist grounded theory research (Charmaz 2014). The consistent use of reflection prompts during data analysis, enabled reflexivity to become an ever-present component of this research (Appendix H). This reflexive approach minimised the opportunity for researcher-bias and enabled the perspectives of the research participants to emerge (Corbin and Strauss 2008, p.32). Triangulation of data sources also added to the validity of data analysis whereby focussed and theoretical codes were shaped based on comparisons between multiple accounts of policymaking processes (Creswell 2007).

The transparency of this research was ensured through the development of ‘thick’ or detailed descriptions of the policy topic (Roller and Lavrakas 2015; Lincoln and Guba 1985). As outlined in the previous section on research limitations, the social constructivist paradigm by nature concentrated on the pursuit of understanding from multiple perspectives. Therefore, the published findings do not present one universally accepted policymaking reality. Instead, the findings present theories on policymaking from participants with both similar and varying interpretations (Boyland 2019). This multifaceted narrative of policymaking concomitantly contributes to the usefulness of this research through the presentation of rich findings, conclusions and recommendations to aid the policymaking space (Roller and Lavrakas 2015). Furthermore, the culmination of the findings and conclusions of this research enabled the creation of a revised conceptual framework or proposed policymaking process which points to improvements required in policy timelines, consultation and communication.

3.13 Conclusion

This chapter outlined a rationale and description for the research methodology to be used in this investigation. Firstly, the research question and embedded questions were presented. The

epistemology and ontology of the researcher firmly positioned the choice of the social constructivism paradigm. The qualitative constructivist grounded theory research design was then examined, aligning with the research paradigm. Subsequently, the data collection methods were delineated, outlining how interviews, documents and a methodological journal were employed to gather data in relation to the research problem. A combination of initial sampling and theoretical sampling was used in recruiting a research sample of fourteen participants. Data analysis was structured through the use of initial, focussed and theoretical coding as well as the use of analytic memos. The ethical considerations of this research were presented with reference to risk management procedures and the steps to acquire informed consent from human participants. The limitations to this research were discussed, pointing to the restrictions caused by a relatively small sample size, the prevalence of powerful decision-makers in the sample, the integral role of the researcher in data collection and analysis and the use of audio-visual online communication. Finally, the quality assurance measures for this research were articulated with reference to the Total Quality Framework Approach for qualitative research advanced by Roller and Lavrakas (2015).

Following this overview of the research methodology, the next chapter presents and discusses the research findings.

Chapter Four

4.1 Introduction

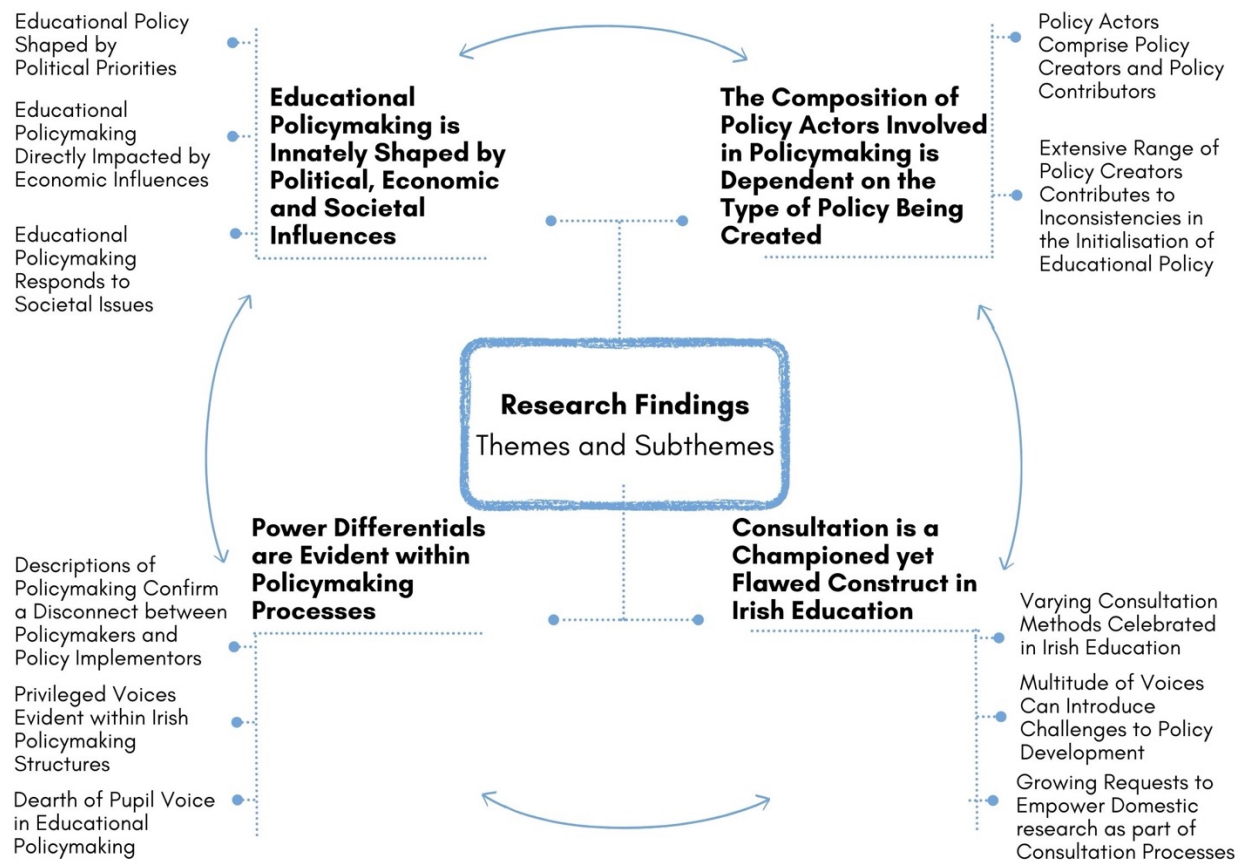
This research represents an investigation into the mechanisms by which decisions are made surrounding Irish primary educational policymaking. As established in Chapter Two, policymaking of this nature can be viewed as a complicated and complex process abundant with change, tension and opposing perspectives (Bell and Stevenson 2015). Therefore, this research has adopted a qualitative constructivist grounded theory research design within a social constructivism paradigm (Charmaz 2014) in order to account for differing experiences and interpretations of educational policymaking (Corbin and Strauss 2008, p.8). Rigorous stages of data analysis enabled the emergence of evidence-based research findings. These findings are articulated thematically in a bid to convey theories and provoke questions on the research topic.

The structure of this chapter is centred on four key themes which cast a light on policymaking in the Irish primary context;

- Educational policymaking is innately shaped by political, economic and societal influences
- The composition of policy actors involved in policymaking is dependent on the type of policy being created
- Power differentials are evident within policymaking processes
- Consultation is a championed yet flawed construct in Irish education

The Research Findings Map depicted in Figure 4.1 below illustrates the research themes and associated research findings which are presented as sub-themes.

Figure 4.1 Research Findings Map



The research themes are situated in the context of policy, research and literature from Chapter One and Two of this dissertation. The three themes of Chapter Two included policy and policymaking, policymaking in the context of global educational reform and policy actors and policymaking. The second theme which concentrated on the influences of global educational reform consumed a significant proportion of the chapter due to the prevalence of this theme in policy literature. Interestingly, while the research findings in this chapter certainly make reference to the claims explored in the second theme of the literature review, the weight that was afforded to the impact of global educational reform in the literature review is not paralleled in the findings. In fact, the findings made more prominent references to the other two themes of Chapter Two. Further elaboration on the recommendations and implications arising from the findings are advanced in Chapter Five. The opening theme of this chapter provides an in-depth analysis on the findings relating to the political, societal and economic influences that affect educational policymaking in Ireland.

4.2 Educational Policymaking is Innately Shaped by Political, Economic and Societal Influences

According to literature, policymaking can be moulded by numerous sources of influence (Davies 2004). Overall, there is consensus in the data to confirm that educational policymaking in the Irish context can be defined as a complicated and sensitive space of decision-making amidst an array of social, economic, political and international influences. The array of influences that affect policymaking is aptly captured by Participant E, who expressed that *“it’s very often in the milieu of society and culture and politics”* that policy developments occur in Irish education. Participant E forged this description of policymaking through multiple experiences of leading educational policy development at national level. Aligning with the claims of Bell and Stevenson (2015), Participant F rejected the contention that the creation of policy follows a linear path, stating that: *“it’s not a linear process that you would have policy made somewhere and implemented somewhere else, it’s actually much more circular”*. This explanation speaks to the range of influences that occur throughout the “paths and pipelines” of policymaking (Ball 2016, p.552) and is also suggestive of policymaking as an iterative process. Therefore, this theme further explores the prominent sources of influence that converge to affect the educational landscape in Ireland. Firstly, the intricate relationship between politics and education is discussed in this theme, assessing the political factors that shape policy formulation. Subsequently, the economic and financial forces that interact with the national education system are appraised. Finally, an overview is provided on the processes by which Irish society and media sway the policy agenda in education.

4.2.1 Educational Policy Shaped by Political Priorities

Education, as a public domain, impacts every individual and society at large, and therefore, attracts widespread attention and interest (Anderson 2003; Bell and Stevenson 2015; Portnoi 2016). The research and literature presented in Chapter Two is unwavering in the assertion that educational policy is shaped by political influences and can be impacted by lobbying and the need to address a public concern (Adams 2016; Furlong and Kraft 2014; Looney 2014). The findings of this research confirm these claims and illuminate the political underpinnings that influence and direct educational policy in Ireland. This section outlines the research findings relating to the political trends that shape the development of educational policy, examining the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders on the interactions between the political landscape and educational policymaking. More specifically, the research findings illustrate

how the dynamic nature of national politics affects the priorities on the policymaking agenda. Furthermore, decision-making in government can introduce uncertainties in policymaking structures, thus creating a delicate dance between agility and stability in the education system. It is important to note that the research data in this section features references and excerpts from a range of participants, however, given the political nature of this section, the evidence focusses in particular on the insights from participants that have held ministerial positions and/or worked in the Department of Education.

Educational policy was classified by Participant H as a “*political piece*”, symbolising the political weight associated with education in Ireland. This assertion, however, is largely unsurprising given that the typical creator of educational policy is the Department of Education, a ministerial department of Government. The implications of the effect that educational policy has both within and beyond the education sector was aptly captured by one participant who held the role of Minister for Education and advanced that “*any decision you make at policy level has an impact*”. This reflection from a participant who has held such a prominent role in educational decision-making serves as an indicator of the high-stakes nature of creating national educational policy. Furthermore, this insight demonstrates the ripple-effect that a change in educational policy at primary level in schools can have in subsequent years of education for pupils and indeed their lives. Education embodies a precious and irrefutably influential position in Irish society and perhaps, this rationalises the weight of political interest and influence.

4.2.1.1 Influence of the Programme for Government

Participants in this research recalled examples of educational policy being shaped by the priorities emerging from the programme for government and indeed the priorities of the Minister for Education (Participants A, B, D and K). This is suggestive of the collective influence of political party ideology as well as the impact of the personal priorities of those in positions of power. The structure of Irish government means that the Minister for Education is an elected politician who may or may not have prior experience of working in the education sector (Participant A). The Minister for Education is, therefore, a representative of their political party and oversees the implementation of the programme for government pertaining to education (Participants A, B, C, D and K). Participant K described how policymaking in the Department of Education is guided by the programme for government as well as commitments “*from the Minister’s priorities*” and other areas of government. This quotation speaks to the

influence of the Minister for Education in advancing their own priorities regarding policy development. This claim was reinforced by further participants in this research with six participants in total alluding to the impact that a Minister for Education can have in progressing particular policy priorities (Participants A, B, C, D, K, I and J). According to Participant D, variance in the priorities of Ministers for Education can occur irrespective of common political ideals: *“Even within the same party, ministers will have specific areas that are maybe more priorities for them than for others”*. Participants B and C insisted that the priorities of a Minister for Education can be influenced by a range of factors, including the political manifesto of their own political party, as well as their own background, interests and educational philosophy.

As the policymaking process in education can span multiple ministers and governments, policies are often inherited or carried forward from previous administrations and as a result, changes in focus and priority can occur. Participant B referred to an example of educational policy that had been on the policy agenda for a significant length of time under their regime as Minister for Education. A cabinet reshuffle was conducted before this policy was enacted in the system and a change to the Minister for Education resulted in the policy losing priority and falling victim to a change in direction (Participant B). Consequently, Participant B captured the effects that a change in the Minister for Education can have on policymaking; *“different ministers have different priorities, they [policies] can lose momentum as a minister changes”*. This experience denotes that educational policies that may have been a priority under a previous government can suddenly become side-lined.

4.2.1.2 Political battleground for big ticket items

The research evidence confirms that certain educational policies attract a wealth of political commentary, in particular, the educational policies that are deemed to be critical in shaping the future of Irish education or what Participant D referred to as *“the big ticket items”*. Policies that are considered to be high-stakes in the field of education are discussed and debated in the Dáil and/or the Oireachtas (Participants D and K). Naturally, the democratic processes of debate in the Dáil invite scrutiny from the opposing political power in government which was indicated as a certain source of influence in igniting debate on educational policy (Participants A, B and C). Participant A shared an experience that provides a glimpse into the level of influence that political debate exerts on educational policymaking. According to this participant, *“ferocious pressure”* was channelled towards them as the Minister for Education

from the opposition in the Dáil to introduce a specific policy change in Irish primary education (Participant A). Furthermore, it was explained that the timing of this push from the opposition coincided with a general election which created a swell of noise around the policy and impacted the policymaking process. In a similar trend, Participant D spoke of the political implications affecting policymaking around election time:

It's an interesting one where the political interplay comes because it was clear that there was going to be an election and one of the concerns that would have been was that if you produce, [...] if you suggest to a minister publishing a literacy strategy, and then the opposition completely oppose it, and then you're back in, you've made it very political. So there was a bit of a thing about would you be better [...] even if you had it very well developed, to wait and to put it to a new minister after the election that was obviously coming.

These examples very much reinforce the description of Looney who classified the development of certain types of policies as “a political battleground” (2014, p.7). Participant C remarked on the influence of parliamentary questions raised to the Minister for Education in the Dáil and humorously described them as “*the bane of every Minister’s life*” with the focus of questions ranging from structural issues in school buildings to the developments in relationships and sexuality education. This diverse range of questioning in the Dáil can suddenly focus national attention towards delicate policy areas within the system as well as sparking debate and affecting policymaking processes.

The evidence of this research also indicates that educational policies that are deemed to be politically significant require collaboration across government departments. More specifically, Participant A imparted that collaboration between government departments would occur when the educational policy in question “*had a bearing on*” the work of other departments. According to Participant D, a number of educational policies would cross departments and this communication could be formalised through the establishment of discrete subcommittees or task forces to enable policy dialogue. Examples of government departments that would be influenced by policy change in education that were referenced in this research included the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Department of Health and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Participants A, B and D). While collaboration across government departments exhibits positive signs of policy alignment in government (Coburn *et al.* 2016), it also indicates the reach of Irish educational policy and the

resultant vested interests that interact with the policy space. Furthermore, the cross-collaboration of government departments introduces further policy dialogue. Giest argues that the involvement of additional participants in the policymaking process would increase challenges and add a further layer of “complexity” (2017, p.13).

4.2.1.3 Policy continuity

While policymaking in Irish education can be influenced by political priorities, participants in this research celebrated the relative continuity that is maintained in educational policy unlike other countries where political shifts can result in significant policy change and in some cases complete policy reversals (Participant H). Literature on Irish educational policy explains that the nature of a centrist government in Ireland means that relative consistency in educational policy is observed even when changes in government occur (O’Sullivan 2005). Participant I points to the internal structures of the Department of Education as an explanation for the relative stability observed in Irish education despite changes in government personnel:

There's the sort of civil service side of it, which is kind of you know the machinery of government that trundles along, and then there's the political side of it, which is where the Minister comes in and they are a political appointee, and they will have some political appointees, and they're usually in position for a few years at a time so they have a priority or a couple of priorities and so on [...]but the other side of it then, the more if you like kind of machinery side of it, you might have people who have been working there for 10 or 20 years.

This insight from Participant I provides a conflicting account of the political structures affecting policymaking. On the one hand, ministerial changes can maintain or upset the flow of policy direction in education while on the other hand, relative stability is observed in the positions of civil servants working in the policy formulation space.

This section has presented a range of perspectives on the multi-varied means by which the political landscape affects educational policy in Ireland. The data is clear in the summation that educational policy in the Department of Education is undeniably shaped by the educational priorities outlined in the programme for government. Additionally, the influence of a Minister for Education in advancing their personal educational policy priorities in the policymaking process was identified in this research. These priorities can be influenced by a range of factors including the background of the Minister for Education as well as their interests and

educational philosophy. The research highlights that transitions in political power can result in changes in policy priorities and therefore, policies that may have been in development under a previous political regime can become stalled and halted. Furthermore, the evidence of this research concludes that educational policies that are deemed to be politically significant require collaboration across government departments. Despite these findings and somewhat contradictorily, participants in this research celebrated the relative continuity that is maintained in educational policy in comparison to other jurisdictions where political change can result in policy upheaval. The next section will examine the economic influences that shape educational policymaking in Irish education.

4.2.2 Educational Policymaking Directly Impacted by Economic Influences

The relationship between educational policy and the economy is one that is narrated by a number of researchers (O'Connor 2014; Bodroža *et al.* 2016; Fleming and Harford 2014). One such source of research concluded that reform in educational policy can be rationalised in terms of the intention to positively impact economic progression (Bodroža *et al.* 2016). In a similar trend, this research confirms that change in Irish primary educational policy can also be legitimised through clarification of proposed, future benefits to the economy. Furthermore, the results of this research firmly capture the influence that financial considerations regarding policymaking place on the decision-making process. This section, therefore, examines the economic influences that direct, mould and often dictate policymaking in the Irish primary context. The section is divided by three sub-headings, namely, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the Irish Business and Employers Confederation.

4.2.2.1 The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

The data suggests that cross-collaboration can occur between government departments as part of the policymaking process. One such department that was heavily referenced in this research as a consistent point of contact in the process of creating policy was the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Notably, four participants in this research who had decision-making roles in national educational policymaking, referred to the consistent need for negotiations with this department. Participants B and D explained that most policies produced by the Department of Education have a budgetary component and therefore, decisions regarding policy of this nature must be made in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

This need for communication is primarily due to the cost of resourcing educational policy which is an expensive output for the Government. Participant K spoke of the need to assess potential costs as part of designing policy, stating “*when you're looking at policy, you have to identify where the tangible benefits are and what are the costs and weigh those up against each other*”. The cost of resourcing policymaking can be affected by factors such as consultation processes, making funding available for schools to implement a given policy and increasing “*people capacity*” to enable the enactment of a policy (Participant D). The Digital Strategy for Schools 2022-2027 is a recent example of educational policy that required a commitment of financial resourcing to enable policy implementation. This development will see an investment of €50 million being provided to primary and post-primary schools to purchase and maintain digital technology infrastructure (Department of Education 2022c). While policy strategies such as this require large sums of money being pumped into education, Participant C, conceded that in comparison with international counterparts, we as a country “*are very poor investors in education*”. Participant B spoke of the challenge of gaining approval from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in order to fund policy implementation:

So you fought with the Department of Finance first, then you brought it back to the cabinet and then you might have another row with finance [Department of Finance], because no matter what policy there is, there's an additional expenditure and you have to have that ringfenced.

This concept of evaluating the cost of a policy prior to publication resonates with the concept of evidence-based policy whereby established procedures exist to ensure projected costs are factored into policy decision-making (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Furthermore, this quotation speaks to the iterative check-ins between policymakers and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the process of policy design, signalling the ebb and flow of influence that took place due to financial implications. Notwithstanding the delays that this collaboration between the Department of Education and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform can place on the policymaking timeline, this co-ordinated approach to policymaking in government was endorsed by participants in this research in order to make informed decisions about educational policy (Participants B and D).

4.2.2.2 The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

There was also consensus in the data confirming that certain educational policies in Irish primary education can be legitimised due to economic justifications. More specifically, such

arguments for the need to re-evaluate educational policy in the pursuit of economic progression typically come from comparative data with international counterparts, customarily accumulated through assessments from the OECD (Participants A, B, D and K). Results from OECD assessments, such as PISA exert a significant influence on Irish educational policymaking. Participant B signified the role that the assessment data plays in processes of policymaking, confirming: *“you will also get assessments by the OECD, and that, that information is also part of the entire discussion that takes place when you're coming to a policy framework”*. Additionally, the desire to measure Ireland’s educational performance relative to other countries is evidenced by the work of the Educational Research Centre (ERC), who devote considerable capacity towards evaluating and reporting on the results of assessments such as PISA and TIMSS (Participant I). Participant I explained that these reports would then be shared with policymakers in the Department of Education for consideration. This is evidence of performativity in Irish education through comparison with other countries and the consideration of this in policymaking (Ball 2003; Lingard and Sellar 2013; Sahlberg 2007). Participant A commented on the unquestionable influence of assessments such as PISA on Irish education:

as a Minister you learn very quickly to know all about PISA, PISA rears its head all the time [...] and the Department really bows to PISA and to the OECD and if I heard once about Finland, I heard it about a million times.

While the benefits of drawing on international research to inform policymaking were supported by Participant J, this participant similarly questioned the benefit of looking too closely at other contexts such as Finland. The influence of PISA assessments in Irish education was clearly articulated in the findings. One participant alluded to an experience of policymaking whereby *“panic”* ensued amongst policymakers and members of the general public over a drop in PISA assessment results compared to international counterparts in 2009 (Participant B). It was further explained that this panic contributed to policy change to deal with the perceived plummet in educational performance through the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2011-2020. Similarly, Participant I referred to the shock emanating from PISA results in 2009 and recommended the need to exercise caution when interpreting assessment data:

PISA 2009 was kind of a big one that I think, sent a bit of a shock and perhaps too much of a shock through the system. So it's probably the one that would come to mind as you know, maybe being a driver of change if you like. [...] any one set of results at one point in time, you know, there can always be sort of strange things or kind of one-off events [...] that you might want to bear in mind or when you're looking on a broader level, it's more reliable.

Participant N, a teaching principal explained how the impact of these assessments on educational policy is very much evident at school level and extreme care needs to be taken with how these results influence decision-making:

There does need to be an element of caution in terms of how much we rely on those types of assessments [...] like PISA and TIMSS, a decision could be made to change a whole curriculum [based] off results in a given year.

Despite scepticism related to international assessment results, an acknowledgement is evident in the data that looking to other countries can provide inspiration for policy development. Participant G expressed the desire within Irish education to look abroad for policy inspiration, explaining “*we are keen to learn from our peers in Europe*”. Participants A, C and D referenced how policy influences can also come from the European Union (EU) in terms of negotiating on educational reform and funding. However, Participant D stresses that the OECD exerts greater influence on educational policymaking in Ireland and the role of the EU is likely to be more influential in other government departments. In addition to this, Participant D suggested that the positive contributions that the OECD make to Irish education is somewhat overlooked:

People think that it's all this big economic monster, but they probably had, if you were looking at research and comparable work, they probably produced more research that allowed us to look over what's happening across countries.

The notion of looking at what is happening across countries to inform policymaking reverberates with the concept of policy borrowing outlined in Chapter Two (Ball 2016; Fast 2016; Auld and Morris 2016). Participant G referred to this process as “*policy learning rather than policy borrowing*”. This evidence indicates that policy borrowing has influenced Irish educational policymaking (Ball 2016; Fast 2016). The influence of the OECD is not only confined to issuing results of educational assessments, Participants K and G spoke of OECD

involvement in working groups on consultation and community involvement in Irish education. This clarifies that the power of the OECD as a ‘transnational player’ (Ball *et al.* 2011) is also observed in Irish education. A number of authors allude to the role of the OECD in shaping and influencing educational policy in member states and this research also proves this to be the case in the Irish educational context (Auld and Morris 2016; Grek 2009; Moles *et al.* 2019). This evidence indicates the role of global educational reform on Irish educational policy.

4.2.2.3 The Irish Business and Employers Confederation

The findings also indicate economic influences to policymaking through the representative structures in Irish educational policymaking. Representatives from certain interest groups in education on the bodies working under the aegis of the Department of Education was a further recognition of the economic influences that contribute to primary educational policymaking. Three participants remarked on the role that the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) play in influencing both primary and post-primary educational policy in Ireland (Participants A, B and D). The position of influence held by special interest groups like the IBEC is witnessed by virtue of representation on the NCCA council and the Teaching Council. According to Participant B, this stems from an “*industrial need*” and a desire to ensure that the education system is producing graduates to work in modern society. Participant B also suggested that the influence of outside interest groups is not confined to representation on educational bodies, this participant explained that in her role as Minister for Education, there were occasions where “*outside influencers like people who are in industry or say the third level colleges come to you and say look this is what we see is happening, this needs to be done, we need to have a conversation about this*” (Participant B). This involvement of private sector interests in the public sector resonates with literature on the influence of global trends on education (Jessop 2007).

This section has analysed the economic influences that govern and shape educational policymaking in the Irish primary context. The evidence is clear in the identification that educational policy in the Department of Education is governed by policy financing and this requires consistent lines of communication with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. These discussions between policymakers and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform are a major influence on decisions relating to the policy design. Irrespective of the delays that this collaboration between the Department of Education and the Department of

Public Expenditure and Reform can place on the policymaking timeline, this co-ordinated approach to policymaking in government was endorsed by participants in this research. This research also confirmed that educational policies in Irish primary education can be legitimised by economic justifications. The OECD was identified as a major player in propping up these economic justifications through the provision of comparative international assessment data. Furthermore, this research established that the influence of the OECD is also evident through their involvement in educational projects in the Irish context. Finally, the economic influences from interest groups such as IBEC in the representative structures in Irish educational policymaking was also discussed. The next section of this chapter elucidates the societal influences that impact educational policymaking in Ireland.

4.2.3 Educational Policymaking Responds to Societal Issues

Literature relating to policy, in particular public policy, depicts how the policies set by governing bodies innately shape and influence modern life through the provision of laws, rules and guidelines that structure life in society (Anderson 2003; De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Interestingly, the data from this research confirms the inverse of this relationship and points to the reactive nature of educational policymaking in responding to emerging issues and trends in society. Therefore, this section outlines the intricate relationship between society and educational policymaking in Irish primary education, highlighting the means by which societal factors affect policy creation.

The reactionary nature of educational policy is a concept identified in policy literature (Adams 2016). Evidence from this research confirms that educational policymaking is indeed reactionary to societal problems and challenges in the Irish primary educational context. The responsive nature of Irish educational policy was confirmed by a number of participants in this research ranging from those with direct experience of leading national change in policymaking to those who had little to no experience of high-stakes decision-making in Irish educational policymaking (Participants A, B, G, H, E and N). Participant K explained that policy in education is created for different purposes and one type of policy that is created in the Department of Education can be classified as “*responsive*”. According to Participant K, this type of educational policy is created in a response to an issue that has been identified in society.

A number of participants who alluded to the creation of responsive educational policy captured how policy of this nature typically required an accelerated delivery, as summarised by Participant I: *“if there's an outcry about something, then things can happen very quickly”*. Participant B recounted an example of responsive policy whereby an unanticipated increase in immigration resulted in large numbers of school children requiring school places in urban areas that were already at enrolment capacity, explaining:

That's something that had never been thought about and then all of a sudden came upon us. So that was something that had to be dealt with very, very quickly, on how you support those young people to be integrated into the education system.

Participant K expanded on the topic of responsive policy, observing that in situations where immediate policy action is required, there is not always the luxury of time to complete the formal channels of communication and/or consultation with educational stakeholders. Participant K adjudged that policymaking needs to be agile and flexible to keep abreast with changes in society and therefore two approaches to policymaking are required, namely, policymaking that is created in response to an unplanned event and policymaking that is carefully considered through stages of consultation. Correspondingly, Participant N expressed the need for education to keep in time with societal developments, stating: *“I am of the opinion that the society you're developing all the time, and our education system needs to constantly be developed in order to keep in line with the different changes”*.

The swell of national interest in education was reinforced by Participant B who clarified that *“education affects everybody, so it's in everyone's life, and therefore it's hugely important”*. Educational policy holds an intrinsic role in society for inciting change and responding to problems. However, six participants in this research claimed that education cannot be viewed as the sole vehicle for assuaging societal issues. For instance, Participant A expressed *“no matter what the problem is in society, people think that education can solve it, not only education can solve it but that the education system can solve it”*. The need to reflect on the impact that changes in society are having on education was promoted by Participant D, who suggested: *“society is changing an awful lot, and I'm not sure we've had the real conversations about what matters to us”*. Similarly, Participant L queried educational policy that is too heavily focussed on equipping learners for future society, declaring:

We are too focussed on preparing pupils for employment rather than being well-rounded, with skill sets of cross-transferable skills that will adapt no matter where we go in society and whatever employment opportunities are there for them as adults.

This quotation from Participant L reverberates with the claims of Devine *et al.* (2015) who suggest that some policies in Irish education have been created to enable competition in the global market. This rejection of market-based ideology in educational policy aligns with the claims of Skerrit (2019).

4.2.3.1 Media influence on educational policymaking

The evidence in this research indicated that the media, and indeed social media act as conduits for contributing to public discussion around issues in society (Participants B, C, G, H and L). Notionally, an increase in notoriety with a particular issue in society through media representation can inflict pressure on policymakers to instigate change (Participant C). Two of the three Ministers for Education in the research sample acknowledged that the educational correspondence in the media was an undoubted source of influence in shaping decision-making processes (Participants B and C). In relation to the role of the media, Participant H proclaimed *“I think one of the really negative influences is the media and that's a real problem, because policy is sometimes developed to the knee jerk reaction to what's in the newspapers”*. Correspondingly, Participant J discussed how the media can imply *“urgency”* in relation to a particular issue, thus acting as a *“driver”* for policy change. Both Participant G and Participant N acknowledged the positive aspects of policy influence being channelled through social media. Firstly, Participant G expressed the benefits of social media in *“connecting top-to-bottom”* and removing obstacles between policymakers and practitioners. In a similar vein of thought, Participant N explained:

Certain people in certain groups feel that they need to take to social media, online communications, such as social media to have their voices be heard, then clearly, there's a chink in the armour somewhere. There's a link missing along the way in terms of that line of communication. So I think that's signalling where development is needed. I do think that there does need to be clear lines of communication between the school level and the Department of Education and the ultimate decision makers when it comes to policy.

However, Participant N questioned the suitability of a platform such as a social media for hosting public discussion on key policy issues relating to education. The evidence from research presented in this section has established that educational policymaking in Irish primary education is shaped and influenced by societal trends and issues. This responsive nature of policy can increase the expediency of policymaking process due to an identified need requiring a somewhat immediate solution. Furthermore, the data suggests that the media and social media act as catalysts for public conversation surrounding policy and can, therefore, become powerful policy drivers.

4.2.4 Conclusion

The content of this theme has examined the prominent sources of influence that affect educational policymaking in Ireland. Firstly, the intricate relationship between politics and education was discussed, identifying the range of political factors that shape policy formulation. The economic and financial factors that interact with the national education system were then assessed. Finally, the processes by which educational policymaking is shaped by societal influences were discussed. The next theme explores the fluidity observed in the policy actors that create and contribute to Irish educational policymaking.

4.3 The Composition of Policy Actors Involved in Policymaking is Dependent on the Type of Policy Being Created

Literature explains that the term policy actor refers to any group and/or individual that is involved in the policymaking process in any capacity, including but not limited to politicians, members of government, practitioners and stakeholders (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.364). The findings of this research uniformly underline that the policy actors involved in the policymaking processes in Irish education depends entirely on the type of policy being formulated. In fact, the evidence illustrates a transient and extensive cohort of policy actors that is contingent on the nature of policy being formulated.

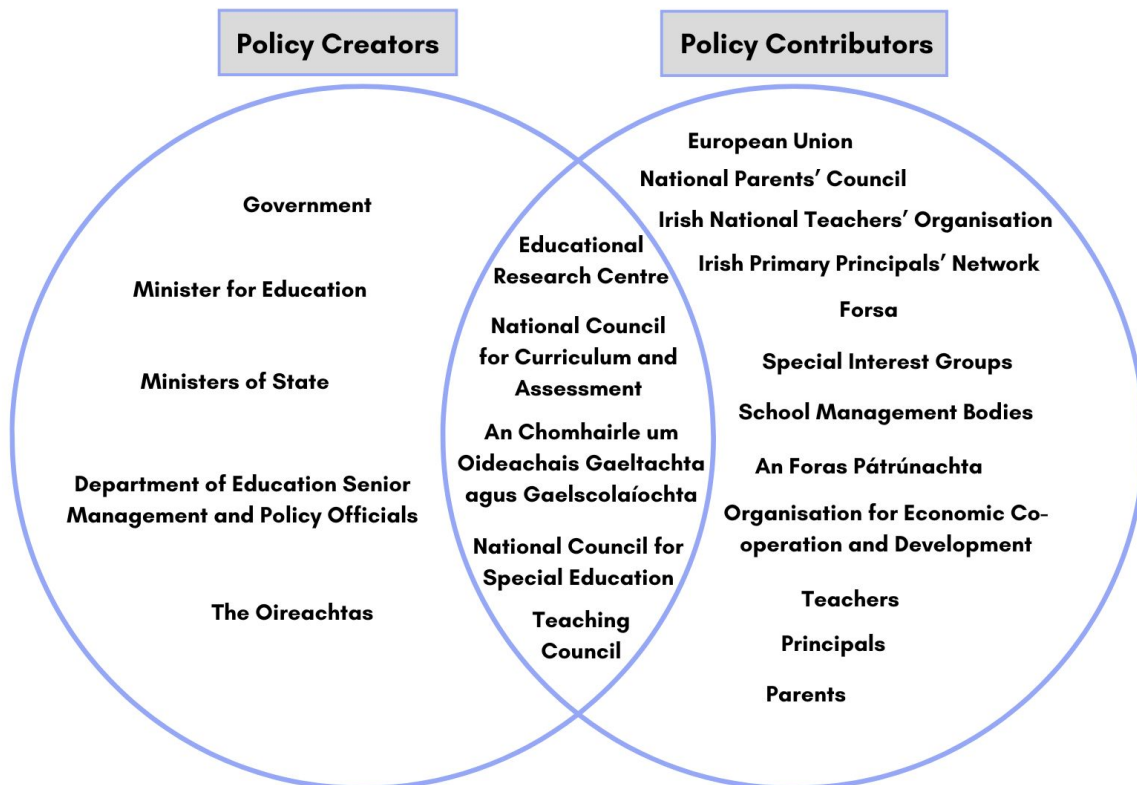
While the data indicates considerable expanse in the range of policy actors involved in policymaking, the evidence confirms the existence of two distinct groups within the transient cohort of policy actors, namely, policy creators and policy contributors. Once again, the type of educational policy being produced affects who engages with policymaking processes as a policy creator and policy contributor. Therefore, this theme provides an overview of the

evidence advanced by participants in this research regarding the roles and identities of those who act as policy creators and those who act as policy contributors in Irish education. Furthermore, this clarification of policy actors involved in decision-making processes allows for greater consideration as to how policymaking processes are initialised in Irish education. Consensus in the data reveals glaring inconsistencies in how educational policy is initiated in Irish primary education, confirming an ad-hoc nature surrounding who instigates and commences policymaking proceedings. Therefore, the final section of this theme discusses these inconsistencies relating to the initialisation of educational policy in the Irish primary context.

4.3.1 Policy Actors Comprise Policy Creators and Policy Contributors

The findings from this research underscore a clear separation between policy actors in terms of their involvement in policymaking processes. The policy actors in Irish education can be subdivided into two distinct, although not mutually exclusive categories: policy creators and policy contributors. Figure 4.2 below depicts the range of key policy creators and policy contributors in Irish primary education as identified by participants in this research. The bodies working under the aegis of the Department of Education have been placed in the intersection of the groups, because depending on the type of policy being developed, some bodies can move between the creation and contribution space. Similarly, not all the policy creators and contributors listed in the figure below will feature as policy creators for every policy, instead this figure constitutes a list of groups and individuals that have acted as policy creators and contributors at a point in time in the development of a given policy.

Figure 4.2: Policy Creators and Policy Contributors



This section discusses the roles of policy creators and policy contributors in accordance with relevant evidence from the field. It must be noted that the diversity of participants involved in this research constitutes a wealth of varying experiences in educational policymaking. Therefore, the insights of some participants feature more exclusively when examining policy creation or policy contribution respectively, as this depends entirely on the category to which their experiences pertain. For the purposes of this section, policy creators are discussed initially, followed by a review of the data relating to roles of the bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education. Finally, the roles and identities of policy contributors in Irish education are considered.

4.3.1.1 Policy Creators Directed by Chief Decision-makers in Education

Policy creators are the policy actors that operate pivotal roles in terms of instigating and leading policymaking processes. The evidence from this research aligns with literature and indicates that policymaking at primary level in Ireland is predominantly led and created by the Department of Education. An example of this was illustrated by Participant L who described policymaking as a process that is “*Department-driven*”. While the bodies under the aegis of

the Department of Education serve different roles in the policy creation space, ultimately, decision-making rests with the Minister for Education, Ministers of State and the senior management in the Department of Education. As expressed by Participants A and B, the purpose of the Government and the ministers working in conjunction with the Department of Education is to exercise leadership and make decisions. Notwithstanding the principles of partnership in Irish education which promote the inclusion and involvement of educational stakeholders, the evidence from this research copper-fastens the essential role of the Minister for Education in casting final decisions and determining the policy direction.

Participant A described that those in positions of power must still take ownership when it comes to decision-making: *“everybody has an opinion in education, I genuinely believe, everybody's opinion is valuable in education, but the Minister's job is to balance them”*. This decision-making power means that not all members of the public and/or vested interests in education will always be content with the final policy decision (Participants E and F). The conception of the sensitive policymaking space was reinforced by Participant K who declared that policymaking *“isn't a people-pleasing exercise”*. This connotes that not all views, backgrounds and perspectives expressed in policymaking processes can ultimately shape the eventual policy and associated decisions. Additionally, and indeed crucially, this finding also highlights that unpopular policies still require implementation, regardless of popular sentiment. This research establishes that inequity in decision-making amongst policy actors exists in policymaking processes, with the Minister for Education playing an outsized role. This inequity mirrors Portnoi's (2016) contention about inequity in policymaking processes.

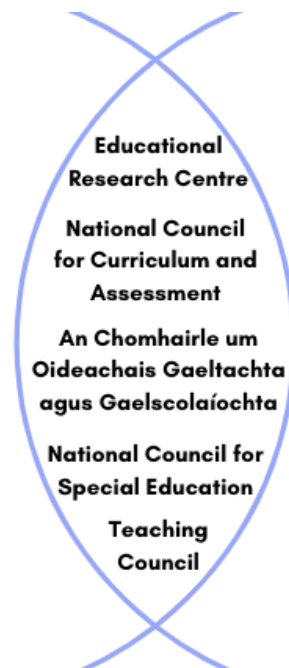
While the essential role of the Minister for Education was apparent in the research findings, notably, the participants in this research who held decision-making roles in the Department of Education were adamant in affirming the influential role of the Ministers of State working with the Department of Education as well as the members of senior management in the Department (Participants A, B, C and D). According to Participant B, experienced senior management in the Department of Education in accompaniment with the Ministers of State would often *“bring something else to the decision-making table”*. As such, these policy creators enact instrumental roles in directing educational policy in Irish primary education. This idea of decision-making being largely controlled by the Department of Education and the Minister for Education and Ministers of State is reminiscent of the elite policy theory presented in Chapter Two whereby those in leadership and political power make the decisions (Anderson 2003). Furthermore, the

earlier description of Participant K which suggests that policymaking cannot be a people-pleasing exercise is further evidence of the mantra where “a few govern the many” (Anderson 2003, p.13). While the processes of consultation are discussed in greater detail in a later theme, it is important to note that the creators of policy must make decisions surrounding the use and format of consultation with external stakeholders. Participant K outlined that at the early stages of policymaking, stakeholder-mapping takes place to identify who needs to be consulted and informed. Therefore, the need for experienced leaders with “*good working relationships with the partners in education*” is essential in order to allow for meaningful conversations and progression (Participant B). The involvement of stakeholders in the early stages of policy design is supported in literature (Bae and Stosich 2018; OECD 2019).

4.3.1.2 Bodies Under the Aegis of the Department of Education Enact Creation and Contribution Roles

The bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education also play a “*key role*” in the development of educational policy and some bodies move between the creation and contribution spaces (Participant F). The Department of Education list the following statutory bodies on their website: 1) An Chomhairle um Oideachais Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), 2) Educational Research Centre (ERC), 3) National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 4) State Examinations Commission, 5) Teaching Council, 6) National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 7) CARANUA - Residential Institutions Statutory Fund, 8) The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 9) Residential Institutions Redress Board and 10) Residential Institutions Review Committee. The statutory bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education that were identified in this research as policy creators/contributors at primary level in Ireland are depicted in Figure 4.3 below.

Figure 4.3: Bodies Under the Aegis of the Department of Education that Create and Contribute to Primary Educational Policymaking



These bodies have been included in the intersection of policy creators and policy contributors in Figure 4.3 as the research indicates that depending on the policy in development, the bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education can act as policy creators and/or policy contributors. This research gathered data from participants with ties to three of the education bodies listed in Figure 4.3, namely the Teaching Council, the NCCA and the ERC. This section initially outlines the diverse structures of these bodies, exemplifying how each body is distinct and individual. This recognition of the independent nature of these bodies is crucial in understanding how these bodies can perform creation and contribution functions in policymaking.

The bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education are identified by Participant F as the “*formal structures*” through which educational stakeholders are involved in policymaking. The Teaching Council, the NCCA, the NCSE and COGG are four bodies with a diverse representation of stakeholders within their respective organisations. Interestingly, the arrangement of stakeholders on the councils for each body are completely different. The NCCA council is a 26-member council including “nominees of the partners in education, industry and trade union interests, parents’ organisations and one nominee each of the Minister for Education and the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2022a). The Teaching Council consists of 37 members

with more than half of the council being occupied by representatives of primary and post-primary teachers (Teaching Council 2024). The remaining members of the Teaching Council are representatives from third level bodies, colleges of education, parents' associations, school management and nominees of the Minister for Education whereby IBEC and ICTU must be included in the ministerial nominations (The Teaching Council 2023). Contrastingly, the councils of the NCSE and COGG are not representative of the majority of stakeholders in education and instead comprise members with interests and backgrounds in special education and the development of the Irish language (Participant H). The council of the NCSE consists of a chairperson and 12 members appointed by the Minister for Education "from among persons who have a special interest in or knowledge relating to the education of children with disabilities" (NCSE 2023). With an equivalent number of council members, COGG also has a chairperson and a range of members from interest groups relating to the development of the Irish language such as Foras na Gaeilge and Údarás na Gaeltachta (An Chomhairle um Oideachais Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta 2024).

As per the terms laid out in the Education Act 1998, the NCCA provide policy advice to the Minister for Education and indeed the Department of Education regarding curricular policy (Participant E). A query or request to the NCCA regarding policy development can be received from the Minister for Education (Participant E). In this case, the request is discussed in the council and followed by subsequent research to assess the remit of the NCCA regarding the query (Participant E). While the NCCA may be in communication with a range of divisions within the Department of Education, most frequently, ongoing communication takes place between the NCCA and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit in the Department of Education (Participant E). However, the NCCA can also be identified as a policy creator due to the curricular policy that is created through the structures of the council, the boards and the development groups (Participant E).

Similarly, the Teaching Council also employ an advisory role to the Department of Education in consulting on and creating policy within their legal remit (Participants F and G). The Teaching Council Act 2001 (as amended) provides the legal parameters within which the Teaching Council formulate policy in conjunction with the Minister for Education and the Department of Education. Due to the nature of being an "*independent regulator*" in the teaching profession, Participant G advances that the Teaching Council cannot work as closely with the Department of Education as other bodies on policymaking. The ERC provide

information rather than advice to the Department of Education regarding educational policymaking. This information is evidence-based, extrapolated from national and international educational research conducted by the ERC, sometimes in partnership with international colleagues such as the OECD and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (Participant I). According to Participant I, the ERC “*brief the Department or brief the Minister*” on information relating to the policy area and this information is then used to direct, inform and reinforce policy decisions as part of what is regarded in literature as evidence-based policy (Tobin *et al.* 2010; Ozga 2009; Giest 2017; Ball 2003).

This section has established the list of policy creators which can include: the Government, the Minister for Education and Ministers of State, management and officials in the Department of Education, the Inspectorate, the Oireachtas and the bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education. As identified, the nature of the policy being formulated impacts which policy creators from the list above that are centrally involved in policymaking processes. The range of policy contributors that are involved in educational policymaking is now delineated.

4.3.1.3 Policy Contributors

A major finding of this research was the breadth of policy actors that contribute to educational policy in the Irish context (Participant A). While the principles of the partnership model and the arrangement of policy actors on the Teaching Council and NCCA council give an indication regarding the major policy players in Irish education, the results of this research exhibit a flexible approach to the selection of policy actors in relation to the development of a particular policy. As outlined by Participant K, there cannot always be a consistent representation of the partners in education because “*depending on the policy, you might want a stronger input from one area*”. Furthermore, as a later theme explores, the means by which these policy actors, or contributors, are consulted as part of policymaking can vary greatly depending on the type of policy in question. This section explores the range of policy actors that contribute to educational policy and how these contributions can vastly differ.

The large number of groups and individuals that contribute to educational policy was referred to by the majority of participants in this research. Participant C shared an example of a

significant policy development where thirty-four policy contributors were involved in policy discussions in order to share their insights and commit to their individual roles:

Each of them had their speaking point. They had their role to play [...] but it was to talk about their own responsibility and where they were now what change they saw. So we were getting them to take ownership.

The tension of maintaining balance between such a breadth of voices was identified as a challenge by the creators of policy that participated in this research (Participants A, B, C, D, K). Participant M captured the range of contributions to the development of policy that can come from the government, politicians, unions, agencies and interest groups, assessing that it is not possible for all policy contributors to be content with the finalised policy. Notably, not all policy contributors in education are implementors of policy. Participant E commented on the inclusionary and exclusionary nature of legislating the composition of policy actors on the NCCA council yet conceded the impractical notion that all relevant policy contributors in Irish education could be easily gathered in unison for the purposes of policymaking. While such legal underpinnings do not exist for the invitation of policy contributors in the development of all educational policy by the Department of Education, it is clear that the processes that enable policy actors to contribute to policy also appear to be inclusionary and exclusionary in nature as some policy contributors in Irish education have fixed and consistent arrangements through which their voices can be heard in relation to the development of policy. These arrangements include representation on some bodies working under the aegis of the Department of Education, fixed bilateral engagements with the Department of Education, representation on consultative groups and inclusion on the Primary Education Forum which is outlined in further detail below.

The Department of Education engage in a number of bilateral meetings with certain policy actors in the calendar year to discuss and review policy issues (Participants F and G). For example, the INTO have regular bilateral meetings with the Department of Education. This communication takes place between the INTO and the varying divisions of the department depending on the type of policy in development (Participant F). These meetings are supplementary engagements to the Annual Congress where the Minister for Education addresses the INTO (Participant F). The NCSE also engage in regular bilateral meetings with the Department of Education throughout the year (Participant H). In completing the consultation processes to develop a policy on Irish-medium education outside of the Gaeltacht,

the Department of Education employed the use of bilateral meetings under phase three of the consultation process to liaise with “certain stakeholders” (Department of Education 2023b). The terminology here again highlights the inclusionary and exclusionary nature of policymaking due to the fact that the policy actors who participate in bilateral meetings can alter depending on the policy in question. This confirms the claim of De Marchi *et al.* (2016) who express that the relative power and influence of policy actors can vary depending on the policy issue. Participant H illustrated this point by explaining that although the National Parents’ Council (NPC) are bound by the Education Act to be consulted on policy developments, the means by which this consultation takes place depends on the policy in question:

There would be consultation at some level. So sometimes that can be literally an email with a link to a survey. But really, generally it's more sitting on working groups being asked for submissions [or] sitting on steering group.

The Primary Education Forum is another means by which policy actors can contribute to policymaking. This forum is facilitated by the Department of Education and hosts a range of policy actors including representatives from the school management associations, an Foras Pátrúnachta, the INTO, the NPC, Gaeloideachas, the IPPN, Forsa, and the NCCA (Department of Education 2023c). The members of this forum meet approximately four times per year to discuss “core issues” in the “pace and sequence of change” in Irish primary education (Participant K). While these formal mechanisms exist, Participant F explains that informal conversations also arise in between formal engagements which are hugely significant in terms of sharing thoughts, queries and concerns about the policy in question. This signals the development of positive working relationships between certain policy contributors and policy creators which Participant H regards as a strength of the partnership model in the Irish education system.

Participant B explained that the lack of “good working relationships” between the Department of Education and the partners in education leads to nothing but “difficulty”. In addition to this, Participant G suggested that the development of relationships, listening to others and understanding how to voice perspectives both formally and informally is critical in exerting an influence on educational policy. The need to establish good working relationships and have spaces for diverse discussion signals the time commitments required in policymaking.

Understanding how to work with other policy actors and the systems of policymaking emerged as a further finding. The development of relationships with policy creators and engaging in policy discussions is considered by Gaventa (2006) as holding power. Participant C remarked that teacher unions and interest groups “*know how to lobby*” and this has a significant impact on enabling their voice to be heard amidst the range of partners in education. The data suggests that some groups and individuals can “*fall into this trap*” of believing that rallying vociferously against change and publishing “*position papers*” will always result in the desired policy outcome and this is not always the case in Irish education (Participant G). Participant M proffers that there are numerous issues in education but in order to make change, you have to assess what changes are possible and channel energy in this direction.

This section has communicated the wide-range of policy contributors that can interact with policymaking procedures in Irish education. The policy contributors identified by participants in this research include the OECD, the EU, bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education, unions, management bodies, special interest groups, schools, parents, teachers, principals and representative groups. Interestingly, in alignment with the trends of global educational reform, policy contributors are not confined by domestic borders and include transnational players (Ball *et al.* 2011). The nature of the policy being formulated impacts which policy contributors from the list above that are involved in policymaking processes. This denotes that the characteristics of how ‘exclusive’ a particular policy forum is relies on the nature of the policy in question (Fischer and Leifeld 2015). The final section of this theme explores the evident inconsistencies in how educational policy is initialised in Irish educational policymaking.

4.3.2 Extensive Range of Policy Creators Contributes to Inconsistencies in the Initialisation of Educational Policy

The first section of this theme firmly established the variety of policy actors that operate within the policy creation and contribution circles. The findings indicate that policy creation is primarily orchestrated by a combination of policy actors from the Government, the Minister for Education and Ministers of State, management and officials in the Department of Education, the Inspectorate, the Oireachtas and the bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education. Such a range of policy creators speaks to a further finding of this research whereby evidence confirms glaring inconsistencies in how educational policy is initiated in

Irish primary education. This evidence confirms an ad-hoc nature surrounding who instigates and commences policymaking processes. This section outlines the evidence that validates the impromptu tendencies that pervade the initial stages of educational policymaking.

While a previous section of this theme identified a wide range of policy creators, evidence from this research also indicates that policymaking at primary level in Ireland is predominantly “*driven*” by the Department of Education and the associated ministers (Participant L). The data indicates that policy can be instigated from a number of sources including “*political advisors*”, “*the cabinet*”, the parliamentary party in power and the Oireachtas (Participant B). This claim hints at the stewardship of political powers and associates involved in Irish educational policymaking, confirming the argument that policymaking in Irish education is very much a “*political process*” (Looney 2014, p.10).

Despite the historical trends of policy creation within the Department of Education, it is clear that the personnel who instigate the emergence of a particular educational policy depends entirely on the type of policy being created. According to the participants in this research who have worked with, and in, the Department of Education, there is not one fixed system for how policy is developed across the divisions in the Department of Education, this is dependent on the particular policy in question (Participants D and G). Perhaps, an explanation for this behaviour is captured in the quotation by Participant K who imparted that the Department of Education “*don’t have a box of how to do policy that was built in 1981 that we still use today, the policy process is constantly evolving*”.

Although there are two divisions of the Department of Education which, by virtue of their titles, would appear to act as centres for policymaking, evidence from this research suggests that policy development occurs across all department divisions (Participants G and D). Participant G advised that different divisions within the Department of Education deal with different issues. There is not one sole division in the Department of Education that focusses exclusively on policymaking, rather it is typical that policy development requires co-operation across all department divisions. In certain cases, a policy may be developed by one division of the Department and on other occasions collaboration occurs across a “*cross-section*” of divisions (Participant D). This complicated process captures the complexity of policy initialisation in Irish education. Participant G revealed that a policy in education could have so many implications that it necessitates collaboration between different divisions in the Department of

Education. Participant D remarked on similar sentiments of collaboration, however, explained that particular high-stakes policies require collaboration between departments in the Government. While it is evident that the initialisation of policy is very much dependent on the policy being created, a major reflection is just how complicated the process of initiating a policy can be due to the potential range of policy creators.

Further to the point about collaboration within the Department of Education, Appendix J depicts an overview of the divisions in the Department of Education from the most recent Annual Report published by the Department of Education in 2022. While the researcher recognises that structural changes may have taken place since this was published, this appendix has been included as a further indicator of the many layers that a given policy may pass through in the Department of Education as a result of collaboration between divisions. Additionally, the illustration of the numerous divisions of the Department of Education reinforces the limitations associated with attempting to apply policy process theories such as that outlined by Anderson (2003) to the complexity of policymaking in the real world.

In certain instances, a policy may be instigated by the Minister for Education or indeed spearheaded by the Secretary General of the Department of Education, who directs stages of policy formulation, consultation and review (Participants B and D). However, once again, this very much depends on the policy in question and in other examples of policymaking, the Secretary General may adopt a position of observation and oversight rather than direct leadership (Participant D). This is a significant finding as it points to the vastly different approaches to policy formulation that can occur within the Department of Education itself, before consultation with external stakeholders has even been considered. According to Participant K, educational policy can be created in order to; 1) respond to an immediate need in education/society, 2) support associated policy implementation, 3) outline the strategic vision for the system, 4) provide operational instructions for schools. Perhaps, the responsive approach to policymaking outlined here hints at scope for the Department of Education to deal with the change and flux in “policy demands” presented by policy actors and indeed changes in society (Anderson 2003, p. 3).

This section has outlined the impromptu mechanisms that exist in the initial stages of educational policymaking due to a dynamic cohort of policy creators that is dependent on the type of policy being formulated. The complexity associated with this stage of the policymaking

process in Irish education prompts the establishment of formalised policymaking procedures in Irish education. Based on these findings, the recommendation for developing policymaking procedures will be explored in the next chapter.

4.3.3 Conclusion

The content of this theme has examined the extensive, variant and sometimes transient cohort of policy actors that interact with the policymaking structures in Irish primary education. Firstly, this theme has explored the roles assumed by policy actors in creating and contributing to educational policymaking in the Irish primary context. The policy actors that emerged as central to the creation of policy include the Government, the Oireachtas, the Ministers of State, the Minister for Education and the members of senior management and officials working in the Department of Education. While the influence of all policy creators may vary depending on the policy in question, the role of the Minister for Education in balancing the many voices in education and casting decisive calls emerged as a clear finding. The bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education mainly occupy an advisory role to the creators of policy, however, depending on the type of policy being developed, some bodies such as the NCCA and the Teaching Council can move between the creation and contribution space. Subsequently, data relating to policy contributors was presented which concluded that a large number of policy contributors exist in the Irish context including but not limited to politicians, interest groups, unions and school management bodies, teachers, principals, parents and the bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education. Finally, evidence was analysed that confirms an ad-hoc nature surrounding how policy is initialised in Irish educational policymaking. Notably, policy creation is not confined to one section of the Department of Education and can involve a cross-section of officials from all divisions in the Department. Additionally, policy creation can also involve cross-collaboration between other government departments. The next theme of this chapter discusses the evidence of power differentials within policymaking processes.

4.4 Power Differentials are Evident within Policymaking Processes

Literature relating to policymaking outlined that “power differentials” can exist between policy actors (Portnoi 2016, p.27). Typically, these differences in power are present in public policymaking due to the political nature of decision-making (Portnoi 2016). Differentials in power occur when parity in decision-making is not afforded to all policy actors and only certain

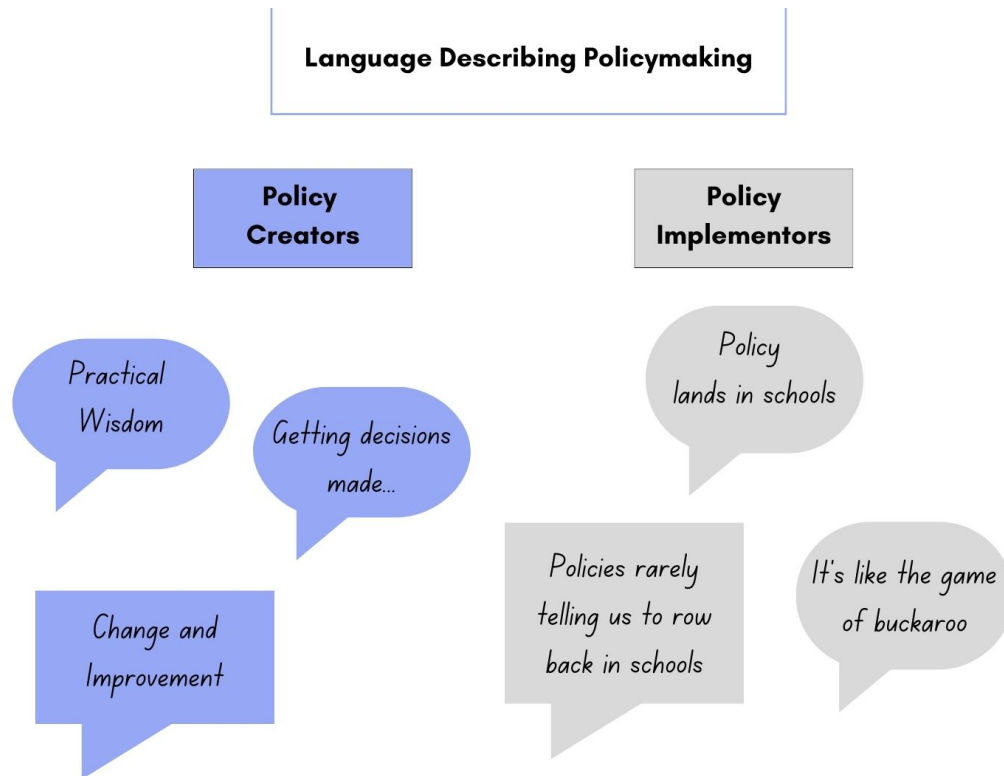
policy actors are operating in what Bowe *et al.* (1992) refer to as the context of influence. The evidence in this research strongly indicates that power differentials exist within the processes of Irish primary educational policymaking. Furthermore, the differentials in power contribute to dominant and silenced voices in Irish education (Bell and Stevenson 2015). This is significant to this research as it communicates that certain policy actors can yield greater decision-making power on a policy issue. Firstly, this theme examines the natural hierarchy that exists within Irish policymaking structures and how this contributes to a palpable separation between policymakers and policy implementors. Subsequently, this theme presents the evidence in relation to silenced and side-lined voices in Irish education, in particular, identifying the dearth of pupil voice in the Irish primary policymaking context. Finally, the data confirming the need to build capacity for widespread, meaningful policy debate and discussion is articulated.

4.4.1 Descriptions of Policymaking Confirm a Disconnect between Policymakers and Policy Implementors

As outlined in the literature review, the word ‘policy’ can be interpreted and understood in varying forms (Anderson 2003; Bell and Stevenson 2015; Fay 1975). The commentary from literature defines educational policy as the domain of public policy that shapes and directs the provision of education (Portnoi 2016; Bell and Stevenson 2015). In order to make sense of the complex phenomenon of educational policy, this research obtained the insights of participants pertaining to their experiences of educational policy in the Irish context. Participants’ experiences relating to the term educational policy varied widely in this research. Interestingly, a variance in the descriptions of policy and policymaking were evident between those who had direct experience of making policy decisions and those who implement policy in Irish primary schools, accentuating a tangible disconnect between policymakers and policy implementors in the Irish context. This section, therefore, examines the evidence validating the existence of a division between policy makers and those responsible for implementation.

Generally, policymaking was regarded by participants in this research as an action of the Department of Education who along with the Minister for Education, were identified as the chief decision-makers (Participants A, E, G, I and M). However, further convergence in descriptions of policymaking was not evident in the data, in fact, palpable differences were observed between policymakers and policy implementors as depicted in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4: Policy Descriptions from Policy Implementors and Policy Creators in this Research



Participants with experience of leading and/or directly contributing to educational policymaking provided justifications for the necessity of educational policy in the Irish school system. Participant C shared an understanding of educational policy as “*practical wisdom*”, whereby educational policy provides guidance and instruction to inform the education system. This conception of educational policy as fluid and ever-evolving was reinforced by Participant K, who outlined how policy is produced by the Department of Education for the purposes of creating “*change and improvement*”. Participant G affirmed that educational policy is the construct by which the learning environment moves and adapts to attend to the needs of the learner. In addition to these descriptions, Participant B spoke about policymaking as a political process and what is required to make decisions in government:

At the end of that that's how you get the decisions made so that's why you see prior to general election, people put together policy papers for their own organisations, and they meet with the elected representatives and they try and influence that as part of their policy document [...], and then that leads you to what will be the government policy over x amount of years.

The descriptions and language used by educational practitioners to describe educational policymaking paints a juxtaposition of perspectives between policy implementors and policy creators. For example, four participants in this research remarked how policy “lands” in schools (Participants J, L, M and N). The implicit use of this verb is suggestive of an interpretation of policy as something that is produced externally by others and subsequently distributed to schools. This language also connotes helplessness, a lack of agency and feelings of not being empowered. Participant L, a practicing teacher at the time of interview, shared the following perspective:

Policies are rarely telling us to row back and are usually adding more and from that point of view, it can lead to having that feeling when we hear policy that we have started to associate it with news of more work.

It appears that this volume of policy documents contributes to feelings of uncertainty, frustration and being overwhelmed. This insight from Participant L is also indicative of the lack of autonomy of schools to resist policy change due to a top-down model of national policy development. This corresponds to the image of the teacher struggling to deal with increases in accountability in educational policy presented in Chapter Two (Moles *et al.* 2019). Notably, such sentiments correspond to the claim of Gleeson (2004) who contends that certain policy actors and interest groups command policy decision-making and therefore, partnership remains a sought-after component of Irish educational policymaking. Participant M provided a humorous yet concerning analogy when asked about the role of the principal in dealing with educational policy in schools, explaining:

It's like the game of buckaroo, where one more little item landed on your back can kick the whole lot up into the air.

Participant J questioned the timing of certain policies being introduced and queried the joined-up thinking between policy formulation and the considerations about practical implementation. Participant J argued that a lack of understanding can be demonstrated for school leaders and teachers, providing an example of policy change in School Self-Evaluation in 2021, “when schools just came back for the first time in September” and had to deal with an updated “Looking at our School” document and the associated circular. In Chapter Two of this

dissertation, the analysis of literature revealed that introducing policies at the right moment can have a substantial impact on successful implementation. In the Irish context, the timing of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in 2011 was described as the “rising tide” of accountability from European influences meeting the “perfect storm” of a dip in performance in PISA results and this created the necessary conditions for change, acting as a driver for policy (Conway and Murphy 2013). While a rationale for policy renewal such as the example outlined above might not always be so heavily rooted in international comparison data, it does indicate the importance of timing and the need to communicate and rationalise change.

Such imagery contrasts drastically with the philosophy of policy as ‘practical wisdom’ provided by Participant C and instead points to the challenge of enacting national policy at the local level in schools (Portnoi 2016). This once again is indicative of a disparity in the understanding of policy between policymakers and policy enactors and resonates with the findings of a report produced by the IPPN which constitutes an analysis of literature and practitioner research into the role of leadership in primary schools (Irish Primary Principals’ Network 2023). This report acknowledges that schools are “policy overloaded” and calls for policymakers to liaise with school leaders and to establish further supports that enable school leaders to effectively engage in leadership and management duties while also leading learning in schools (Irish Primary Principals’ Network 2023, p.12). Aligning with the perspective of Participant L above, regarding the vast number of policy documents for schools to negotiate, this report also analysed the number of circular letters issued to schools since 1973. The results demonstrate that from 1973 to 2003 there were ninety-five circulars issued to schools, which contrasts starkly with a total of seven hundred and ninety-four between 2004 and 2022 (Irish Primary Principals’ Network 2023, p.98). This finding from the IPPN regarding policy overload is equally reflected in the findings from this research, in particular, from participants who are educational practitioners. Participant L questioned the rationale for policy change in education advanced by Participant K outlining that educational policy introduces change and improvement into the education system. Instead, Participant L suggested that change in the education system is often enacted in a bid to improve competitive participation in the global market. This finding resonates with the work of O’Connor (2014) and Harford and Herron (2016) who describe how the Irish educational policy agenda after the 1950s was heavily influenced by the policy developments in Europe and began to focus on the ideals of free trade and competition.

Five participants in this research who have experience of implementing policy as a teacher or principal expressed feelings of being helpless towards policy change (Participants E, L, M and N). Participant E described this as being “*subjected*” to policy as a teacher. Correspondingly, Participant F, who had experience of contributing to policy on behalf of the INTO recognised that teachers may not always feel like they are directly influencing educational policy. Participant L, for example, felt that individual initiative was required in order to find out the appropriate channels to voice thoughts and perspectives on curricular policy as it was not something that was widely advertised or discussed in the education community. Participant J spoke of the challenge of implementing the new Primary Language Curriculum and the perspectives from practitioners in schools were only sought when problems were encountered. Literature refers to the process of “policy-churning” whereby the learning comes from unsuccessful reforms, signifying policy-based evidence rather than evidence-based policy (Jessop 2007, p.285). This evidence challenges the description that the partnership model in educational policy presented in Chapter Two as an “inclusive”, “consultative” and “democratic” approach to decision-making through the involvement of social partners in policymaking structures (Harford and O’Doherty 2016, p.41). Relatedly, the partnership model which functions on representative voice clearly does not entirely pacify feelings of distance between certain implementors of policy and the creators of policy. This accentuates the differences in responses between those in policymaking circles and those who are enacting educational policy.

The vastly different descriptions and experiences presented through the data of this research constitutes a critical finding of this research as it exhibits the concerns of policy implementors regarding the prevailing mechanisms for policy creation. The diverse research sample enabled a range of varying experiences of educational policymaking to be shared, however, some participants had a greater level of insight into how policymaking operates compared to others due to the nature of their experiences in policymaking. More specifically, the participants in this research who had the least exposure to experiences of national policymaking were Participants L and N, a principal and a teacher at the time of the interviews. These participants represent the practitioners of policy who put the policy into effect in what Bowe *et al.* (1992, p.147) refer to as the “context of practice”. The literature explains that practitioners engage in policy-forming whereby policy is constructed at local level by educational practitioners (Adams 2016), reverberating with the concept of practitioners being the street-level bureaucrats of policymaking (Lipsky 2013). However, the evidence suggests that the so-called ‘policy-

formers' tasked with implementation are afforded fewer opportunities to engage with policymaking processes compared to other vested interests in education. This section has indicated the need to review and amend policymaking structures in Irish education to build connections between policy creators and policy implementors. The next section discusses the privileged voices that are evident within Irish policymaking structures.

4.4.2 Privileged Voices Evident Within Irish Policymaking Structures

As outlined in the opening theme of this chapter, the research findings indicate that policymaking in the Irish context can be defined as a complicated and sensitive space of decision-making amidst an array of social, economic, political and international influences (Bodroža *et al.* 2016; Davies 2004). A common thread running through the data from this research confirms the presence of privileged voices operating within this complicated and sensitive space of policymaking. This section presents the data that resoundingly points to the favoured voices in the processes of Irish educational policymaking.

Firstly, the research findings capture the delicate environment in which educational policymaking operates. This is important to note in this research as a sensitive space for policymaking depicts an environment where policy decisions can be swayed by certain groups and/or individuals. Participant E captured how educational policy is created through “*discussions*”, “*negotiations*”, “*deliberations*”, “*compromises*” and “*brokerage*”. The language used by Participant E here is noteworthy as words such as negotiations, compromises and brokerage suggest how policymaking is forged on the collision of differing backgrounds, understandings, values and perspectives as part of the policymaking process (Elmore and McDonnell 1987). Furthermore, these terms signify how certain policy actors are forced to compromise in policymaking negotiations and these views also indicate that not all views, backgrounds and perspectives expressed in policymaking processes can ultimately shape the eventual policy and associated decisions. This demonstrates that the pursuit of seeking consensus is not always possible in educational policymaking (De Marchi *et al.* 2016).

Davies (2004) clarifies that the participants within the policymaking process proffer significant influence over decision-making and the eventual policy outcomes. While the evidence in this research also confirms this to be the case in Irish education, the experiences shared by participants in this research confirm that certain policy actors proffer greater influence than

others in the creation of educational policy. In fact, the findings of this research unequivocally confirm that “power differentials” exist between policy actors and the relative influence that can be exerted on policymaking (Portnoi 2016, p.27). As illustrated by the previous theme, the structures of the Department of Education indicate an evident hierarchy of decision-making from the Minister of Education to the Secretary General and senior management. Hierarchical decision-making mechanisms such as the Minister for Education casting a final decision on a policy signify clear power differentials in policymaking (Participant B). However, the findings of this research also cast light on the power differentials in existence between policy contributors.

The evidence from this study indicates that some policy actors hold more privileged policy-leveraging positions than others. This privilege can be proffered through greater opportunities to engage in dialogue with decision-makers. Participant H described this as some policy actors holding “*more weight in the room*” than others. Claims were progressed by participants surrounding the disparity in the platform afforded to certain policy actors in the system, reminiscent of the argument of Devine *et al.* who described consultation as a “cloak” used to provide the appearance of collaboration whilst in fact disguising stark inequalities in operation within the partnership procedures (2015, p.7). As a Minister for Education, Participant B held a position of holistic oversight regarding the decision-making processes in educational policymaking. Crucially, this participant provided an invaluable insight from the perspective of a policy creator, explaining: “*some people get heard more often than others*” thus confirming that power differentials exist in policymaking processes. Participant D imparted that the Department of Education would typically meet with “*the bigger education partners*” once or twice a year to uphold consistent formal channels of communication. This finding is certainly suggestive of certain voices being privileged in Irish educational policymaking processes. In a similar trend, Participant A pointed to the unmistakable strength of certain policy actors in Irish educational policymaking and identified the teacher union and the management bodies as critical players in contributing to policymaking, conceding that “*you can't do anything without them really*”. In fact, the strength and political weight held by the INTO in influencing policymaking was referred to by a number of participants (Participants A, B, C, D, H, K and M). Participant F believes that this strong position afforded to the INTO in policy discourse is largely due to the respect held for the teachers’ voice in education given that they are fundamental to the implementation of policy. As expressed in the previous section, this view, however, was not held by the practising teachers who took part in this research

(Participants L and N). Participant G shared an experience of policymaking led by the Teaching Council and the Department of Education which serves as an indicator regarding the position of strength assumed by unions and management bodies:

We realised however powerful the body of the Teaching Council may be, and it is in many ways, but it simply could not implement the changes on its own because it is a regulatory body, it regulates the profession but not schools, it doesn't control schools, it doesn't control principals, it doesn't control boards of management. So it was absolutely reliant on the management bodies, the unions and others, to actually make sure that the people on the ground the principals and the teachers went with this.

The management bodies and unions constitute an invaluable link between policy creators and policy implementors and therefore are considered crucial players in the processes of policymaking. However, a later section of this chapter questions the effectiveness of the representative structures in education and therefore, serves to undermine the strength of these links between policy creators and policy implementors.

While the completion of consultation processes in Irish educational policymaking was undisputed in this research, some participants remained sceptical over the level of influence that participating in consultation can have on a given policy (Participants J, L and N). These findings also allude to the inequalities of power that operate within the consultation space (Devine *et al.* 2015; Harford and O'Doherty 2016). Participants G and E outlined the challenges of assuaging the scepticism that some participants have in feeling that taking part in consultation will have little to no effect on the eventual policy. Participants E, J, L and N commented on experiences of engaging in consultations and not receiving any feedback or insight into how their contributions affected the policy in question. Participant J explained how this contributes to feelings that policy is often a “*fait accompli*” before consultation has even begun and participants are involved for the purposes of adding legitimacy to the policy. Understandably, the work of the NCCA is only “*public-facing*” at certain stages in the development cycles and therefore, policy actors may view curricular development as an “*invisible process*” (Participant E). Interestingly, these perspectives on policymaking align with the manipulation rung on Arnstein's Ladder (2019) whereby participants feel they are involved for the purposes of validating and gathering support for a policy rather than providing valuable input. While Participant E commended the partnership model used in Ireland to create

policy, this participant also described it as a “*corporatist approach to partnership*” alluding to rigidity of the structures by which consultation occurs. Furthermore, by definition, this claim of Participant E points to the industrial representation in Irish primary consultation and therefore, invites further questions about the voices that are not represented in educational policymaking. Participants F, H and K also spoke of the possibility that some groups are not currently represented at the policymaking table in Irish primary education. Participant H narrated the challenges associated with empowering some of the perceived silent voices in education, conceding that “*some voices are very hard to find*”.

This section has outlined the differentials in power that operate within policymaking processes in Irish education. In Chapter Two, an analysis was provided on Gaventa’s Power Cube, which presented a framework for examining citizen participation in policymaking and the associated power dynamics involved. There were two forms of power articulated in this theory that have been identified through the research findings, namely, visible power and hidden power. Firstly, visible power, a form of power that represents the tangible aspects of power in policy such as the rules and operating procedures of decision-making is clearly evident in the hierarchy of decision-making in the Department of Education (Gaventa 2006). Secondly, the presence of hidden power at play in Irish policymaking has been corroborated through the identification of favoured opportunities to engage in policy dialogue being provided to some policy actors (Gaventa 2006). Such power differentials are also suggestive of dominant voices in the policymaking process which invites consideration into the voices that are being side-lined or silenced (Bell and Stevenson 2015; Elmore and McDonnell 1987). This is reminiscent of the claim from literature that opposing voices to neoliberalism were not listened to in Ireland (Devine *et al.* 2015). The next theme outlines the findings relating to one such silenced voice in primary educational policymaking, revealing the dearth in pupil voice in the current operating procedures.

4.4.3 Dearth of Pupil Voice in Educational Policymaking

The presence of privileged and dominant voices in the processes of educational policymaking reciprocally means that there are certain voices that are not afforded the same opportunities in policy discourse (Bell and Stevenson 2015). This research data indicated a lack of consistent procedures to engage with the voice of pupils in educational policymaking processes at primary

level. This section relays the evidence that confirms this claim as well as situating this finding in relevant literature and policy developments.

Participants who held leadership positions in the Department of Education did not refer to the voice of primary school pupils as a source of influence in educational policymaking. This lack of consideration of pupil voice by those in the Department of Education could legitimately be viewed as a strategic blind spot thus indicating a clear disconnect between those in the Department of Education and the pupils they purportedly serve. The dearth of the voice of primary school pupils in the current policymaking procedures and consultation processes was signalled by Participants F, H and N. Participant H strongly indicated an absence of the voice of primary pupils in consultation, firmly deducing that *“the child's voice is not listened to at primary and I would go as far to say not listened to”*. Participant F recognised the calling for further input from pupils in contributing to policy. In addition to this, Participant F acknowledged the efforts made through certain consultation processes and the need to extend these efforts to influence further policy creation:

The current debate around voice is now focused on student voice, how do we incorporate the voice of students and at primary level most of the consultation processes now include the voice of children and there's a way of doing that, that ensures that the voice of children is heard in any policy development.

Aligning with the claim of Participant F in relation to the efforts to include pupil voice in certain consultations, examples exist as to the involvement of primary school pupils in curricular consultations completed by the NCCA (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2019). For example, the final report on the research conducted by Leavy *et al.* (2023) focussed on using a range of methodologies to gather pupil voice as part of the broad consultation on the New Primary Mathematics curriculum including the use of photovoice, focus groups interviews and draw and tell activities. The findings from their research provided a critical insight into the way that pupils in primary school view and understand mathematics, firmly indicating the pivotal role that the voice of primary school pupils can play in contributing to educational policymaking. Consultation with primary school pupils was also completed by the NCCA on the Primary Curriculum Framework through the commissioning of research through Marino Institute of Education. Amongst other questions children were asked “what they liked, disliked, and would change about learning in school” (National Council for

Curriculum and Assessment 2020). Eight primary schools took part in this research whereby teachers in the schools gathered the data and compiled audio recordings, drawings and worksheets from pupils in their context. While these efforts signify a major development in the inclusion of pupil voice in educational policymaking, consistent consultative structures such as the establishment of a representative body for primary school pupils would further progress the inclusion of the voice of pupils in Irish educational consultation.

Participant N spoke of the use of pupil assessment data to influence educational policy such as standardised tests and international assessments conducted through the OECD. This participant questioned how influential these assessment results should be in influencing policy and compared this to the sharing of standardised test results in schools:

You know, as a principal and as a teacher, every year when the standardised tests are sent out to parents we are issuing that word of caution around this is a snapshot of pupil learning, this is just one example of their learning from the year so don't read into it too much. However, when the shoe is on the other foot and we're looking at international assessments, like PISA and TIMSS, a decision could be made to change a whole curriculum off [sic] results in a given year. So I do think that that is something that we as a country need to be very careful about in terms of how much those assessment results influence policy.

This reflection provides a pivotal insight into the reductive means by which pupils contribute to educational policy, which according to Participant N is dominated by the analysis of assessment results from Irish primary pupils. As outlined, such results provide a limited glimpse into the learning profile of a pupil and will not afford similar insights garnered through alternative qualitative methodologies outlined above in the summation of the research by Leavy *et al.* (2023). The terminology of “*when the shoe is on the other foot*” is again symptomatic of a dichotomy between policy implementors and policy creators and further reinforces the need to establish effective mechanisms for the meaningful inclusion of the pupil voice in Irish primary educational policymaking. Additionally, the preference of quantitative data over qualitative data resonates with the influences of global trends on educational policy (Tobin *et al.* 2010; De Marchi *et al.* 2016; Adams 2016).

As alluded to in the previous section, the identification of educational partners in the Education Act 1998 by its nature both includes and excludes vested educational interests (Participant E).

While it is clear that there are limits to representation in order to enable consultation and indeed policymaking to effectively function, the need for a diverse range of voices to filter through into consultation was advanced by all participants in this research. Indeed, the recognition of the need to enhance the reach of pupils' voices in Irish society has received greater attention since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. Notably, the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making sets out four priority areas of action, one of which clarifies the aim of ensuring that "children and young people will have a voice in decision-making" in education (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2015, p.3). Recent developments at post-primary level certainly confirm the strides taken to achieve this goal through the updated composition of the NCCA council to include representation of the ISSU (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2022a). The development of *Bringing Education Alive for our Communities on a National Scale* (BEACONS), a project being led by the Teaching Council in association with funding from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, demonstrates a commitment to enhance communication between the local community and the national processes of consultation (The Teaching Council 2022). In May 2022, the NCCA published a report on one of the consultative events held by BEACON entitled 'From Purpose to Practice: A consultation with school communities on the future of the Primary School Curriculum in Ireland (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2022b). In this report, it explains that forty primary school children took part in this consultative event and captures the insights and perspectives of primary school pupils following an emergence from education during the Covid-19 pandemic. The establishment of structures such as BEACONS that furnish connection loops between the local community and the national policymaking processes might indeed, provide a solution to the aforementioned desire for defined consultation structures in Irish education.

This section has clarified the dearth of pupil voice in Irish primary educational policymaking. Furthermore, the evidence from this research calls for improvements in the establishment of consistent consultative structures that enable the voices of pupils to be meaningfully heard in policy developments in the Irish primary context. The conclusion below provides a brief summation of the key findings from this theme.

4.4.5 Conclusion

The content of this theme has analysed the prominent power differentials evident within Irish policymaking structures. Firstly, this theme established a clear disconnect between policymakers and policy implementors as illustrated by vastly different accounts of policymaking processes. Evidence from the data was then presented which indicated that privileged voices exist within policymaking that provide greater policy-leveraging positions for some policy actors. This allowed for exploration of the final finding in this theme which outlined the dearth of pupil voice in Irish primary educational policymaking. The next theme discusses consultation as a championed yet flawed construct in Irish education.

4.5 Consultation is a Championed yet Flawed Construct in Irish Education

The concept of consulting with educational stakeholders in the formulation of educational policy is widely promoted in literature and indeed has become a key tenet of educational policymaking in Ireland (O'Doherty 2014). While policymaking is readily regarded as a complex and complicated process, similar descriptions are propounded in relation to the mechanisms by which consultation is conducted in education (Luetjens and Mintrom 2016; Giest 2017). At a time where the importance of stakeholder involvement in education is being openly acknowledged by the Department of Education (Department of Education 2021a), this research provides a timely discussion on the means by which stakeholders contribute to educational policymaking. This theme outlines consultation as a celebrated concept in Irish education, however, the research data also indicates numerous limitations to the prevailing consultation processes that currently occupy the policymaking space in Irish primary education. Therefore, this theme firstly explores what works well regarding consultation in Irish education. The relationship between policy types and timelines and consultation is also examined.

4.5.1 Varying Consultation Methods Celebrated in Irish Education

The involvement of educational stakeholders in policy discussions has been a hallmark of Irish educational policymaking since the 1990s. As outlined, developments in the creation of the Education Act 1998 signalled the moves towards multi-lateral dialogue in education (Department of Education 1995). Therefore, the term consultation is very much part of the vernacular amongst policy actors in Irish education as evidenced by participants in this research who were readily familiar with the concept of consultation. In general, consultation is a process that brings a multitude of voices to the policymaking space was celebrated by participants in

this research. This section narrates the strengths of the consultation processes used in Irish education, pointing to a range of consultation methods used in Irish policymaking and the associated benefits of employing such approaches.

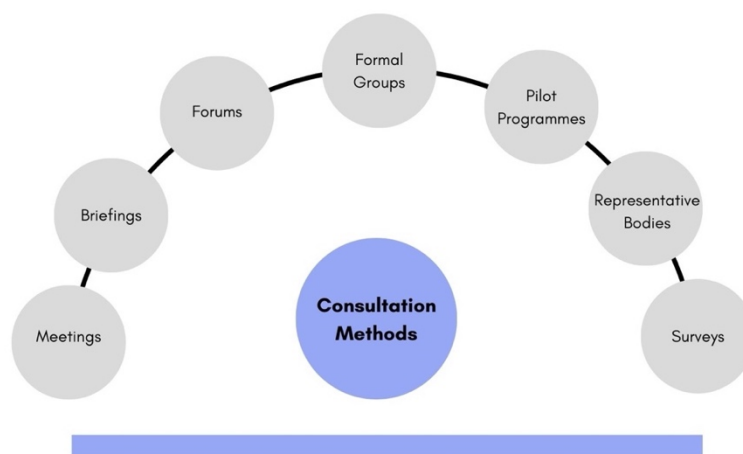
All research participants commented on the need for consultation processes in Irish education with the vast majority signalling the need to involve a range of voices and perspectives. As expressed by Participant C who oversaw the completion of widescale consultation on national educational policy, the aim of consultation is to generate “*a wide image of society*”. Additionally, Participant E identified that education needs to hear voices “*from the grassroots*” at the forefront of policy implementation in order to establish confidence and ensure that the education system as a whole receives and responds to policy decisions. Interestingly, two participants in this research who held the role of Minister for Education pointed to the comparisons between creating policy in education compared to other government departments, suggesting that consultation with stakeholders is not only promoted in educational policymaking but is also expected. Participants A and B explained that wide consultation was required in education in order to facilitate agreement and commitment from the partners in education. Notably, Participant A added that consultation holds particular gravitas regarding decision-making in education, remarking that “*you can't make a decision without agreement in education, it's consultation in other departments, you have to get agreement in education*”. This reflection denotes the power afforded to the partners in Irish education from those in pivotal policymaking positions. According to Participant C, the purpose of consultation is to “*create an environment in which everybody's voice*” can be heard. Similarly, Participant E shared experiences of leading consultations and explained that facilitating consultation should be about listening and should steer clear of defensive or persuasive tendencies. Additionally, Participant G reflected that mediators of consultative processes strive to “*be impeccable with [their] word, never make assumptions, don't take things personally and always do [their] best*”. Both Participant G and J spoke about the importance of ensuring that those engaging in consultation are fully informed about the policy at hand which requires communication before, during and after consultation. Participant G also spoke of the importance of certain policy actors in leading policymaking processes and reflected on certain experiences where the policymaking process would break down due to the absence of certain policy actors. This insight resonates with the notion of “nodal” policy actors presented in Chapter Two whereby certain policy actors are pivotal to linking, transferring and developing ideas (Ball 2016, p.161).

The data clearly indicated that while certain methods of consultation are consistently employed in order to facilitate discourse on educational policy, the processes by which stakeholders are consulted on policy can vary. Participants D and H welcomed varied means of consultation processes in Irish education. Participant H suggested that different types of policy require different forms of consultation in order to gather the necessary insights and information:

I think surveys and submissions are fine if it's a very high level lack of detail type policy [...], because you can get a point across in that but if it's around discussing nuanced policy, and how it's going to eventually work within the school context, then I think you need to have discussions. [...]one of the things that's really important with the groups, the working groups and the steering groups, particularly, is seeing other people's perspective, and that's just essential.

In this quotation, Participant H referred to different types of consultation methods such as the use of surveys, submissions and consultative groups. The different types of consultation methods referenced by participants in this research are illustrated in Figure 4.5. Consultation can adopt different forms ranging from written correspondence to in-person communication.

Figure 4.5: Summary of Consultation Methods Identified by Participants



Participants C and D alluded to examples of policy consultations that brought numerous stakeholders together at one time by means of a policy forum. In certain instances of significant policy renewal, full public consultations can also take place such as the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism as well as the forum on the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Participant D).

Participants A and B referred to the specific consultation points that occur each year whereby stakeholders meet with the Minister for Education, in particular, mentioning annual conferences. Both participants explained that further consultation takes place throughout the year, however, this would typically take the form of communication between the stakeholders and relevant section of the Department of Education depending on the given policy. Further meetings with education partners may take place throughout the year, however, not all would be considered consultative meetings but would rather constitute information briefings such as post-budget meetings (Participant D). Participant F confirmed that this bilateral communication takes place through both formal and informal meetings and discussions and strongly affirmed the need for both types of communication in policymaking mechanisms. The description of bilateral meetings bears resemblance to the partnership level on the ladder of citizen participation whereby policy actors are provided with opportunities to engage in joint decision-making (Arnstein 2019).

Five participants outlined that formal consultative groups or advisory committees can be established by the Department of Education and the Government, to enable stakeholders to contribute to educational policymaking. Participant B proffered that the Minister for Education can set up an expert group to incorporate stakeholder voice on educational policy narrating that this constitutes a “*functioning group within the Department (of Education) at all levels, and then the Department reaches out to people to support them*”. According to Participant B, these groups can be understood as “*rolling organisations*” that can involve stakeholders but are led by varying divisions within the Department of Education. The information garnered by this method of consultation is then communicated with senior management and then if necessary, with the ministers. Participant G explained that policy steering groups can also be commissioned by the Department of Education and can include external stakeholders or individuals with vested interests in the policy topic such as a leading academic in the area.

The use of pilot projects to trial policy change can also be used as a form of consultation with practitioners in schools. This can be led by the groups within the Department of Education and can also be facilitated by some of the education bodies such as the NCCA and the Teaching Council (Participants E and L). Participant E expressed that this form of consultation is used as part of developmental work in the NCCA in a bid to gather the “*community voice*” and the “*voice of children*” as much as the voice of teachers and principals in schools. Participants J and L shared positive experiences of engaging in respective pilot projects in school, pointing

to the benefits of mediating the policy in a supportive environment. In contrast to this, Participant A claimed that pilot programmes can present flawed results as typically, there are internal benefits for the school engaging with the pilot. Notwithstanding this perspective shared by Participant A, the use of pilot programmes signifies an investment on behalf of policymakers to harness the voice of practitioners, which was celebrated by Participants J and L. The enactors of policy hold control over the appearance and practice of policy (Burde 2004), therefore, consultation methods such as pilot programmes provide space in which the mediation of policy can be carefully observed and supported.

Surveys, questionnaires and submissions are further examples of consultation methods used by the Department of Education and some of the education bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education. Participant H narrated that consultation between policymakers and the NPC can vary greatly depending on the policy in question and can include an invitation to join one of the consultative groups outlined above or it can simply be an email with a link to an online survey. Participants J, L and N also shared experiences of completing surveys relating to curricular policy development. In fact, Participant L was able to complete written correspondence through online surveys and submissions as part of curricular consultation “*after school*”, which signifies the benefits of practicality and accessibility of this type of consultation method. Perhaps, accessible forms of consultation such as those outlined above could help to reach the voices that do not wish to be heard in educational policymaking (Participant F).

The Primary Education Forum is another means by which policy actors can contribute to policymaking. As discussed earlier, this forum is facilitated by the Department of Education and hosts a range of policy actors in Irish education (Department of Education 2023). According to Participant K, this forum is “*a two-way conversation*” whereby the Department of Education are permitted to brief the policy actors on upcoming plans and discuss policies before being finalised, however, it was stressed that this is not a replacement for consultation. Participant M remarked that this forum provides an opportunity to thrash out thoughts and perspectives on policy and enables stakeholders to put their voice forward on key issues.

Finally, the findings of this research indicate that the Department of Education do on occasion draw upon the information gathered from internal consultations that are completed by stakeholder organisations. For example, Participant D recited an example whereby the

Department of Education requested that a stakeholder group gather feedback from a small sample of teachers and principals relating to a policy development at the time that was causing particular difficulties in schools. According to Participant D, this information was gathered, analysed and shared with contacts in the Department of Education in order to shed light on the thoughts and feelings of practitioners. The internal consultations completed by stakeholder groups such as the INTO, the IPPN, the NPC are done so in order to inform the representative “*policy position*” of the group (Participant F). Participant G, who worked with the Teaching Council, was invited to work on a policy steering group, which this participant believed was done in order to enable communication with the register of teachers that was available through the Teaching Council database. This involvement hints at what Arnstein refers to as manipulation, a level of participation whereby citizens are involved in policymaking as a means of gathering support, in effect acting as a “public relations vehicle” (Arnstein 2019, p.26).

A number of the consultative methods outlined above require the voice of policy actors to be shared through the use of representative groups and individuals. For example, the education bodies, the Primary Education Forum and consultative groups headed by the Department of Education all employ the use of representative structures to relay the perspectives of policy actors. Participant E commended this partnership model used to create policy, expressing that this approach is “*the envy*” of many other jurisdictions. All participants in this research who had experience of working through the representative structures of the NCCA council reflected on positive, proactive working relationships between the diverse range of stakeholders on the twenty-six person council (Participants D, E, G, F and H). Participant F declared that this representation of stakeholders is crucially important to the system as a whole:

It [The NCCA Council] is representative of the different voices in education and it can lead to very interesting discussions around the table and also huge opportunity to learn more about the other sectors.

Participants E and D explained that the nominees on the council are interested and invested in the curriculum developments that move through the council and that while relationships are collegial, it is far from “*a cosy consensus*” (Participant E). While Participant G acknowledged the challenging role of representing a body through the partnership structure of the NCCA council, this participant also affirmed the learning that can occur through professional dissonance and listening to diverse views, expressing “*but that tension, you know, it's almost*

like, Leonard Cohen you know the cracks, that's how the light gets in". Furthermore, Participant K outlined that the opportunities for stakeholders to sit in a room together and listen to the perspectives of others within the education system are quite limited so that mechanisms that allow representative voices to engage in dialogue are vitally important to the development of educational policy in the Irish system.

Participants welcomed the use of a varied combination of consultative approaches including informal and formal communication as well as the recruitment of stakeholders' perspectives through both quantitative and qualitative means. This combination allows a range of voices to engage in consultation while also enabling the collection of rich, meaningful data to inform the policymaking process. However, reflection on the findings indicates that aside from consultation on curriculum development, a lack of consistency can be observed in the consultative approaches employed by the Department of Education on educational policy. This, the data suggests, is primarily due to the fact that the approach to consultation can vary depending on the policy topic. Participant D recommended that an intermediary body be set up to bridge the discourse gap between the local and national levels in educational policymaking. This is reminiscent of the identification of the gap between the local and national level in Chapter Two whereby some countries have a provincial level for policymaking (Portnoi 2016). This suggestion for a coherent link between policymakers and the school community is examined in greater detail as a recommendation in the next chapter.

This section has outlined the strengths of the consultation processes in Irish education with evidence speaking to the benefits of enabling a multitude of voices to contribute to the policymaking processes. Furthermore, the data is consistent in indicating the advantages to employing varied methods of consultation in educational policymaking. The succeeding finding examines the limitations of consultation whereby a number of voices introduces tension, sensitivity and delays to the policymaking processes.

4.5.2 Multitude of Voices Can Introduce Challenges to Policy Development

While the participants in this research welcomed the fact that consultation has become commonplace in Irish education, the data reveals the challenges that consultation can present to the progression of policymaking. More specifically, the experiences shared by participants in this research confirm that the involvement of multiple voices through consultation with a

range of policy actors can introduce tension, sensitivity and timeline delays to policy development. This section presents the relevant data relating to this finding.

4.5.2.1 Tension

One of the challenges to policy creation presented by consultation with multiple policy actors is the emergence of tension. In a memorable statement, Participant D expressed the benefits of gathering agreement through consultation while also clarifying the major setbacks to policy creation that consultation can present:

Consultation at its best gives you a consensus on which to move forward and at its worst, it slows things down and causes huge trouble and you have to fight in the ditch the whole way.

This is noteworthy from a participant who held a key position in policymaking in Irish education and alludes to the pressures that consultation can invite to the policymaking space. According to Participants D and H, a multitude of voices can contribute to obstacles in decision-making which can be disruptive. Furthermore, Participant H shared experiences of policymaking where the voices involved in consultation created a “*divisive*” environment which stalled policymaking processes. This reinforces the claim that acquiring input from multiple stakeholders can invite complexities and hamper decision-making (Connor 1988; Luetjens and Mintrom 2016; Giest 2017). The large number of stakeholders that exist at primary level and the relative impact that consultation with this quantity has on delaying policymaking was argued by eight participants in this research. Participant A narrated an experience of a policymaking cycle that lasted six years before the given policy was implemented, attributing lengthy consultations with stakeholders as a contributory factor to this prolonged timeline. Participant G suggested that time is needed in policymaking to have the necessary discussions and that progress in policymaking does not always equate to a rapid timeline.

4.5.2.2 Adoption of Default Positions

Participant C, who experienced consultation from the perspective of Minister for Education, expressed that complexity in consultation can be caused by stakeholders who take a “*default position*” of resisting change which can stagnate policymaking. Correspondingly, Participant D alluded to the lack of appetite for policy change that can be presented by policy actors in the system, attributing this to an “*inherited status quo*” in education circles. Participant D also

concluded that delays can occur in consultation due to an unwillingness on the part of some policy actors to execute “*trade-offs*” or take on board alternative views. This contributes to what Participant B considers “*over-consultation*” whereby stalemates occur in reaching agreement through consultative processes. As a result, a policy can be shaped and moulded by so many hands that the original intention of the policy no longer aligns with the final product (Participant K). Participant H spoke of the “*double-edged sword*” of attempting to reach consensus amongst policy actors through consultation, asserting:

Trying to get consensus means that the policy was initially intended to do one thing, but doesn't get there.

This finding speaks to the drawbacks associated with consultation whereby a lack of consensus can delay decision-making or negatively impact the intentions of a policy. Participant D added that very broad consultation can also summon challenges in terms of the richness that the collected data affords. Furthermore, this research indicates that facilitating consultation with policy actors requires both human and financial capital and therefore, the acquisition of this investment can act as a barrier to both enabling and expanding consultation (Participant D). Participant A expressed that while a range of views are welcomed on policy issues, eventually policymakers must make decisions to avoid excessive delays to policy timelines.

4.5.2.3 Purported Representation

The use of representation in policy consultation to channel the voice of policy actors was critiqued by participants in this research. Participant H communicated frustration with the fact that stakeholder representation requires no standard that needs to be met in terms of consulting internally with members prior to voices being represented in national consultation. Undoubtedly, this connotes a deficit in the system whereby no evidence is required to confirm the sentiment of a so-called representative statement. Given that stakeholder voice is predominantly heeded through representative structures, this calls to attention the need for agreement and confirmation as to what is deemed appropriate evidence to inform a balanced representation of stakeholder voice. The achievement of such a standard would require investment and supports provided to stakeholder bodies to ensure that adequate internal consultation could take place in advance of representation at national level. Additionally, the challenging role of working on a representative group was advanced in this research. In particular, the complexity of acting as a member of the NCCA council emerged in the data

(Participants G and H). According to Participant E, the dual role of being a council member while also representing a group or body certainly summons challenges for council members. Participant G explained:

We enter the door by virtue of a particular label, but when we sit down at the table, we are all and this is very made very clear to us as council members, you're here as NCCA council member, that's your responsibility.

Further to this, challenges can also be encountered as a representative on the NCCA council in straddling between functions of governance and contributing to curricular development (Participants E and H). A hypothetical example of reviewing a curriculum specification on post-primary physical education was shared by Participant H, who explained that all council members would offer thoughts and perspectives on this curricular development, irrespective of the fact that council members have varying interests and backgrounds and perhaps only one member may have taught the subject previously. This example was put forward to question the remit of the council in terms of casting critical feedback on a curricular specification:

I think that council has a really important role to play in curriculum in making sure that all the consultation processes were done appropriately and all considerations were brought in [...] but talking about what individual pieces are on a curriculum, I struggle to understand how the council should be involved in that (Participant H)

Further commentary on the use of representation in consultative processes in Irish education alluded to privileged voices and silenced voices as presented in the previous theme.

4.5.2.4 Tokenism

While the presence of consultation in Irish educational policymaking is undisputed, some participants remain sceptical over the level of influence that participating in consultation can have on a given policy (Participants J, L, and N). Additionally, Participant J expressed frustration with how consultation processes are conducted, pointing to inconsistent means of sharing information about the policy in question and details relating to how consultation will take place. Furthermore, participants in this research called for greater accountability and transparency in terms of how decisions are made regarding the approaches used for consultation with stakeholders as well as how stakeholders are selected to participate in these

approaches. While in theory, stakeholders can be viewed as “agents of democracy” by virtue of participation in the processes of policymaking, the research findings denote an increasing desire for defined consultation structures in Irish education as well as greater insight into the decision-making surrounding the involvement of stakeholders (De Marchi *et al.* 2016, p.16). Arnstein (2019) expresses that consultation, the fourth rung on the ladder of participation, may be considered as a degree of tokenism whereby actors are included in meetings but little impact on decision-making is observed. Instead, participation at this level is typically measured by the numbers of people involved in policy discussions or the quantity of completed surveys or questionnaires (Arnstein 2019). Given that transparency is one of the characteristics to investigate the strengths of policy forums (Fischer and Leifeld 2015), the claims from this section highlight the need for improvement in the communication of policymaking processes and decisions. Therefore, the inclusion of transparent policymaking procedures is referenced in the recommendations of the next chapter.

4.5.2.5 Time Delays

Ten research participants declared that the processes by which educational policymaking occurs in general in education takes considerable time. In fact, a number of research participants regarded the policymaking process as “*slow*” (Participants A, C and E). Seven participants highlighted the challenge of consulting with a large number of stakeholders at primary level and the relative impact this has on delaying proceedings. Participant D outlined:

I think the issue of all the stakeholders and the consultations and the discussion, it makes it probably a more slow-moving system than you might like at times.

Interestingly, Participants A and D compared policymaking in the Department of Education with other government departments and reflected that the need for wide consultation in education, while positive and proactive in terms of collective decision-making, “*takes an awful long time*” (Participant A). Participant A recounted an experience of a policymaking cycle that lasted six years. Similarly, Participant B spoke of the causal effect that a lengthy policy timeline can have when a change in political power is observed and suddenly, a policy that was on the agenda of the previous government, suddenly falls victim to a change in political ideology. Clearly, delays can lead to missed opportunities for improvement as well as policies becoming outdated. Participant A expressed the need for the Minister for Education to exercise leadership

in situations where a large amount of consultation has taken place, asserting that excessive consultation processes delay policy development.

This section has analysed the experiences shared by participants in this research that confirms how the involvement of multiple voices through consultation processes can introduce tension, sensitivity and timeline delays to policy development. These findings will be critical in constructing the conclusions and recommendations of this research in relation to the involvement of policy actors in policymaking.

4.5.3 Growing Requests to Empower Domestic Research as part of Consultation Processes

As outlined in the review of literature relating to policymaking, research plays an essential role in providing evidence-based insights and recommendations to guide processes of policymaking (De Marchi *et al.* 2016; Tobin *et al.* 2010). The important role of gathering relevant data and using this to contribute to educational policymaking was supported by all participants in this investigation. In fact, the findings of this research indicate a request amongst participants for domestic research to feature into policymaking through consultation processes. This section discusses the evidence from this research that captures the demand for the inclusion of context-based research from Irish primary schools in consultation processes.

The data confirms that the use of evidence to inform policymaking is certainly a feature of Irish policymaking. Such sources of evidence range from assessment results, consultation reports, financial evaluations and input from experts which is in line with the concept of evidence-based policy (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). The pivotal role of the ERC and the Inspectorate in collating data that informs educational policy emerged in the research findings (Participants D and I). Participant I explained how the ERC meticulously analyse data and present this in the form of briefings and research reports to the Department of Education. The work of the ERC is, however, bound to sizeable bodies of work such as the analysis of TIMSS, PISA and the DEIS initiative. Therefore, the capacity for the ERC to engage in smaller-scale research is somewhat hampered by the maintenance of these research projects:

By the time we account for those projects, that actually takes up a lot of the time of most of the research staff. So unfortunately, there's probably less capacity to take on sort of ad hoc or sort of smaller, more targeted bits of research than we would like, I think if we had more capacity, probably we would, try to take those things on (Participant I).

This claim denotes that a greater investment in the capacity of the ERC would afford increased opportunities for national research that would undoubtedly enrich the education system.

Participant J signalled that although a significant amount of educational research is conducted in Ireland through colleges of education and universities, there is often a gap between research findings and their incorporation into policy. This aligns with the claims of Ifitimescu *et al.* (2019) who propose that a lack of translation exists between the findings of published educational research and educational policymaking. The findings of this research suggest a similar situation in the Irish context regarding the translation of research into policymaking processes. Participant J argued that policymakers should establish mechanisms for translating research outcomes into actionable policy recommendations. Correspondingly, Participant G called for improvements in translating research and connecting the spaces between policy creators and the research conducted in colleges of education. Participant D recommended that further capacity should be afforded in the system to draw on evidence and research “*in a structured way*” and suggested that there “*should be more commissioned research*” to inform policymaking. Participant J promoted the need to commission teacher research, advising that capacity should be afforded to teachers to conduct research in their own schools based on a proposed research rationale and agreed research background.

While the benefits of drawing on international research to inform policymaking were supported by Participant J, this participant also highlighted the need for domestic, context-based research to be included in policymaking processes:

What we think will work or what has worked in Norway or Finland or indeed in England or the UK, New Zealand or Australia, may not work in Connemara may not work in North Kerry may not work in the midlands.

This quotation resonates with the concept of policy borrowing examined in the review of literature whereby the structuring of policy is based on “what works” in another location (Ball 2003, p.222). In a similar line of thought to Participant J, Adams *et al.* also indicate that direct policy borrowing can ignore and side-line the “important cultural and contextual influences” that can exist within the application of a policy within any school system (2016, p.166). This research concludes that there is a pressing need for improved collaboration between researchers

and policy creators as well as a commitment to build capacity for further research within Irish policymaking structures.

4.5.4 Conclusion

The content of this theme has presented the findings in relation to consultation as a celebrated yet flawed construct in Irish education. Firstly, the advantages afforded by employing a variety of consultation methods was outlined. Subsequently, this theme discussed how a multitude of voices can introduce tension and sensitivity into the policymaking process as well as contributing to delays in policy timelines. Finally, the growing requests to empower the domestic research as part of consultation processes was analysed.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the intricacies of educational policymaking in Ireland as a dynamic interplay of political, economic and societal influences that all collectively shape the educational landscape. Additionally, the research confirmed how the policy actors involved in policymaking is dependent on the nature of the policy being created. Power differentials were identified as an inherent presence in policymaking processes, highlighting the complex nature of decision-making. While consultation is a championed means of inviting input from a range of policy actors, it is not without its limitations and the insights of participants revealed a number of deficiencies requiring attention from policymakers. The findings from this chapter are used to discuss the conclusions, recommendations and implications of this research in the succeeding chapter of this dissertation.

Chapter Five

5.1 Introduction

In light of the research findings presented in Chapter Four, this chapter discusses the conclusions and recommendations of this research. As established in Chapter One, the aim of this research is to provide what Lingard refers to as “enlightenment” on policy, thus shining a light on what works well and what could be improved in policymaking processes (2013, p.119). In fact, reflection is core to this research, if educational policymaking is represented by the artist working tirelessly at the easel, this research constitutes the artist taking a step back to provide a holistic reflection on the work-at-hand, what Rolfe *et al.* (2001) refer to as ‘so what?’. The reflections from this research are presented in the form of conclusions and recommendations in this chapter. Firstly, eight conclusions are presented, drawing on the research findings as well as relevant literature and policy. Subsequently, the recommendations of this research are outlined, suggesting implications for policymaking and suggestions for further research.

5.2 Conclusions

The wealth of policymaking experiences afforded by interviewing a diverse research sample allowed for wide-ranging findings in this research. The expanse of these findings across the landscape of primary educational policymaking provides a number of critical conclusions. This section outlines eight conclusions, providing an analysis that refers to the evidence, literature and policy developments in Irish education. The conclusions of this research are depicted in Figure 5.1. Although these conclusions have been numbered in the figure, it is important to note that this does not denote any particular hierarchy and equal weighting is afforded to each conclusion.

Figure 5.1: Research Conclusions



5.2.1 Policy overload in primary schools poses a significant challenge to policymaking

The findings confirm that policy overload in primary schools poses a significant challenge to policymaking. Firstly, a disparity is evident in the descriptions of policymaking proffered by policy implementors and policy creators in this research. In general, policy creators commented on the importance of policymaking, branding educational policy as practical and something that was needed to propel change and improvement in the education system. This, however, is in sharp contrast to the descriptions of policymaking advanced by the participants that were engaged in policy implementation in schools. For example, four participants remarked how policy ‘lands’ in schools. The use of this verb is telling as it suggests helplessness and the absence of empowerment and agency amongst those who implement educational policy. Additionally, the findings provide an insight into the site in which primary educational policy is enacted, pointing to a deluge of policy descending on primary schools. A memorable analogy in the findings compared the experience of dealing with updates in educational policy to adding weight after weight in the game of buckaroo. This reflects the tension of attempting to make

sense of new educational policies while concurrently trying to keep other policies implemented. Furthermore, the unfortunate impact of dealing with numerous educational policies and competing priorities means that school staff are largely unwilling to partake in consultation processes relating to curricular policy developments.

While the findings certainly point to a disconnect between policy creators and policy implementors, a far more perilous realisation is the danger posed by this disconnect. Firstly, the descriptions of policymaking advanced by policy implementors do not align with the heralded principles of inclusivity and democracy espoused by the partnership model in Irish education (Harford and O’Doherty 2016, p.41). In fact, the descriptions speak to a separation between policy implementors and policy creators which threatens the effective functioning of the policymaking processes in Irish education. The literature review confirmed that negative implications can be seen in cases where policy actors feel they are not effectively involved in policymaking and have no sense of ownership in decision-making. This can contribute to policy actors feeling “neglected” and “side-lined” from the policymaking process (Bodroža *et al.* 2016, p. 356). A recent domestic publication produced by the IPPN acknowledges that schools are “policy overloaded” and calls for policymakers to liaise with school leaders and to establish further supports that enable school leaders to effectively engage in leadership and management duties while also leading learning in schools (Irish Primary Principals’ Network 2023, p.12). Furthermore, this research concludes that feelings of being inundated with educational policy in schools is contributing to a lack of time and appetite amongst policy implementors to engage in policymaking processes.

One thread of the theoretical framework presented in Chapter One outlines Anderson’s policy process theory (2003). Although this study focussed on the first three stages of the policy process theory in terms of gathering evidence, it appears that policy overload in the implementation stage is negatively affecting how policy implementors engage with the earlier stages of the policymaking process. This sticking point in the policy process in Irish primary education, therefore, requires thoughtful attention. A lack of appetite, time and energy amongst policy implementors to engage in policymaking threatens policy forming at the local level in schools (Adams 2016; Lipsky 2013). As it currently stands, the relationship between policymaking and implementation has become strained and problematic largely due to the incessant requirements on schools to make sense of educational policy. The recommendations

outlined in the latter section of this chapter provide suggestions relating to how this problem can be broached.

5.2.2 The priorities of the Minister for Education are a clear source of power in educational policymaking

The findings from this research denote the significantly influential role wielded by the Minister for Education in Irish educational policymaking. This section outlines how this position of power in leading educational policymaking affords the Minister for Education opportunities to furnish their priorities on the policymaking process (Gaventa 2006).

The research findings denote that policymaking at primary level in Ireland is predominantly driven by the Department of Education, the Minister for Education and associated Ministers of State. The evidence from this research copper-fastens the essential role of the Minister for Education in casting final decisions and determining the policy direction. The Minister for Education, therefore, holds a crucial role in directing and leading policymaking. A number of participants alluded to the impact that a Minister for Education has in progressing particular policy priorities. Notably, these priorities can vary irrespective of political ideals within or beyond the structures of political parties. The political priorities of Ministers for Education can be shaped by a myriad of factors including political and social ideals as well as personal backgrounds and interests. A given policy being created in education could potentially span multiple ministers and thus changes in the Minister for Education can result in changes in focus and priority. An example proffered by one participant was a change to the Minister for Education which resulted in a policy losing momentum, denoting that educational policies that may have been a priority under a previous government can suddenly become side-lined.

Consideration of this conclusion casts a speculative light on certain policy developments in education over the past decade. The fact that educational policy can be influenced by the personal interests and background of a Minister for Education forces examination of major policy doctrines that were advanced under the regime of a given Minister. For example, was the STEM Educational Policy Statement 2017-2026 on the policy agenda for quite some time or was the development of this policy catalysed by the background, interests and former ministerial experiences held by the Minister for Education at the time? The conclusion of this research would suggest that irrespective of how long this policy had been on the radar of the

Department of Education, the then Minister's background and interests were highly influential in prompting the introduction of the STEM Educational Policy Statement in the Irish system.

The decisive nature of the role of the Minister for Education is unsurprising, in fact, literature refers to the historical significance of various Ministers for Education in igniting change and improvement in the Irish education system (Harford and Herron 2016; Fleming and Harford 2014; O'Doherty 2014). However, the degree to which the priorities of a Minister for Education can shape educational policy invites consideration. Firstly, the structure of Irish government means that the Minister for Education is an elected politician who may or may not have prior experience of working in the education sector. The idea of a Minister for Education with no experience of working in the education sector projecting their priorities on the educational landscape requires consideration. Secondly, the fact that a Minister for Education can introduce a policy that can subsequently be shelved by a ministerial replacement is illogical and impractical. In fact, this instability in policymaking speaks to the need for clear and consistent structures of policy creation that honour commitment to devising a policy irrespective of changes in political governance. The sentiments of these research findings depict a lack of stability, timelines and policy alignment. Hence, a recommendation from this research outlines the need for policy timelines to be publicly shared and communicated with policy actors providing short-term and longer-term policy priorities.

5.2.3 Certain policy actors hold privileged positions in educational policymaking

The research findings point to the presence of privileged voices operating within the policymaking space. This section discusses the extent to which these privileged voices dominate decision-making in Irish education.

The evidence from this study indicates that some policy actors hold more privileged policy-leveraging positions than others. This privilege can be due to the hierarchy of decision-making in the structures of government and the Department of Education such as Ministers for Education as discussed previously. However, this research also identifies other privileged and indeed dominant voices in policymaking. One reflection in the findings intimated that some policy actors hold a greater weight in the room than others. This builds a picture of an unjust and imbalanced policymaking reality where role and position dictate the level of influence on decision-making. Furthermore, the findings suggest that privileged voices in education are

afforded greater opportunities to engage in dialogue with decision-makers. A participant who was a former Minister for Education acknowledged that certain voices are heard more often than others in policymaking. Reflections of this nature further undermine the historically heralded partnership approach in education and instead illustrate a narrative of favouritism. This preferential treatment may in fact be a subconscious culture within policymaking circles as the findings contained references to ‘key partners’ and ‘big players’, intimating that some partners are considered to be far more critical than others. This sentiment, it appears, is also seeping into policymaking vernacular whereby references are also made in official Department of Education communication to consultation with “key partners” (Department of Education 2017a, p.46).

Findings of this nature invite questions into who are considered key partners in Irish education and why they are deemed to be more important than others (Department of Education 2017a). One participant referred to the pointlessness of attempting to introduce a policy in education without the backing of the teacher union and the management bodies. In fact, the dominance of the INTO in all aspects of primary policy developments emerged as a strong research finding. The OECD was also regarded as an influential player in Irish educational policymaking through the emphasis placed on the comparative assessments produced by this organisation. Preferential treatment towards influential policy actors can be seen through the provision of a greater number of opportunities to engage in policy discourse with policy creators. These opportunities can be fixed, formal events such as planned bilateral meetings and annual engagements. These opportunities to engage in policy dialogue can also be informal conversations that occur over the phone or in-person. This captures how policy discourse is not confined to formal structures in Irish education and this means that proximity and comradery may afford greater opportunities to influence policymaking.

Clearly, imbalances of power are in operation within the Irish policymaking space (Devine *et al.* 2015; Harford and O’Doherty 2016). Visible power is evident through the hierarchy of decision-making in the Department of Education (Gaventa 2006). Hidden power is also prevalent through the preferential treatment afforded to certain policy actors in policymaking processes (Gaventa 2006). Hidden power can also be seen through the stage at which policy actors are involved in decision-making processes serving as a further indication of privileged voices dominating the policymaking space and thus side-lining the voices of other policy actors (Gaventa 2006; Bell and Stevenson 2015; Elmore and McDonnell 1987). The notion of policy

actors holding greater weight in the room can also be seen in the greater weight of numbers on representative structures in education. For example, the NCCA council is typically comprised of one representative from a range of different policy actors, however, there are three representatives from the INTO, two ordinary members and one deputy chairperson (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2022a). While the combined representation of the two union groups at post-primary level equates to three representatives, no other policy actor has three members in the twenty-six-member council (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2022a). Nearly one quarter of the council is comprised of union representation including primary and post-primary. The structure of the Teaching Council displays similar numerical imbalances with twenty-two out of the thirty-seven-member quota comprising primary and post-primary teachers. It must be noted that seven representatives out of these twenty-two teachers are nominated by the primary and post-primary teacher unions, once again displaying the strength of union voice across representative structures in education. Arnstein (2019) refers to the weight of numbers in policy discourse, citing the idea of placation whereby a small number of representatives of an under-represented group can still be out-muscled by the decision-making power of the majority (Arnstein 2019). Undoubtedly, the imbalances in representative structures in Irish education could contribute to the nurturing of placation.

This conclusion raises a number of concerns relating to policymaking at primary level in Ireland. The notion of inequity, imbalance and inconsistency being present in policy discourse is disconcerting and requires attention. The recommendations section of this chapter advances some potential measures that can be put in place in a bid to combat some of the clear inequalities in existence.

5.2.4 Pupil voice is a neglected narrative in Irish educational policymaking

This research concludes that pupil voice is a neglected narrative in Irish educational policymaking. While the findings confirm that educational policymaking in Ireland seeks the insights and input from a range of policy actors, the evidence points to an absence of coherence and consistency in the approaches used to listen to the voices of primary school pupils in the development of educational policy. This section demonstrates the neglect of pupil voice in Irish educational policymaking, signalling the limitations that this poses to the education system.

The findings indicate that the voices of Irish primary school pupils are neglected in the current processes of policymaking. Indeed, strong, emotive language was used to resoundingly claim that Irish pupils are not listened to at primary level. Participants in this research who held leadership positions in the Department of Education did not refer to the voice of primary school pupils as a source of influence in educational policymaking. This lack of consideration of pupil voice by those in the Department of Education could legitimately be viewed as a strategic blind spot thus indicating a tangible disconnect between those in the Department of Education and the pupils they purportedly serve. Furthermore, the topic of critical or key players in policymaking that emerged in research findings had no mention of pupil voice. While some evidence hinted at developments in the attempts to incorporate pupil voice into policymaking, ultimately, the data suggests that vast improvements are required. For example, the reliance on the use of assessment results to direct policymaking was identified as a further rationale for the meaningful inclusion of pupil voice in Irish education. The construction of educational policy fixated on data, also described as ‘policy as numbers’, clearly requires the balance of qualitative methods to actively involve pupils in constructing educational policy (Lingard 2011). The research conducted by Leavy *et al.* (2023) denotes how a range of methodologies can be used to gather pupil voice. This work, commissioned by the NCCA, was completed as part of the broad consultation on the New Primary Mathematics curriculum, however, it must be noted that the incorporation of pupil voice took place in 2022/23 when earlier drafts of the New Primary Mathematics Curriculum had already been in existence for a number of years. Unfortunately, narratives such as this capture pupil involvement in policymaking as an advocacy piece, whereby involvement appears on the surface as participation but ultimately masks legitimacy efforts (Fischer and Leifeld 2015). As such, this suggests that on the occasions where pupil voice is involved in some form in policymaking, little impact is observed in terms of how this shapes the policy. Instead, this involvement can be viewed as a front for consultation, feeding into the “strategic framing” or rationalisation of the policy (Auld and Morris 2016, p.205).

Significant improvements are required in terms of meaningfully involving pupil voice in Irish educational policymaking. The recognition of the need to enhance the reach of pupils’ voices in Irish society has received greater attention since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 where Article 12 alludes to the right for children to express their views and to have their views received with due recognition (United Nations 1989, Article 12). Lundy’s Model of Participation, a conceptualisation of Article 12 in the

National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making 2015-2020, presents four domains, namely, space, voice, audience and influence (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2019). According to this model, children should be afforded the space to express their voice as well as the opportunity for their voice to be listened to and acted upon appropriately. This research concludes that improvements are required in all aspects of Lundy's model regarding the inclusion of pupil voice in Irish educational policymaking.

Recent developments at post-primary level certainly confirm the strides taken to incorporate the views of students in Irish education through the updated composition of the NCCA council to include representation of the Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU) (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2022a). Regrettably, no such structure exists in terms of representing pupil voice at primary level (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2022a). An OECD report in 2019 also recommended the inclusion of student/pupil voice in policymaking due to the recognition of this stakeholder as one of the underrepresented in educational policymaking (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019). Additionally, the minutes from a meeting of the Primary Education Forum in March 2023 further confirm the recognition by policymakers of the need to improve the inclusion of pupil voice in educational policymaking. According to the meeting summary, the Department of Education are in the process of establishing a new child participation unit to capture the voice of children in education (Department of Education 2023c). While no further information has been provided on this development at this stage, the foundation of this unit is a welcome effort to assuage some of the glaring issues identified in the research findings.

5.2.5 A fluid approach to educational policymaking contributes to an ad-hoc assortment of policy creators and contributors

The research findings confirm that educational policymaking in the Irish context can be defined as a complicated and sensitive space of decision-making amidst an array of social, economic, political and international influences. This complicated space of policymaking is made more complex by inconsistencies in the policy actors that lead and contribute to the policymaking process. The findings indicate that the range of policy actors involved in policymaking alters depending on the type of policy being created. This section discusses the nature of these inconsistencies and calls for updates to be made to tackle this issue in educational policymaking in the Irish context.

This research identified the existence of two distinct groups within the cohort of Irish policy actors, namely, policy creators and policy contributors. Crucially, the type of educational policy being produced determines who occupies the creation and/or contribution spaces. This fluid approach to the development of policy contributes to an ad-hoc nature of policy initialisation in Irish education. The range of policy creators, could include policy actors from the Government, the Minister for Education and Ministers of State, management and officials in the Department of Education, the Inspectorate, the Oireachtas and the bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education. Policymaking within the Department of Education also denotes transient processes as there is not one fixed system for how policy is developed across the divisions in the Department of Education, this again is dependent on the particular policy in question. As is articulated by one participant, the policy process is constantly changing and there is no existence of standard operating procedures for how policy is created (Orland cited in Plank *et al.* 2009).

In a similar vein to the trends of policy initialisation, further inconsistencies are evident in relation to the policy contributors that are involved in policymaking processes. The vast array of policy contributors in Irish education undoubtedly contributes to some of these inconsistencies. Contributions to the development of a policy can come from a range of policy actors including the OECD, the EU, bodies under the aegis of the Department of Education, unions, management bodies, special interest groups, schools, parents, teachers, principals and representative groups. While the development of curricular policy displays relative consistency in the approaches used to involve policy contributors, in general, this research indicates a flexible approach to the selection of policy actors in relation to the development of a particular policy. One rationale that emerged to support this approach was the perceived need to match the policy contributors to the type of policy being created, ensuring those with clear vested interests get their opportunity to contribute. These inconsistencies add further complexity to the policymaking process. The literature review highlights the importance of accountability in policymaking, signalling the need for transparent decision-making procedures and mechanisms of participation (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Such transparent procedures are clearly lacking in Irish educational policymaking. This research raised queries around the selection of policy contributors to engage with policymaking. Taking pilot programmes as an example, there are no evident procedures to explain how the schools for pilot programmes are selected. These irregularities add a layer of confusion to policymaking processes and could be a further

contributory factor to the silenced voices or voices that do not want to be heard in education as the lack of consistent procedures muddy the waters for potential policy contributors.

The mechanisms for policymaking in Irish education are peppered with inconsistencies, ranging from ad-hoc policy initialisation to irregular involvement of policy actors. These inconsistencies threaten the effective implementation of policies at the local level (Portnoi 2016). These mechanisms require amendments in order to improve communication regarding policy initialisation as well as establishing coherent structures for involving policy actors in policymaking.

5.2.6 The involvement of numerous policy actors in educational policymaking can contribute to delays and complications

A major finding of this research was the breadth of policy actors that contribute to educational policy in the Irish context. Based on the substantial amount of policy actors, this research concludes that the acquisition of an agreed consensus amongst this range of policy actors is at best aspirational. This section analyses the findings relating the range of policy actors involved in policymaking processes and the associated complications this can present in terms of decision-making.

As referred to in the previous section, the list of policy actors that can potentially be involved in policymaking processes is extensive. Furthermore, the fact that these policy actors are divided into policy creators and policy contributors means that there are indisputable differentials in power which further impede the possibility of reaching consensus on a given policy. An example of policymaking involving thirty-four policy contributors was described in the research. While it was explained that the purpose of enabling this number of policy contributors to participate in policymaking was due to the aims of empowering ownership, the prospect of appeasing all participants in such a scenario is challenging. Notably, the tension of maintaining balance between the breadth of policy actors was identified as a challenge by the creators of policy that participated in this research. The harsh reality of making decisions amid such a wide range of voices was captured in this research in the description of policymaking as a construct that cannot be a people-pleasing exercise. This is perhaps one of the most telling comments that emerged from this research in relation to policymaking. This quotation hints at what literature refers to as the “drive” behind policy which can be understood as the values that

rationalise the need for a policy (Brighouse *et al.* 2018, p.39). By this understanding, if the values and drive for the policy are robust, then other forms of influence should merely inform the policy rather than reshaping it. Therefore, it is clear that not all views, backgrounds and perspectives expressed in policymaking can ultimately shape the eventual policy and associated decisions. This assertion also speaks to the decision-making power of policy creators, very much conceptualising the notion of a top-down system of policymaking where privilege is afforded to what policymakers value as important (Elmore and McDonnell 1987).

This research recognises the need for decision-making amidst the challenges presented by interactions with multiple policy actors. Understandably, such a range of policy actors can introduce divisive environments and present obstacles to decision-making. One policymaking experience referred to a policymaking cycle that lasted six years largely due to the delays that resulted from multiple engagements with policy actors. In fact, a number of participants explained that the processes by which educational policymaking occurs in general takes considerable time. The findings referred to over-consultation in policymaking whereby stalemates occur in reaching agreement through consultative processes. In addition to time delays, it appears that the desire to reach consensus can cause a policy to be influenced by so many policy actors that the original intention of the policy no longer aligns with the final product. This is reminiscent of the story of the Tower of Babel mentioned in the literature review chapter whereby the speaking of different languages contributes to confusion in building (Connor 1988). Equally, the complications in building the Tower of Babel could have arisen from differing interpretations, conveying how individualism does not easily lend itself to co-operation. Perhaps this is a justification for the summation of policymaking as a process that cannot please all.

The impracticality of reaching the consensus milestone, however, is not a deterrent to involving a range of policy actors in decision-making. The findings of this research were rich with references to the benefits of hearing other voices in policymaking. While consensus may not always be reached in a policy discussion, time and space needs to be provided to policy actors to voice perspectives and listen to alternate points of view. This presents a critical opportunity to build relationships and learn from one another. The use of transparent policy timelines outlining fixed consultation points and deadlines would assist in ensuring that policy development does not contribute to delays. This idea is further explained in the research recommendations.

5.2.7 Consultation is a juxtaposition of partnership and tokenism

In the previous chapter, consultation was celebrated as a welcome component in Irish educational policymaking. The findings, however, indicate a number of limitations that mar consultation in the primary sector. This section draws alignment between these research findings and the citizen participation ladder presented as part of the conceptual framework in this research (Arnstein 2019). This examination provides the foundation for recommendations on how consultation can be improved in Irish education.

The tradition of consultation in Irish education was certainly heralded in this research. In general, consultation was recognised as a process that brings a multitude of voices to the policymaking space. Consultation is completed in various forms in the Irish primary context including the use of meetings, briefings, forums, formal groups, pilot programmes, representative bodies and surveys. While reflections on the plurality of consultation methods was greeted with positivity in this research, it is clear that distinct separations exist between the levels of participation observed with varying methods. Firstly, the use of consultation methods such as policy forums, bilateral meetings and multi-stakeholder gatherings was praised in this research for inviting participation and contributing to a sense of ownership and involvement (Sahlberg 2007). In fact, the use of repeated consultation points throughout the year was recognised as a strength of the consultation structures by certain participants. The findings alluded to a number of examples of policymaking incorporating bilateral and multilateral communication between policy actors through both formal and informal means. The Primary Education Forum, for example, represents a conduit for multilateral discussion between policy actors on pressing issues in education. One policy contributor who had experience of participating in this forum praised the opportunity for rich and varied policy dialogue. Notably, the description of these consultation methods represents a degree of what Arnstein describes as “citizen power” (Arnstein 2019, p.26). Elements of the partnership rung of the ladder can be seen here through multilateral dialogue in relation to policymaking. However, the description of partnership proffered in the conceptual framework expresses that singular decision-making by those in power no longer takes place at this level. As identified in the previous conclusion, the nature of Irish educational policymaking means that singular decision-making power is typically held by the creators of policy. It must also be noted that while strong elements of partnership are certainly evident through the mechanisms outlined

above, such interactions are not an open invitation to all policy actors and are, in fact, exclusive (Fischer and Leifeld 2015).

Further consultation methods used in Irish education denote what is outlined in the conceptual framework as “degrees of tokenism” (Arnstein 2019, p.26). Surveys, questionnaires, submissions and pilot programmes are further examples of consultation methods used by policy creators that exhibit such tokenistic characteristics. Although the practicality of some of these methods was recognised in this research, the findings also revealed that some methods were employed when the policy was already in draft form. Two participants shared suspicions surrounding the degree to which their input impacted policy decision-making, pointing to an absence of feedback to assuage their concerns. Such experiences equate to the fourth rung on the participation ladder, consultation (Arnstein 2019). At this level, policy actors are included in policy discussions but little impact on decision-making is observed. Instead, participation at this level is typically measured by the numbers of people involved in policy discussions or the quantity of completed surveys or questionnaires (Arnstein 2019).

Representative measures in consultation such as formal consultative groups, advisory committees and representative bodies also display degrees of tokenism. Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation refers to this as placation whereby under-representation of a certain group results in limited impact against the powerful decision-makers (Arnstein 2019). One participant suggested that their invitation to work on a consultative policy group was instigated for the sole purpose of enabling communication with the contacts at the disposal of the participant in question. The practical considerations around harnessing data from this participant denotes elements of what Arnstein refers to as manipulation, a level of participation whereby citizens are involved in policymaking as a means of gathering support, in effect acting as a “public relations vehicle” (2019, p.26). In addition to this example, one participant also communicated frustration with the fact that stakeholder representation requires no standard that needs to be met in terms of consulting internally with members prior to voices being represented in national consultation. This clearly demonstrates a deficit in the system whereby no evidence is required to confirm the sentiment of a purported representative statement. This highlights the need for appropriate structures to reduce purported representation, ensure due diligence and empower representation that is balanced, accurate and evidence-based.

Although, the findings identified that education needs to hear voices from the grassroots at the forefront of policy implementation in order to establish confidence in policy decisions, the evidence suggests that consultation is not effectively catering to this need in Irish education. Interestingly, the participants in this research who, at the time of research, were implementing policy at the so-called grassroots expressed clear frustrations with consultation processes. It appears that far more examples of policymaking tinged with tokenism outweigh those that demonstrate partnership. The research findings denote an increasing desire for defined consultation structures in Irish education (De Marchi *et al.* 2016).

5.2.8 Potential exists in policymaking processes for domestic context-based research

Based on the findings of this research it can be concluded that there is a potential in Irish education to support the completion of domestic research and the subsequent translation of this research into educational policymaking. While a range of data sources are used to guide educational policymaking in Ireland, the findings point to the benefits of extending the incorporation of domestic research.

The processes of educational policymaking in Ireland are commended by participants in this study for the use of research to inform and direct decisions. Irish educational policymaking is, in theory, fitting the bill of evidence-based policymaking as advocated in literature (De Marchi *et al.* 2016; Tobin *et al.* 2010). The range of data sources used to inform policymaking in Ireland include assessment results, consultation reports, commissioned research and financial evaluations. However, in practise, there can be an over-reliance on certain types of quantitative assessment data, in particular referring to the international assessments produced by the OECD. Furthermore, the findings illustrate the need to balance this form of data through the meaningful integration of domestic, context-based, qualitative data. The concept of policy borrowing (Ball 2003) was also broached in the research findings which concluded that international research does not necessarily translate to the primary school context in Ireland. One participant likened the over-reliance on quantitative assessment data to the reporting of standardised tests in primary school, suggesting that this is only a snapshot of learning and further forms of data-collection are also required.

An over-reliance on the use of international student assessment data, such as from the OECD and the IEA, to guide Irish education shows similar trends to other international counterparts

(Adams 2016). Literature suggests that the type of data used in policymaking is governed by ease of access and obtainability (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Perhaps the stringent use of student assessment data to guide policy decision-making in Irish education is due to the fact that this form of data is easier to access or is considered more scientifically rigorous and reliable (Tobin *et al.* 2010; De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Furthermore, the use of international assessment data means that Irish education can be compared with the performance of other education systems across the globe, thus providing a “benchmark” for comparison (Elmore and McDonnell 1987, p.145). However, the commitment to repeatedly engaging with this type of assessment data to guide educational policy has limitations. For example, the international assessment data mentioned above is analysed by the ERC who are responsible for making sense of the data and communicating this appropriately with policymakers. The ERC are also responsible for completing national assessments such as National Assessments of Maths and English Reading (NAMER) and for conducting research and reviews on the DEIS scheme. A consequence of the commitment required to manage this large volume of work means that the ERC are constrained from pursuing small-scale domestic research projects. This clearly demonstrates the need for increased domestic research in the Irish system. Unfortunately, the findings exhibit that a plethora of domestic research exists, however, this rarely seeps into policymaking processes. The process of translating policy into concise summary reports and briefing this to policymakers in the Department of Education is part of the remit of the ERC and serves as an indication of how research results can be communicated with policy creators. Academic research emanating from colleges of education in Ireland constitutes a bank of domestic, context-based research that could fill the void outlined in the research findings. In addition to this, although there were mixed reflections on the benefits of using pilot programmes in schools to inform policymaking, it is clear that such approaches to gathering data allows for mediation of policy at the local level in schools, thus providing a platform to the voices of the school community.

Measures are needed to balance the reliance on the use of international assessment data to guide educational policymaking. Context-based domestic research provides a welcome counterweight to this quantitative overload. Accordingly, mechanisms are required for the translation of this research into educational policymaking processes.

5.2.9 Conclusion

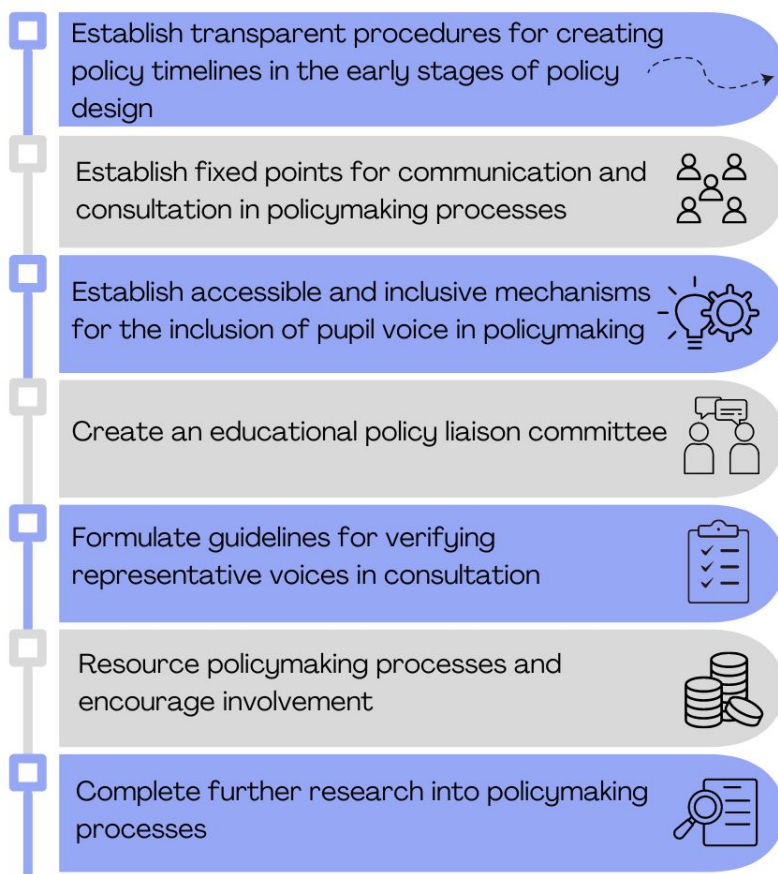
This research into the complex and dynamic processes of educational policymaking in Ireland has uncovered a number of critical conclusions. Firstly, the presence of policy overload in school presents a significant hurdle to policymaking and underlines the need for clear, coherent policymaking timelines to be communicated with school communities. The discernible influence of the priorities of the Minister for Education captures the political nature of policymaking while also indicating the top-down nature of policymaking in education. A further conclusion notes the privileged positions held by certain policy actors in educational policymaking, marking the presence of inherent imbalances of power. The findings also conclude that the voices of pupils in Irish education are neglected in educational policymaking and although some developments are evident, this issue at primary level demands attention. The research also highlights the evident inconsistencies in the policy creators and policy contributors that are involved in policy initialisation and formulation. In fact, the numerous policy actors operating within the policy design space fuels complications and time delays. This research also concludes that consultation denotes opposing characteristics of partnership and tokenism. Finally, a clear conclusion of this research is that a space exists in educational policymaking processes for the completion and translation of domestic, context-based research. These conclusions raise a number of concerns regarding the policymaking processes in Irish education. As a result, the next section of this chapter explores the recommendations for policymaking processes as well as recommendations for further research on the topic of educational policymaking.

5.3 Recommendations

The findings and conclusions of this research identify both commendable and problematic aspects to policymaking processes in Irish primary education. Returning to the analogy used in the introduction of this chapter, this section represents the artist returning to the easel after taking time for reflection, cognisant of the areas requiring development. This is what Rolfe *et al.* (2001) refer to as ‘now what?’. Therefore, as the final section of this chapter, a number of recommendations are presented in a bid to provoke potential approaches to dealing with the problematic aspects of policymaking highlighted in this study. In line with the fourth embedded question of this research, this chapter directs recommendations towards policymakers regarding improvements that are required in the current policymaking processes. Recommendations are also directed towards teachers/school leaders and the general public

regarding improvements to policymaking processes. These recommendations collectively constitute a practical contribution to the policymaking space that is grounded in the insights, perspectives and experiences of policy actors in the Irish context. These recommendations outline scope for improvement in communication, transparency, consistency and participation in policymaking. Recommendations for further research are also presented based on the constraints of this study and indications arising from the research findings. The recommendations are shown in Figure 5.2. Although these recommendations are displayed vertically in the figure, it is important to note that this does not denote any particular hierarchy and equal weighting is afforded to each recommendation.

Figure 5.2: Research Recommendations



The culmination of these recommendations is reflected in a proposed approach to the policymaking processes in Irish primary education, constituting a conceptual framework, which is presented at the end of this chapter.

5.3.1 Establish transparent procedures for creating policy timelines in the early stages of policy design

Arising from this research, it is recommended that transparent procedures are established for the creation and communication of policy timelines in the early stages of policy design. The recommendation for such measures emerges from the inconsistencies which are prevalent in policy initialisation and the changeable nature of policy creators from one policy to another. This research concludes that these inconsistencies further add to the inherent complexities of educational policymaking. Therefore, this section recommends developments intended to improve transparency of decision-making in the onset of policymaking processes. More specifically, this section discusses the diagnosis of a policy problem, the construction of a policy timeline (Wallace 1991) and crucially, the transparent communication of this information with the vast network of policy actors.

The conclusions of this research confirm the ad-hoc nature of policy initialisation and the resultant complications that this can present in policymaking processes. As outlined in the research findings, effective leadership is required in policymaking in order to facilitate policy dialogue and balance decision-making. Resultantly, the policy creators need to be identified as a pre-requisite to the creation of a policy timeline. The concept of untangling the complicated web of cross-collaboration between sections of the Department of Education appears an impractical task, therefore, it is crucial that the policy creators who are facilitating the policy process are identified early in the process to avoid unnecessary complexity and confusion. This would require the Department of Education to complete an analysis of the policy problem and decide on the policy creators to be included in leading formulation. Transparency is a pivotal word in this recommendation, therefore, it is recommended that all decisions regarding the policy in question are published and shared with the public (De Marchi *et al.* 2016; Fischer and Leifeld 2015). Associatively, once those chosen to lead the policymaking process have been identified, discussions can begin in relation to the structure of the policy timeline.

In articulating the policy problem, consideration needs to be afforded to the type of policy being created. The research findings revealed different types of educational policy that can be created by the Department of Education, including policy in response to an immediate need in education/society, policy to support implementation space, policy to outline the strategic vision for the system and policy to provide operational instructions for schools. Identification of the type of educational policy thus allows for discussion around the prioritisation of the policy,

classifying if the “policy demand” requires an immediate or long-term response (Anderson 2003, p.3). While it is understood that current mechanisms in Irish education are entirely dictated by the policy at hand, the suggestions in this section promote the branding of a policy in order to indicate if immediate action is required or if prolonged development is recommended. Naturally, this distinction dictates the timeline that the policymaking process then follows.

In order to allow for agility in policymaking, there needs to be scope for differentiated timelines based on the priority of the policy in question. Therefore, this research recommends the construction of two policy timelines that vary in duration. The prolonged timeline allows for an extensive development cycle, incorporating different phases of consultation and design. The immediate timeline represents a more streamlined approach containing only one consultation phase and a significantly reduced duration or horizon (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.365). Hence, decisions surrounding the prioritisation of a policy allows for the choice of a suitable timeline. Importantly, both timelines need to be furnished with appropriate deadlines for the different stages. This is required in order to negate the delays to policymaking cycles afforded by excessive consultation processes. Additionally, the transparency of decision-making combined with clear timelines reduces the potential for changes to be caused by Ministerial priorities and/or changes in political power.

The literature review revealed that introducing policies at the right moment can have a substantial impact on successful implementation (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Accordingly, a rationale for defining policy timelines is to provide greater alignment and structure to the addition of policies to the implementation space. The conclusions from this research suggest that policy overload in primary school presents a significant threat to policymaking processes. Therefore, in creating policy timelines, it is imperative that consideration is afforded to the implementation space and that the timelines allow for policies to have the necessary breathing space to facilitate implementation. This recommendation is particularly important in light of the significant policy changes currently underway at primary level, including the implementation of the New Primary Mathematics Curriculum and the Primary Curriculum Framework. Recent experience of curricular change at primary level indicates that meaningful policy change takes time. Therefore, thoughtful crafting of policy timelines is crucial in providing the space needed for policies to become operational and thus avoiding the “paradox of innovation without change” (Priestley 2011, p.1). Once the appropriate timeline has been

chosen, decisions can be made by the policy creators surrounding the inclusion of policy contributors in the process.

5.3.2 Establish fixed points for communication and consultation in policymaking processes

This research recommends that fixed communication and consultation points are embedded to policymaking processes in Irish education. Although this research acknowledges the strengths of the Irish education system, boasting a history of committing to consultation processes, the evidence signals a number of areas requiring attention in the participation of policy actors in policymaking mechanisms. Building on the calls for improvement in transparency in the previous section, this recommendation outlines the need for developments in the timing and communication of consultation. Furthermore, this research recommends that consultation becomes an ever-present component in all policymaking timelines.

The findings and conclusions of this research point to the moveable feast of consultation in Irish education. Consultation has three main variables, the policy actors involved, the consultation methods employed and the stage at which consultation occurs in the policymaking process. This research recommends that one component of this changeable triad is fixed through the identification of clear consultation points for policy contributors to engage with the policy formulation process. It is recommended that fixed iterations of consultation and formulation are included as mandated stages of all policymaking processes. The number of fixed consultation points would depend on the timeline of the policy as outlined in the previous recommendation. Working with the recommendation from the previous section, this recommendation also proposes that appropriate communication takes place before, during and after these consultation points. The research findings identified the importance of ensuring that those engaging in consultation are fully informed about the policy at hand which requires improved communication procedures. Furthermore, projects such as BEACONS, outlined in Chapter Four, demonstrate the need to further develop the channels of communication in consultation and policymaking processes. Therefore, it is proposed that the following key points of information are shared with the network of policy actors in the early stages of policymaking: 1) the rationale for the policy, 2) the identities of the policy creators leading the policymaking process, 3) the proposed timeline and 4) the range of policy contributors and the associated opportunities for consultation.

Although the research findings indicate that stakeholder-mapping takes place in the initial stages of policy design in order to identify who needs to be involved in educational policymaking, it is unclear whether this is then communicated with the selected policy actors to be involved or whether the information is shared with the wider network of policy contributors. Consequently, this research recommends that all policy actors have access to summations of the four key points of information outlined above. The purpose of this communication at the outset of the policymaking process is to convey that consultation and input from policy contributors is valued. This information should then be shared via the same means that the eventual policy will be communicated, for example, using post, email, social media and the relevant section of the gov.ie website.

As denoted by this research, elements of tokenism are evident in some of the long-standing methods of consultation used in Irish education (Arnstein 2019). The evidence points to two main reasons for this, namely, the stage of the policymaking process at which consultation takes place and the subsequent lack of “visibility” of influence reflected in the finalised policy (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.370). The stage at which policy contributors are involved in policymaking processes has a significant effect on their ability to shape and influence decision-making (Luetjens and Mintrom 2016). By this understanding, if policy contributors are involved too late in the policymaking process, it intimates controlled consultation and an inability to significantly affect change to the policy in question (Connor 1988). Notably, participants in this research recited examples of being involved in policymaking when the policy was already in draft form. Evidence such as this confirms the untimely addition of policy contributors to policy formulation and connotes restrictive, reductive practices of consultation. Furthermore, the frustrations confirmed by participants in this research in feeling that they were merely part of the “game” through their limited involvement registers the presence of unwelcome practices in Irish education (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.370). It begs the question as to whether such practices speak to a haphazard nature of involving policy contributors in policymaking or more worryingly, whether such tokenistic efforts are a gesture of appeasement in a bid to uphold the history of consultation in education. While the bounds of this research cannot duly answer such questions, the evidence points to the need for these questions be asked of policymakers in the Irish education system.

The lack of feedback processes in consultation emerged as a clear finding. This indicates a lack of measures for denoting how the consultation influenced the policymaking process and points

to inadequate methods of participation whereby participants feel they are involved for the purposes of validating and gathering support for a policy rather than providing valuable input (Arnstein 2019). The aforementioned BEACONS report published in May 2022, clearly illustrates detailed results from the completion of consultation with a range of policy actors. Reports such as these should be a staple of post-consultation practices and while it is understandable that the decisions thereafter cannot please all parties, communication such as this serves as an acknowledgement to all those involved.

While wholesale changes to how consultation is conducted in Irish education is wildly impractical and unnecessary, clearly, efforts are required to enhance communication and consultation. Therefore, this research recommends that consultation points are fixed as part of the policymaking timeline and precede formulation processes. Furthermore, improved communication is required in relation to consultation at the beginning of the policymaking process as well as before, during and after consultation points. This section has outlined a number of recommendations required to update the current consultation processes including fixed consultation points, post-consultation reports and greater consistency in the application of representative measures in education. The next recommendation examines the need to establish accessible and inclusive mechanisms for the inclusion of pupil voice in policymaking.

5.3.3 Establish accessible and inclusive mechanisms for the inclusion of pupil voice in policymaking

One of the key recommendations of the research relates to an urgent need to establish mechanisms to include pupil voice in educational policymaking, particularly at primary level where there is a glaring dearth. Regrettably, the findings indicate that the efforts to incorporate the voices of Irish primary pupils in educational policymaking require considerable improvement. This section outlines measures that would aid the meaningful involvement of pupil voice in policymaking processes.

Firstly, this research recommends that a balance be struck between the use of quantitative student assessment data and the incorporation of pupil voice in policymaking processes. The findings of this research reveal that data relating to student achievement is used to direct and inform policymaking processes. This data is primarily harvested from assessments that are completed through domestic and international mechanisms. The conclusions of this research

suggest that the pronounced emphasis on quantitative assessment data has allowed little to no avenue for the inclusion of pupil voice through qualitative means. Furthermore, there is an absence of any tangible representative or consultative structure through which pupil voice can be advanced in policymaking. Therefore, this research recommends that a balance is secured between the use of quantitative assessment data and the meaningful inclusion of pupil voice in Irish education.

Although government publications display commitment in writing to the need to develop procedures for involving pupil voice in educational policymaking, efforts at the local level in schools to involve pupils in decision-making could be harnessed to affect the policymaking space. According to the meeting summary from the Primary Education Forum in March 2023, the Department of Education are in the process of establishing a new child participation unit to capture the voice of children in education (Department of Education 2023c). A finding of this research highlights the slow-moving nature of policymaking and unfortunately, this seems to be the case in relation to this development as no further updates have been furnished to date. While a child participation unit would be a welcome investment and improvement, this research recommends further measures that could serve to promote the involvement of pupil voice from the local level in schools. Pupil voice is being captured in schools on a frequent basis through student councils and self-evaluative structures such as School Self-Evaluation process (SSE). The SSE process directs schools to engage in collaborative and reflective processes of whole-school review by recruiting the voices of members of the school community by involving staff, parents and pupils (Department of Education 2022d). As a result, schools are choosing an area for school improvement and incorporating pupil voice in decision-making processes through the likes of surveys, interviews and focus groups. The collection of this data constitutes a considerable effort to involve the voices of pupils at primary level and the translation of this localised effort to the national level would actively contribute to the dearth of pupil voice in policymaking. It is, therefore, recommended that a domain be established by the Department of Education which would act as an online platform for schools to share pupil voice summaries arising from self-evaluative processes in schools. Understandably, guidelines would need to be agreed in terms of ethical management and representation of data. This measure would provide a much-needed avenue for pupil voice to reach policymakers.

While the findings of this research noted some efforts to incorporate the voices of Irish primary school pupils in policymaking, this research concludes that these efforts are infrequent and the selection processes for the involvement of pupil voice through mechanisms such as pilot programmes remain unclear. Furthermore, the efforts to involve the voices of pupils in policymaking are far more prevalent in the development of curricular policy than in other policy developments related to primary education. Therefore, building on the recommendation outlined in the previous section, this research recommends that all fixed consultation points in educational policymaking must fulfil consultation requirements with primary school pupils. The fixed consultation points prior to policy formulation would allow for pupil voice to be heard prior to decision-making and the crafting of policy drafts. This measure would also combat the degrees of tokenism evident in the involvement of pupils at the latter stages of policymaking where little to no influence can be achieved (Fischer and Leifeld 2015). There are multiple methodologies that could be incorporated into consultation processes to gather pupil voice, including the use of photovoice, focus groups interviews and draw and tell activities (Leavy *et al.* 2023). Additionally, this research recommends that in the case where consultation processes are not made accessible to all primary school pupils, the selection processes for those involved must be transparent.

While developments in the inclusion of student voice have been made at post-primary level through the updated composition of the NCCA council to include representation of the ISSU, unfortunately no such structure exists at primary level (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2022a). The representative body for post-primary students was established in 2008 and it took fourteen-years to be acknowledged with a recognised place at the policymaking table. Therefore, while this research recommends any developments that aid the representation of pupil voice at primary level in Ireland, it must be recognised that the achievement of an equivalent structure at primary level would take significant time and investment of resources. The establishment of a child participation unit in the Department of Education would undoubtedly aid with this process, however, once again this will take time. Consequently, the predominant recommendation from this research is to establish mechanisms to include pupil voice in educational policymaking, particularly at primary level where there is a glaring dearth. This can be achieved in the current policymaking mechanisms through the establishment of fixed, transparent consultation points for primary school pupils as well as transparent links between policymakers and the work being done at school level to gather pupil voice.

5.3.4 Create an educational policy liaison committee

This research recommends that an educational policy liaison committee is established in order to empower the side-lined and silenced voices in educational policymaking. Regrettably, the presence of privileged voices in educational policymaking means that the voices of some policy actors in the system have become marginalised, restricted or as the research depicts, not heard. Therefore, this research recommends that an educational policy liaison committee is formed that can act as a chain of communication between policy creators and these underheard voices. It is worth noting that the foundation for this recommendation is built upon the suggestions from participants in this research to establish such a mechanism.

The research findings reveal a neglect of certain voices in educational policymaking, illuminating a separation between some policy actors who are afforded the opportunity to dine at the top table while the discourse opportunities for others appear meagre and sporadic. In fact, the voices that are identified in the findings as side-lined or marginalised are all members of the primary school community, namely, teachers, school leaders, parents and pupils. The findings indicated frustrations from teachers and school leaders in relation to a lack of clear structures to enable their voices to be heard. The previous recommendation outlined the need to enact considerable changes to the inclusion of pupil voice in educational policymaking. In relation to the voices of parents, evidence pointed to the reluctance of some parent cohorts to engage in educational discourse due to a range of issues including negative experiences of school and/or language barriers. Taking all of this into consideration, it is clear that measures need to be taken to improve the opportunities extended to voices of the primary school community in general. Therefore, this research recommends an educational policy liaison committee is established that enables the voices in the school community to be actively represented and heard.

The recommendation for the development of a policy liaison committee comes with the realisation that some voices are very hard to find in education. Crucially, the creation of a policy liaison committee devoted to listening to voices in school communities means that policy creators can actively reach out to schools, principals, pupils and parents at the local level. While there was a suggestion from one of the research participants to form an intermediary body that could be used as a support structure for assisting with policy implementation, this proposal has not been incorporated into this recommendation for a number of reasons. Firstly, the functions of an intermediary body means that it would operate

within a “zone of relative independence” and would, therefore, require the establishment of a regulatory or advisory body under the aegis of the Department of Education (Trick 2015, p.6). The creation of another body in education seems unrealistically ambitious and potentially unnecessary provided that alternative measures could be adopted in the current policymaking mechanisms to pave the way for the voices in school communities to be meaningfully heard in educational policymaking. Additionally, the research findings praised the ongoing work of the Primary Education Forum which acts as a communication mechanism between policy creators and representatives of policy contributors. This forum is organised and facilitated by the Department of Education and is characterised by regular meetings and the publication of transparent meeting reports on the Department of Education webpage (Department of Education 2023c). This research recommends that the policy liaison committee for school voices would mirror similar characteristics to the Primary Education Forum in terms of transparency and frequency of contact, acting as a direct line between policy creators and the voices in school communities.

It is envisaged that the policy liaison committee would foster effective and transparent communication channels between policy creators and side-lined voices in school communities. The primary role of this liaison committee would be to facilitate discourse and feedback relating to educational policy. The liaison committee would have varied representation from voices in the school community, ensuring that representation carefully considers a range of school contexts across the country. This would allow for rich and meaningful conversation around educational policy from what Lipsky terms the “street-level bureaucrats” (2013, p.23). The liaison committee could commission school-based research projects to inform educational policymaking, incorporating the use of a range of research methodologies to reach the voices of teachers, school leaders, pupils and parents. This would also contribute to the translation of domestic context-based research into educational policymaking processes. This context-based approach to discussing, analysing and trialling policy would further permit access to a range of under-accessed voices in the school community. The policy liaison committee would enable policy creators to listen to the emerging needs and successes experienced by Irish primary schools in relation to a policy and perhaps, this committee could form part of the workload completed by the new child participation unit to capture the voice of children in education (Department of Education 2023d).

The establishment of an educational policy liaison committee would reinforce and extend the reach of current policymaking procedures. Furthermore, such a structure would also aid the development of the previous recommendations, strengthening transparency, communication and co-ordination in policymaking.

5.3.5 Formulate guidelines for verifying representative voices in policymaking

This research recommends the establishment of clear verification systems for ensuring the authenticity of representative voices in policymaking. The findings indicate a lack of measures for ensuring that representative voices in dialogic structures are in fact communicating a representative message. Naturally, such a lack of validation protocols opens policymaking structures to the possibility of purported representation and misinformation. Therefore, this research recommends that guidelines are formulated that detail the standards required to confirm the accuracy of representative voice.

The findings confirm that a representative voice in national consultation currently requires no standard that needs to be met in terms of consulting internally with members prior to purported representation. Such suboptimal practice opens policymaking processes to the potential of uninformed decisions. Furthermore, the need to establish criteria for reporting representative voice is heightened by the findings that indicate privilege afforded to some policy actors in the education system. Although the findings capture policymaking in the Irish context to be an evidence-based process, the lack of authentication processes in representation opens this classification to scrutiny (De Marchi *et al.* 2016). Therefore, guidelines from the Department of Education need to be provided to representative bodies that standardise representation across the education sector. Clarification is required on the minimum criteria that needs to be met in terms of gathering evidence from members of a representative body prior to engaging in any form of representation. While the appearance of such criteria could change depending on the policy in formulation, such a measure is a necessary amendment to ensure the creation of evidence-based policy (De Marchi *et al.* 2016).

While representation guidelines are required, so too is the mandated enforcement of these standards to ensure that representative voice is in fact representative. The absence of such criteria presents a considerable risk of marginalising certain perspectives or allowing undue influence to be exerted from a minority within a group, what elite policy theory refers to as the

few governing the many (Anderson 2003). Understandably, investment and time would need to be provided to policymaking processes to enable these verification processes to take place. A further benefit of the enactment of representation standards is that it broadens the scope for consultation, enabling the representative bodies to complete insular consultation that can inform the national consultation space. The succeeding recommendation outlines the need to resource and incentivise involvement in policymaking processes.

5.3.6 Resource policymaking processes and encourage involvement

This research recommends that significant investment is made to improve policymaking processes as well as encouraging involvement from the voices that are identified as side-lined in this research.

All of the recommendations outlined thus far demonstrate the need for investment in policymaking processes. Establishing policy timelines, funding fixed consultation events, commissioning post-consultation reports, developing procedures for including pupil voice and formulating representative guidelines are not easy changes to imprint on policymaking processes. Undoubtedly, facilitating these changes would incur considerable costs as well as extending policymaking timelines (Iftimescu *et al.* 2019). However, this research underscores the need for these changes. The most recent budget announced significant investment in education, providing approximately ten billion for the education sector. A statement from the Department of Education in October 2023 explained that allocations from this funding have been declared for policymaking purposes, including “accelerated rollout” of curricular programmes as well as “pilot” schemes (Department of Education 2023e). It is recommended that further allocations for policymaking such as those mentioned will have to be made in the future to aid and improve policymaking processes.

A major finding of this research is the evidence of side-lined voices within policymaking at the primary level. Efforts to reach these voices will require investment from policymakers. Findings indicate a disengagement from teachers and school leaders in relation to policymaking, largely due to policy overload in schools. Therefore, this research recommends that engagement in consultation processes becomes incentivised for schools, teachers and school leaders. Regarding the involvement of schools, engagement with a pilot programme or school-based research project to inform the policymaking space should be accompanied by an acknowledgement scheme for schools. Potential acknowledgements could include the

acquisition of funding, professional development and/or targeted workshops for pupils based on the policy area. Additionally, schools could be acknowledged for their contribution through the acquisition of a school flag for engaging in national policymaking processes, similar to engagement with programmes such as the Green Schools Initiative (Green Schools 2024) and the Active School Flag (Active School 2024). Engagement in policymaking processes by teachers and school leaders on an individual basis should also be recognised by an accreditation process. Perhaps, this could be linked to the extra personal vacation certificate process for primary school teachers. Efforts to encourage and incentivise involvement in policymaking processes would contribute majorly to a far more active and informed policymaking space.

While the majority of recommendations arising from this research are directed at policymakers, this section speaks directly to the general public and primary school educators. This research recommends that these policy actors ensure that they keep in touch with policymaking processes and seek active involvement in consultation processes where possible. Irrespective of further investment in policymaking, opportunities do exist within the current structures for policy actors to get involved. The research findings detailed the use of questionnaires, surveys, pilot programmes and public fora through which the aforementioned policy actors could communicate their perspectives on policy. Furthermore, the findings alluded to the multiple benefits of combining the voices of numerous policy actors within the education system and the positive role that this can play in preparing the implementation space.

5.3.7 Complete further research into policymaking processes

This section presents a number of recommendations for further research in the area of educational policymaking. These recommendations are made in light of the findings and limitations of this research. The limitations for this research included a relatively small sample size of fourteen participants in total. This small sample size meant that only a small number of certain policy actors were interviewed, for example, only two teachers took part in this research compared to three Ministers for Education. A further limitation to this research was that the voices of pupils were not involved due to adherence to initial and theoretical sampling whereby participants needed to have direct experience of engaging in policymaking processes (Charmaz 2014).

In keeping with the research methodology outlined in Chapter Three, the research sample was relatively small. The decision regarding the number of participants was made due to the

preference of interview quality over interview quantity (Kvale 1996). While this research sample yielded rich and varied findings, undoubtedly, further enlightenment on educational policymaking would be garnered from the completion of interviews with other policy actors that did not feature in this study such as representatives from the OECD, the NCSE the Inspectorate, school management bodies, primary school pupils and primary school parents (Lingard 2013, p.119). The breadth of policy actors that interact with policymaking processes in education is significant and therefore, a deeper insight into educational policymaking would be afforded through analysing accounts from further policy actors. Additionally, educational policymaking would benefit from directly reaching out to the policy actors that were deemed to be silent and/or side-lined in this research and investigating mechanisms for including these voices in policymaking processes. As referenced in the Chapter Two, policymaking is ever-evolving and therefore, once this research has been published, it is “already out of date” (Ball 2016, p.562). Hence, further research into educational policymaking processes in Irish primary education is encouraged to continue to provide insight and generate a deeper understanding of the complex structures through which policy is formulated.

This study also recommends that further research is conducted into the role of pupil voice in Irish primary educational policymaking. One of the conclusions from this research points to a lack of coherent and consistent approaches to listening to the voices of primary school pupils in the development of educational policy. Evidence indicates that improvements are required in all aspects of Lundy’s Model of Participation, namely, space, voice, audience and influence (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2019). Research into the meaningful inclusion of pupil voice in educational policymaking could use Lundy’s model as a conceptual framework for further investigation. Research of this nature could bring to light methods of consultation that would aid the inclusion of pupil voice into policymaking. Furthermore, research that focusses on the voices of Irish primary school pupils would add to the bank of domestic, context-based research that could be translated into policymaking processes.

In this research, the OECD was regarded as an influential player in Irish educational policymaking. Although educational policymaking processes exhibit proactive practises of compiling evidence-based policy, the findings alluded to an over-reliance on certain types of quantitative assessment data, in particular referring to the international assessments produced by the OECD. Consequently, this research proposes that further research is conducted in order to examine the interrelationship between the OECD and Irish educational policy. Further

research could explore the interactions between policy creators in Irish education and policy contributors from the OECD. Further research of this nature into the interactions of educational policy and the influences from the market would aid learning about the impacts, if any, of global educational reform on Irish educational policy.

Finally, further research should be conducted into the processes by which educational policymaking is evaluated in the Irish primary context. This stage of Anderson's Policy Process theory (2003) ascertains the effect to which a policy is responding to the policy problem and resultantly decides whether amendments are required to the policy in question. This research investigated the policymaking mechanisms prior to implementation, focussing primarily on policy identification, agenda-setting, formulation and adoption (Anderson 2003). Therefore, the findings do not provide information pertaining to how policy is evaluated in Irish education. In light of the indication of policy overload in primary schools, it is imperative that further research is completed to investigate the means by which these policies are analysed and whether subsequent actions are taken to amend areas of concern.

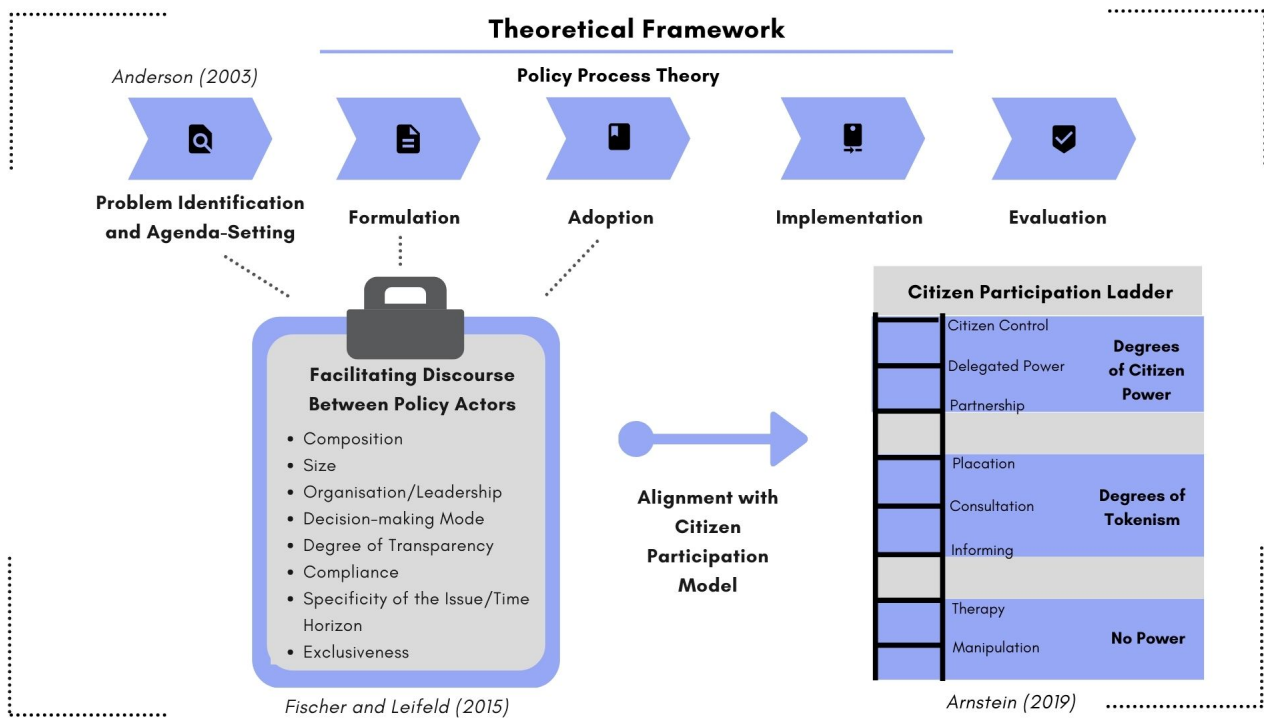
The recommendations outlined in this section serve as an indication for future research into the complex processes of educational policymaking in Ireland. In a bid to enhance understanding of educational policymaking, there is a need for further investigations that reach a broader spectrum of policy actors in the Irish education system. Further research is also advised into the meaningful involvement of pupil voice in primary educational policymaking. Additionally, this research recommends that the interrelationship between the OECD and policy creation in Irish education is scrutinised. Finally, it is proposed that further research is completed to survey the appearance of policy evaluation in the current mechanisms for policymaking in Irish education.

5.4 Conceptual Framework: A Proposed Policymaking Process

The culmination of the research recommendations asserts the need for clear, coherent and considered policymaking procedures in Irish education. In particular, the recommendations espouse the need for improvements in communication, transparency and consultation processes in educational policymaking. The opening chapter of this dissertation presented the theoretical framework for this research which knitted formal theories together on the topic of educational policymaking (Ravitch and Riggan 2017; Crawford 2020). These three theories included the

Policy Process Theory (Anderson 2003), Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (2019) and Characteristics of Policy Forums (Fischer and Leifeld 2015) as shown in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3: Theoretical Framework



The specific nature of these theories provides a theoretical backdrop from which the conceptual framework for this research can be formulated (Crawford 2020). The conceptual framework for this research has been constructed by analysing the research findings, conclusions and recommendations in light of the theoretical framework. More specifically, the conceptual framework references and adapts elements of the theoretical framework, in particular, the policy process by Anderson (2003) in order to present a proposed policymaking process for Irish education. Firstly, this section revisits Anderson’s policy process as shown in Figure 5.4. Subsequently, a revised policy process, shown in Figure 5.5, is introduced. The presentation of the proposed policy process is furnished with a rationale for the amendments to the original framework presented by Anderson (2003). The revised policy process is based entirely on the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this research and represents a proposed policymaking process for the Irish primary context.

Figure 5.4: Anderson’s Policy Process Theory



Anderson (2003)

Anderson’s policy process (Figure 5.4) presents a broad theory of the policymaking process from the articulation of a policy problem to the associated policy implementation and evaluation. A brief summary of each stage of this policy process is outlined below.

Problem Identification and Agenda-Setting: At this stage, policy problems are presented and selected. The chosen policies form part of the policy agenda. The policy agenda can be influenced by politics (Kingdon 1995 cited in Plank *et al.* 2009) as well as transnational influences (Ball 2016). This stage also witnesses the articulation of the rationale behind a given policy, what can be referred to in literature as policy-explaining (Adams 2016).

Formulation: Once the policy problem has been identified and the policy agenda has been set, the process of formulation begins. In this stage, discourse occurs surrounding the details of the policy being created. Therefore, this stage marks a critical juncture in enabling policy discourse where values are broached, ideas discussed and influences forged (Bell and Stevenson 2015). Policy-framing takes place in this stage of the policy process which can be seen as “the interplay between policy creation and response” (Adams 2016, p.301). In the creation of the policy, the potential policy solutions and required actions to respond to the problem are considered (Anderson 2003). The policy solutions or proposals can be both created or borrowed from another jurisdiction.

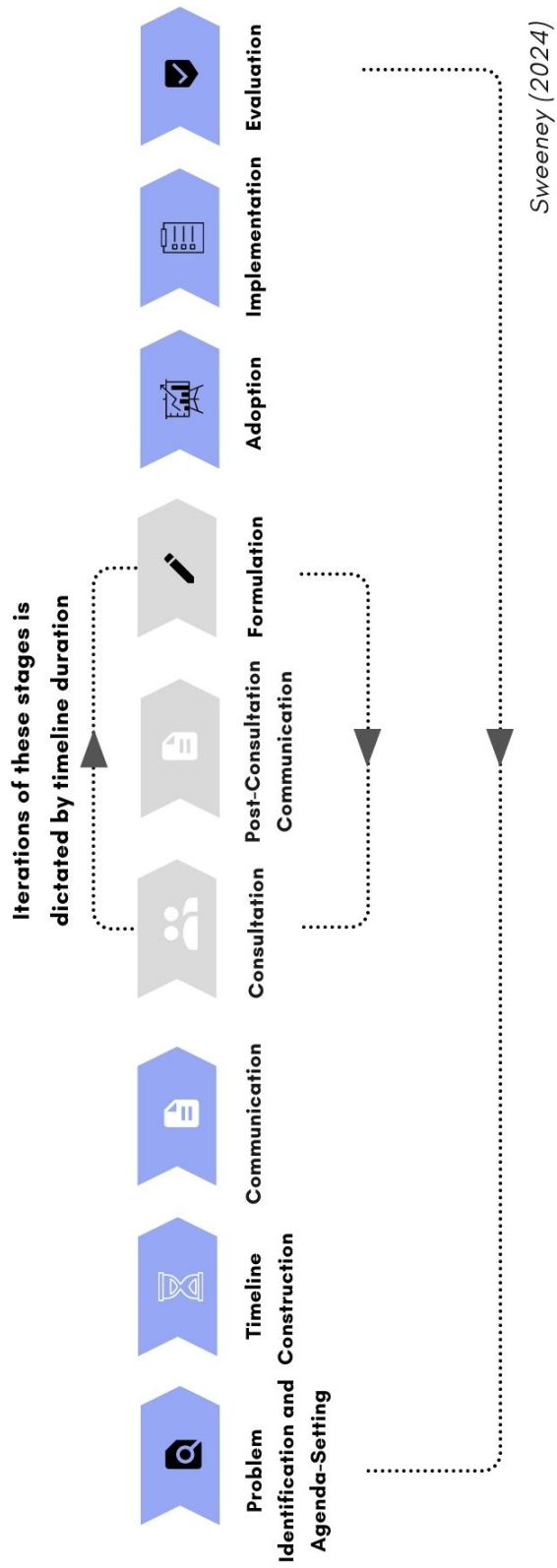
Adoption: This stage of the process requires decision-making on the policy solution and the associated course of action. The ‘context of text production’ refers to the choice of policy instrument and the manner in which the policy is mediated to the public (Bowe *et al.* 1992). Discourse also surrounds the supportive measures required to ease policy implementation.

Implementation: In this stage of the process, the chosen policy solution is put into effect. Literature refers to this as the ‘context of practice’, whereby sense-making of the educational policy occurs through enactment (Bowe *et al.* 1992, p.172). This stage witnesses the handover of the policy control from the policy creators to the enactors/practitioners of policy (Burde 2004).

Evaluation: This final stage of the policy process theory refers to the assessment and monitoring of a policy. At this stage, the policy is evaluated to ascertain the effect that is being observed with reference to the policy problem that was outlined in the early stages of the policy process. If the evaluation stage indicates that amendments are required, this could result in the policy process beginning again.

As was established in the opening chapter, this linear perception of policymaking does not account for the complexities that are in operation throughout the policymaking in the real-world (Bell and Stevenson 2015; Luetjens and Mintrom 2016). However, for the purposes of this research, the policy process has provided a critical framework to analyse and evaluate the current structures of educational policymaking in the Irish context. As a result, this research recommends a number of changes to the policy process theory advanced by Anderson in a bid to illustrate changes that are required to the current policymaking mechanisms in Irish education. The proposed policymaking process is illustrated in Figure 5.5.

Figure 5.5: Conceptual Framework – A Proposed Policymaking Process



Firstly, it must be noted that all five stages of Anderson’s policy process, problem identification and agenda-setting, formulation, adoption, implementation and evaluation, have remained part of the revised policy process with minimal changes to how some of these stages are conducted. Amendments can also be seen in the addition of further stages to the policy process, namely, timeline construction, communication, consultation and post-consultation communication. These additional stages are indicated using the white icons in the figure. This conceptual framework maintains the understanding that policymaking cannot always be neatly packaged into a linear and presentable format (Bell and Stevenson 2015; Luetjens and Mintrom 2016). However, this framework presents clear milestones for policymaking that could be used to provide consistent structures to policymaking processes in Irish education. The conceptual framework revises the policy process and acknowledges the variance to educational policymaking in Ireland that can occur depending on the type and nature of the policy in question. This is exemplified by the three stages branded with a grey colour which can be collectively repeated depending on the nature of the time horizon (Fischer and Leifeld 2015). Resultantly, the process is versatile and allows for differing stages and pathways depending on the policy in question. A summary for each additional stage is outlined below with justifications included for these amendments.

Problem Identification and Agenda-Setting: The characteristics of this stage remain largely similar to the original process, however, one limitation to the original process was the lack of clarity surrounding the policy actors involved (De Marchi *et al.* 2017). Crucially, this revised theory has been designed with both policy creators and policy contributors in mind. Therefore, in articulating the policy problem, consideration needs to be afforded to the type of policy being created and the policy creators leading the policymaking processes. Identification of the type of educational policy allows for discussion around the prioritisation of the policy, classifying if the “policy demand” requires an immediate or long-term response (Anderson 2003, p.3). Once the policy problem has been added to the policy agenda, an appropriate timeline needs to be constructed.

Timeline Construction: Identification of the type of educational policy allows for discussion around the prioritisation of the policy, classifying if the “policy demand” requires an immediate or prolonged timeline (Anderson 2003, p.3). This mechanism affords agility in the policy process with scope for differentiated timelines based on the priority of the policy in question. The prolonged timeline allows for an extensive development cycle, incorporating different

phases of consultation, communication and formulation. The immediate timeline represents a more streamlined approach containing only one consultation phase due to a truncated time horizon (Fischer and Leifeld 2015, p.365). Once the appropriate timeline has been chosen, decisions can be made by the policy creators surrounding the inclusion of policy contributors in the subsequent phases of the process.

Communication: This stage enacts transparent communication with the network of policy actors on the early decisions relating to the policy in question. The original policy process moved straight from problem identification and agenda-setting into formulation and therefore, did not articulate the need for early communication on policy developments. During this stage, the following key points of information are shared with policy actors: 1) the rationale for the policy, 2) the identities of the policy creators leading the policymaking process, 3) the proposed timeline and 4) the range of policy contributors and the associated opportunities for consultation.

Consultation: As a clear amendment to the policy process presented by Anderson (2003), consultation has been added as an additional stage. This has been done as a result of the findings whereby participants expressed concerns with policies being already drafted prior to consultation. Furthermore, in the original process it was implied that control of the policy lay with the policy creators until the implementation stage. Therefore, the aim of this stage is to ease the transition of control by involving policy contributors prior to formulation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019; Bae and Stosich 2018). This stage is characterised as accessible, dialogical and transparent in order to facilitate meaningful discourse between policy actors. Furthermore, representation approaches in consultation are furnished with evidence-based mechanisms to corroborate the representative voice.

Post-Consultation Communication: All consultation processes are followed by the publication of post-consultation reports. These reports capture the range of inputs received in the previous stage and are shared with the general public and network of policy actors. This stage then informs the system of the direction of the policy prior to formulation.

Formulation: In this stage, evidence-based policy begins to be formulated, acquiring evidence from a range of sources including the Government, domestic and international assessment data and the post-consultation report arising from the previous stage. As illustrated in Figure 5.4,

consultation, post-consultation communication and formulation are identified in a different colour to the other stages as these stages can be repeated in the event of a prolonged timeline. The iterative nature of this newly-formed section of the policy process allows for multiple phases of policy re-drafting based off interactions between policy actors. In the event of a policy requiring an immediate response, the timeline would continue onto the next stage after formulation.

Adoption: The policy solution is chosen and decisions are made surrounding the associated course of action in terms of publishing and sharing the policy. Supportive measures are prepared to aid the implementation stage.

Implementation: This stage is where the policy is put into effect, referred to as policy-forming whereby policy is constructed at local level by educational practitioners (Adams 2016).

Evaluation: At this stage, the policy is evaluated to ascertain the effect that is being observed with reference to the policy problem that was outlined in the early stages of the policy process. If the evaluation stage indicates that amendments are required, this would result in the policy process beginning again to rectify the issues being observed by policy enactors. Therefore, an arrow has been added to the policy process diagram to demonstrate this contingency.

Understandably, this revised policymaking framework for educational policy in the Irish primary context cannot account for all of the complexities associated with policymaking processes. This revised process does, however, indicate clear stages that should be incorporated into policymaking processes in order to respond to some of the issues outlined by participants in this research including the need for consistency, transparency, equity and communication in policymaking processes. Therefore, this research recommends that policy creators evaluate the current policymaking processes in light of the revised policy process and the recommendations made in this chapter.

5.5 Conclusion

The examination of the recommendations arising from this research underlines a number of imperative considerations for enhancing the effectiveness of policymaking process in Irish primary education. Firstly, this research recommends the necessity to establish transparent

procedures for creating policy timelines in the early stages of policy design to ensure that policy actors are informed about decision-making processes. Secondly, this research promotes the need for fixed communication and consultation points in policymaking to ensure authentic and inclusive discourse between policy actors. This research also confirms the need to empower the voices of primary school pupils by establishing inclusive and accessible consultation mechanisms. The establishment of an educational policy liaison committee is also recommended to reach the under-accessed voices in school communities. Furthermore, this research recommends the need for guidelines to verify representative voice in consultation. All of these recommendations will require significant investment from policymakers as well as incentives to encourage increased involvement in policymaking processes from certain policy actors. Finally, this research recommended opportunities for further research on the topic of educational policymaking. The culmination of these recommendations allowed for elucidation on a revised policy process from the conceptual framework. This revised conceptual framework presented a proposed policymaking process in Irish education, allowing for varying timelines depending on the priority of the policy in question.

In conclusion, this research asks policymakers in education to pay particular heed to the conclusions and recommendations of this chapter.

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Appendix A – Extract from Sample Literature Input Table

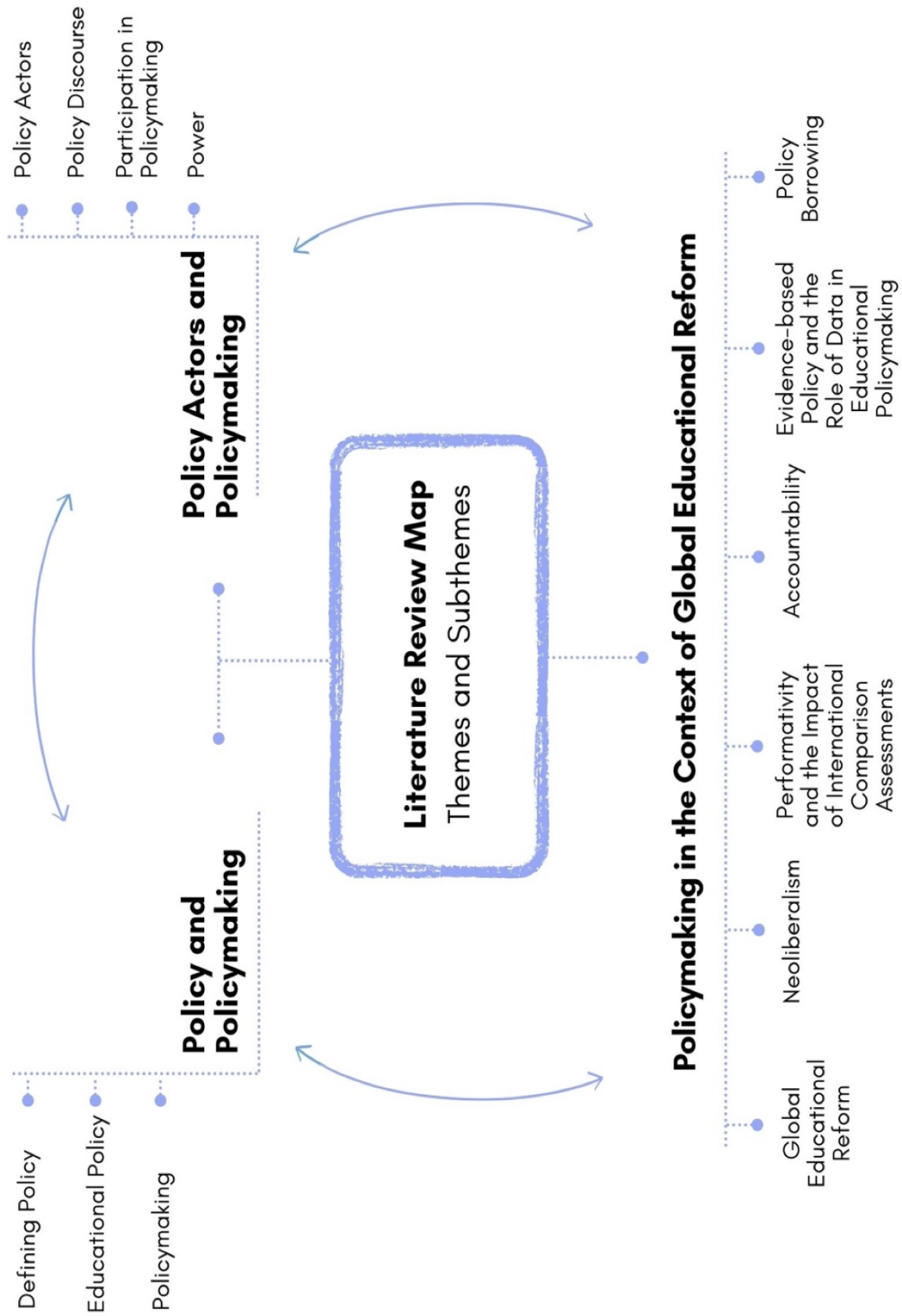
Title: (Literature Review) Evidence-based Policy, Policymaking and Decision-making				
Who	Where	What	Why	Citation Pearls
De Marchi <i>et al.</i> (2017)	De Marchi, G., Lucertini, G. and Tsoukias, A. (2016) 'From Evidence-based Policy Making to Policy Analytics', <i>Annals of Operations Research</i> , 236(1), 15-38.	This paper looks at decision-making with regards to educational policymaking, in particular concentrating on “decision-aiding” and how this is influenced (p.15). Evidence-based policy is also investigated as an approach to policymaking that seeks to gather support from a data-based rationale. The examination of this approach to policymaking reveals shortcomings and instead, an approach called policy analytics is supported as a means of benefitting decision-making in policy. The opening page of the article introduces a really thought-provoking question with regards to policymaking, namely, what is useful and appropriate information to aid the policymaking process? Is it stakeholder involvement, polls, consultations, questionnaires?	This article communicates important terminology with reference to the policy cycle identifying and explaining the associated stages. Additionally, this article raises important questions with regard to the use of evidence in the process of policymaking. Through examination of research, the authors indicate that a common characteristic of public policy is that there can be varying “power relations” between stakeholders in the formulation of a public policy (p.18). Interestingly, the authors allude to the definition of evidence furnished by the UK Cabinet Office in 1999, expressing that evidence can be defined as “expert knowledge; published research; existing research; stakeholder consultations; previous policy evaluations; the Internet; outcomes from consultations; costings of policy options; output from economic and statistical modelling”	“Policies are all around us and, directly or indirectly, they influence many aspects of our life. Quite often, people ask themselves how such policies have been conceived, why politicians have decided to implement that policy, and not another one, why it has been implemented in that precise way and with particular resources, how these have been used and so on” (p.15) “Since the 1950s, policy making has been interpreted as a process, that is a sequence of interactive stages or phases. Under such perspective, the policy making process can be considered as

			<p>(p.27). What would the definition from Irish primary policymakers be in reference to evidence that can inform policy? Is there a preferred methodology for evidence-collection? What research methods are omitted from the policymaking process?</p>	<p>developing in time and space, merging actions and intentions, decisions and also a lack of decision-making, impacting on society and on the political system itself” (p.19)</p>
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Appendix B – Extract from Initial Analysis of Literature Input Tables

Literature Input Table	Key Concepts/Claims/Ideas
1	<i>Global educational reform Policy borrowing Globalisation</i>
2	<i>Theory of educational policy (sociological, anthropological etc.)</i>
3	<i>Evidence-based policy Legitimacy Accountability – New Public Management Policy convergence</i>
4	<i>Different types of policy (local, provincial and national) Educational policy Stakeholders in policy Policymaking theories and models</i>
5	<i>Policymaking: explaining, framing and forming Policy definition Policy and discourse</i>
6	<i>Historical development of Irish educational policy OECD influence Legitimacy</i>
7	<i>Policy as text and discourse</i>
8	<i>Impact of OECD on education systems Neoliberalism International comparison data</i>
9	<i>Alternative approach to use of OECD data (Finland) Educational reform International comparison data</i>
10	<i>Role of data in educational reform OECD influence</i>

Appendix C – Literature Review Map





Appendix D – Letter of Recruitment (Email)

Dear _____,

I hope this email finds you safe and well.

My name is Luke Sweeney and I am completing PhD research on the topic of educational policymaking in Mary Immaculate College under the supervision of Dr. Margaret Nohilly and Dr. Mia Treacy. I am getting in contact with you in the hope that you will consider participating in my research by taking part in an interview to discuss educational policymaking at primary level in Ireland. The interview would take place online and would last approximately 40-50 minutes. I know these are particularly busy times so there is absolutely no pressure, but I would be delighted for you to take part in my research. Please feel free to send me an email or give me a call if you have any questions, my contact details are provided below. I have also attached an information sheet which contains further details about my research. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,

Luke Sweeney

08*****

Luke.Sweeney@mic.ul.ie

Appendix E – Participant Information Sheet

What are the Mechanisms for Decision-making in Irish Primary Educational Policymaking?

What is the project about?

This research is an inquiry into the mechanisms by which educational policy is formulated in Irish primary education. This research intends to investigate how educational policy topics are presented, defined and decided at Irish primary level. Additionally, this research will examine the various policy actors who are involved in the processes of policymaking, examining how policy discourse is facilitated at Irish primary level.

Who is undertaking it?

My name is Luke Sweeney and I am a Postgraduate student attending Mary Immaculate College. I am presently completing a PhD under the supervision of Dr. Margaret Nohilly (Margaret.Nohilly@mic.ul.ie) and Dr. Mia Treacy (Mia.Treacy@mic.ul.ie).

Why is it being undertaken?

The objective of the research is to gather information on the mechanisms of decision-making surrounding educational policymaking at Irish primary level. The rationale for this research is to provide understanding and insight into the processes of educational policymaking.

What are the benefits of this research?

It is hoped that the data gathered from participants will (a) provide understanding on the current processes of educational policymaking (b) identify how educational policy topics/problems are presented, defined and decided (c) provide insight into the policy actors that are involved in the formulation of educational policy (d) generate an understanding about how policy actors are involved in policymaking and (d) contribute rich insight into the mechanisms of policymaking, contributing to future educational policymaking.

What are the risks of participating in this research?

The researcher is aware of the sensitive nature of the research topic of educational policymaking. Therefore, all research data will be anonymised through the use of pseudonyms and every effort will be made to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of research participants at all times.

Exactly what is involved for the participant (time, location, etc.)

Participation in this research will consist of an interview which will last approximately one hour. The interview will take place via online communication at a time of your choice, which is flexible and changeable. The interview questions will seek to gather your knowledge, experience and insights into educational policymaking from an Irish primary context.

Right to withdraw

Every effort will be made to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of research participants at all times. You are free to withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason and without consequence.

How will the information be used / disseminated?

The answers from your interview will be combined with that of the other participants in this study and used to form the results section of my thesis. The answers you provide in your interview may be included in the thesis in the form of direct quotations, paraphrasing and/or summarised points. Your anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured at all times through the use of pseudonyms.

How will confidentiality be kept?

All information gathered will be anonymised through the use of a pseudonym for each research participant. Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality to ensure that participants are not identifiable through the presentation of data from this research.

What will happen to the data after research has been completed?

All the data for this research will be stored on an encrypted memory device in a locked file. In accordance with MIC Data Retention Policy, anonymised data may be retained indefinitely as required by the researcher.

Contact details:

If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study my contact details are as follows:

Luke Sweeney

Luke.sweeney@mic.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact:

MIREC Administrator Research and Graduate School Mary Immaculate College South
Circular Road Limerick Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie



Appendix F – Informed Consent Form

Title: What are the Mechanisms for Decision-making in Irish Primary Educational Policymaking?

Dear Participant,

As outlined in email communication, the current study will investigate the mechanisms for decision-making in Irish educational policymaking. Details surrounding the nature of the research are explained in the **Participant Information Sheet**. The participant information sheet should be read fully and carefully before consenting to take part in the study.

You are free to withdraw from the investigation at any time. All information gathered will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party. In accordance with MIC Data Retention Policy, anonymised data may be retained indefinitely as required by the researcher.

Please read the following statements before signing the consent form.

- I have read and understood the **Participant Information Sheet**.
- I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.
- I am fully aware of **all** the procedures involving myself, and of any **risks and benefits** associated with the study.
- I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason.
- I am aware that my results will be kept confidential.

Name (PRINTED): _____

Name (Signature): _____

Date: _____



Appendix G – Sample Interview Schedule

Initial Questions:

- To begin, could you tell me about your experiences of being involved in national educational policymaking? If you wish, could you describe the policy topic(s) to which these experiences relate?
- Could you outline how/why you came to be involved in the policymaking process?

Intermediate Questions:

- Are there consistent points of contact that you would deal with in contributing to educational policymaking?
- Could you describe any examples of consultation on national educational policy at primary level that you have experienced?
- What do you consider to be some of the influences that shape educational policy at primary level?

Ending Questions:

- As you look back on these experiences, what have you learned about the policymaking process? What works well and what could be improved?
- What do you think are the most important ways to facilitate discourse in educational policymaking?
- Is there something else you think I should know to understand educational policymaking better?

Appendix H – Methodological Journal Prompts

- *What did I learn from the experience?*
- *What surprised me?*
- *What went well and what didn't?*
- *How did I act and why?*
- *What are my own strengths and weaknesses?*
- *How does my experience compare to the literature?*
- *What connections can I make between this experience and the wider policymaking context?*
- *What research/theories/models can help me make sense of this?*
- *Could I have responded in a different way?*
- *What might have helped or improved things?*
- *Would I do things differently? If so how?*
- *How/where can I use this new knowledge and experience?*
- *What are the next steps?*
- *The most significant issue arising from this experience was ...*
- *This experience has highlighted that I need to develop my skills ...*
- *From this experience I have learnt that ... which I feel will be invaluable...*

Adapted from:

University of Cumbria (2022) 'Reflective Prompts', available:

<https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/media/MyCumbria/Documents/PromptsforReflectiveWriting.pdf>

[accessed 23 Sept 2020].

Appendix I – Sample Journal Entry

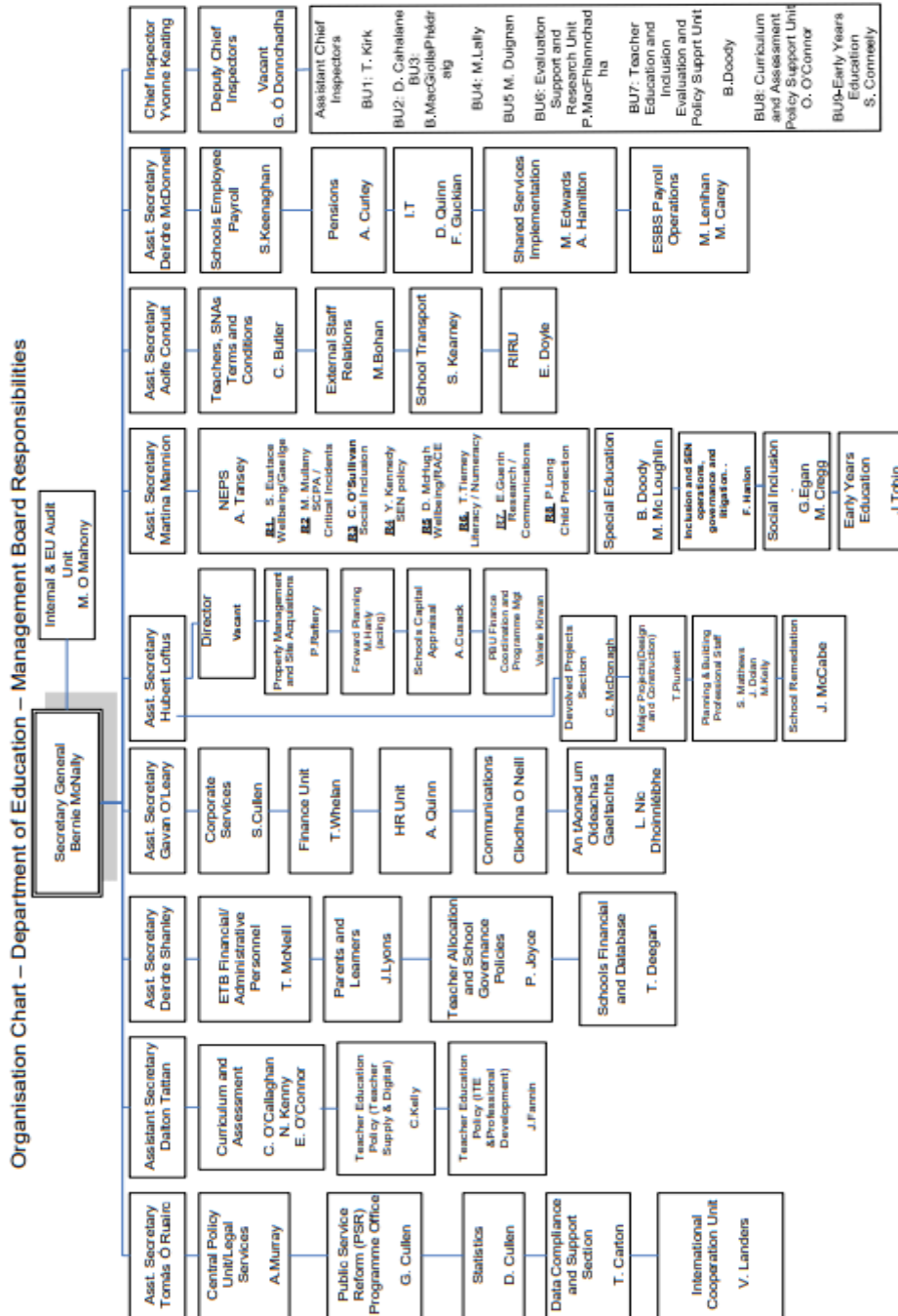
Following the interview with Participant G, the researcher noted the following reflection which points to the complex nature of initiating Irish educational policymaking.

Post-Interview Reflection:

An integral taking from this interview is the complexity of policy initiation in Irish educational policymaking. Participant G revealed that a policy in education could have so many implications that it necessitates collaboration between different divisions in the Department of Education. Participant D remarked on similar sentiments of collaboration, however, explained that particular high-stakes policies require collaboration between a number of departments in the Government. While it is evident that the initialisation of policy is very much dependent on the policy being created, the major reflection from this interview is just how complicated the process of initiating a policy can be through the need to have so many fingerprints in the infant stages of a policy.

Appendix J – Department of Education Organisation Chart

Department of Education (2021b) *Annual Report*, Dublin: Stationery Office.



Appendix K – Ethical Approval



Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee MIREC-4: MIREC Chair Decision Form

APPLICATION NO.

A20-049

1. PROJECT TITLE

The Mechanisms for Decision-making in the Formulation of Irish Primary Educational Policy

2. APPLICANT

Name:	Luke Sweeney
Department / Centre / Other:	Learning Society & Religious Education
Position:	Postgraduate Researcher

3. DECISION OF MIREC CHAIR

<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance through MIREC is required.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance through MIREC is not required and therefore the researcher need take no further action in this regard.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is required and granted. Referral to MIREC is not necessary.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is required but the full MIREC process is not. Ethical clearance is therefore granted if required for external funding applications and the researcher need take no further action in this regard.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Insufficient information provided by applicant / Amendments required.

4. REASON(S) FOR DECISION

A20-049 – Luke Sweeney - *The Mechanisms for Decision-making in the Formulation of Irish Primary Educational Policy*

I have reviewed this application and I believe it satisfies MIREC requirements. It is, therefore, approved.

5. DECLARATION (On behalf of MIREC CHAIR)

Name (Print):	Professor Michael Healy
Signature:	
Date:	28 th September 2020