How Context Shapes Enactment: The Case of School Self-Evaluation in Irish Primary Schools

By

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A Thesis

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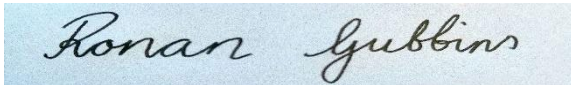
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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Dedications

Firstly, I want to give special thanks to Grace, my new wife. I promised this thesis would be finished before we were married. It took a bit longer, but that's how it goes. Without your love and support, this and a whole lot more would not be possible.

I would like to give recognition to my family. I was very lucky in the cards I was dealt and have a lot to be thankful for. To my inspirational sisters, and to my parents who gave me every opportunity in life, thank you.

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Acronyms

CPD   Continuous Professional Development

DE   Department of Education

DEIS   Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DES   Department of Education and Skills

EAL   English as an Additional Language

FSSU   Financial Support Services Unit

HSCL   Home School Community Liaison

INTO   Irish National Teachers Organisation

ISM   In School Management

MMR   Mixed Methods Research

OECD   Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development

PDST   Professional Development Service for Teachers

PLC   Primary Language Curriculum

SSE   School Self-Evaluation

WSE   Whole School Evaluation

WSE MLL   Whole School Evaluation Middle Leadership and Management

Abstract

Ronan Gubbins

How Context Shapes Enactment: The Case of School Self-Evaluation in Irish Primary Schools

Despite a growing body of research examining School Self-Evaluation (SSE) both internationally and within the Irish post-primary context, there is a notable gap in knowledge concerning practical application of the policy in Irish primary schools. This PhD thesis addresses this gap by investigating the enactment of SSE policy in this important sector of the Irish education system. In achieving this, this study has two primary aims: first, it seeks to understand how SSE policy has been enacted, and second, it seeks to explore how context shapes the enactment of the policy in Irish primary schools.

The study utilises a multi-site case study design with nine sites forming the researched case. Qualitative data is gathered at each site to provide rich and detailed accounts of SSE in practice, the significant contextual influences, and their influence on enactment. In line with the multi-site case study tradition, a comprehensive analysis is undertaken in two stages. Firstly, a deductive within-site analysis provides findings from each site before an inductive cross-site analysis identifies themes applicable to the case.

Within-site findings demonstrate how SSE policy has been enacted before outlining how context has shaped enactment in each site. Cross-site findings identify six themes of significance. Primarily, in relation to how SSE policy has been enacted, these themes demonstrate the dynamics of enactment over time; ambitions and achievements in enactment; adoption, adaption, and avoidance in enactment; and agency and participation in enactment, all with respect to SSE policy specifically. In relation to the shaping influence of context, the final two themes outline how the external, material, and situated context shapes enactment before the shaping role of professional culture on the enactment of SSE policy is presented.

Overall, the study highlights the need for the development of capacity among Irish primary schools in responding to context as they enact SSE policy. Furthermore, the specific areas requiring professional development in the process are highlighted and implications for policy and practice are provided. Finally, several supports aimed at enabling schools to succeed in SSE are communicated.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

The current research, entitled 'How Context Shapes Enactment: The Case of School Self-Evaluation in Irish Primary Schools', aims to bring novel, rich, and deep insights to the field regarding the phenomenon of school self-evaluation (SSE). Specifically, the research explores and explains the complex interplay that exists between policy, context, and practice in the Irish primary setting. This is achieved by positioning teachers and school leaders at the forefront of consideration as they enact SSE policy in their schools.

This chapter aims to orientate the reader by presenting the research background, introducing the research problem and question, by briefly outlining the guiding theoretical framework and research methodology, before finally providing an overview of the thesis chapters.

1.2. Background

School self-evaluation (SSE) is a national educational policy that has been mandated in Irish primary schools since 2012 (DES, 2012b). Packaged as a practical and rational process of action (DES, 2016c; DE, 2022c), SSE provides schools with a systematic, evidence-based, collaborative and participatory approach aimed at improving and assuring the quality of education they provide. The core facets of the policy are presented and communicated to schools using a six-step process model (see figure 1) which is intended to guide schools in undertaking SSE in practice (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012; O'Brien *et al.,* 2017; 2019; 2020).

Figure 1. SSE process model (DES, 2016c, p. 11)

Steps in the process model include identify a focus; gather evidence; analyse and make judgments; write and share report and improvement plan; put improvement plan into action; and monitor actions and evaluate impact. These are further depicted and explained in figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Applying the six-step school self-evaluation process (DES, 2016c, p. 12)

SSE is a particularly significant policy as it has been introduced as a key support during a period of intense reform for Irish education (Coolahan *et al.,* 2017). Here, the Irish government, via the Department of Education (DE), holds responsibility for educational policy development for Irish schools and since the year 2000, a panoply of reform policies have been introduced across the system broadly.

Of course, each of these policies have been introduced to improve the practices of schools and direct the actions of teachers and school leaders, subsequently enhancing pupil learning experiences and outcomes, and positively shaping the social and economic prospects of the Irish state in a globally competitive environment (OECD, 2020b). Examples of each in this context are presented in table 1, below, which draws on the OECD categorisation of reform policy in Ireland (OECD, 2020b).

Table 1. Examples of policies introduced at each level of the system

Level	Student	Institution	System
Policy	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (2015)	Digital Strategy for Schools 2015 – 2020	Strategy Statement 2019 – 2021
	National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy (2011 - 2020)	School Self-Evaluation (2012)	Annual Action Plans for Education

SSE, while being an important policy in and of itself, has taken an interesting position in this landscape. Although intended to enhance educational quality, SSE does not provide any sort of epistemic guidance for schools. It does not guide principals or teachers in relation to what or how they should teach, nor does it provide any curricular or pedagogical direction in relation to what or how pupils will learn. Rather, SSE policy provides schools and their teaching staff with a procedural architecture in which they can identify strengths and areas for development, plan for improvement, take action, and receive feedback (DES, 2016c).

As such, SSE is a policy that can be understood as a mechanism through which school improvement can take place (MacBeath, 1999), and this has certainly been the objective with which SSE has been introduced in the Irish context (DES, 2012c, 2016c). For this reason, it has become a hugely important element of the educational landscape in this context and, accordingly, one that must be examined with great care and seriousness.

1.3. Research Problem

While the rational and linear heuristic process model would indicate that such an endeavour should be straightforward to undertake, empirical evidence shows that SSE is consistently experienced as challenging in practice (OECD, 2013). This has been observed both internationally and in the Irish context, where commentators have questioned the quality and consistency of engagement with the process (Hislop, 2015; Coolahan *et al.*, 2017; O'Brien *et al.*, 2017). Centrally, problems have been identified in the decade since the policy's mandate, with challenges to effective implementation identified in teacher capacity and skills, attitudes, and professional resources to carry out the process (McNamara *et al.,* 2011; McNamara and O'Hara, 2012; Hislop, 2013; Brown *et al.,* 2016; O'Brien *et al.,* 2017). Once school staff are questioned about their experiences, even though the process is viewed as valuable and holding potential, challenges of time, support, initiative fatigue, and workload are commonly highlighted as being very significant issues (O' Hara *et al.,* 2016; Brown *et al.,* 2021; Quinn, 2021).

While an account of the challenges faced by schools is helpful, a review of the literature identifies a striking absence in the dearth of knowledge available regarding what SSE actually looks like in practice. This is especially glaring in the Irish primary context which is a unique stratum of the Irish education system. As a consequence of this, we are currently unable to appreciate to an appropriate degree how the process has been put into practice under real-world conditions. Furthermore, it is without doubt that the policy, like any policy, will come into practice under varying and less than ideal conditions. How these real-world conditions have shaped the policy in practice presents an additional problematic omission from the body of knowledge. Thus, we

are limited in our abilities to consider, discuss, evaluate, or critique SSE as an enacted policy in Irish primary schools.

As the OECD recognise, the goal of policy is to achieve concrete changes in schools. However, 'policy reforms do not always translate into concrete actions and visible results in schools, however well designed they may be' (OECD, 2020b, p. 2). This research therefore hopes to bring to light SSE policy as a practical endeavour. It does so for the purpose of understanding at a deeper level the ways in which the policy influences practices in the contexts into which it has been brought and explicitly addresses calls for further research here. As argued by Skerritt *et al.* (2023, p. 712),

> There is a great need for research in Ireland to begin exploring the similarities and differences in terms of how SSE and its features such as student voice and parental voice are enacted and experienced…

1.4. Theoretical Framework

In order to accurately answer these research questions, this study draws on recent developments in the field of critical policy analysis. Here policy enactment theory (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012) provides a set of conceptual tools that enable progression beyond an oversimplistic understanding of policy as merely implemented. Rather, by incorporating a sociological perspective, it transitions towards an appreciation of policy work as a complex, multifaceted, and contextually mediated process (Maguire *et al.*, 2010). This theory is particularly applicable to the objectives of this study as it has been developed from rigorous research concerning the enactment of similar educational policies in comparable contexts (Ball, Maguire, and Braun, 2012; Braun *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, it has been tested, corroborated, and extended in more recent empirical literature (Skerrit *et al.*, 2023; Bradbury, 2023), underscoring its utility.

This proves to be the rationale with which this theory has been applied in this research as this study seeks to place a greater emphasis on the material, the relational, and the discursive aspects of policy in the Irish primary context (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012). While more traditional

theoretical approaches have looked at the policy process in a rational and linear way, emphasising implementation as anticipated by governments and their associated agencies (Skerritt *et al.*, 2023), this is argued to be a limitation of the current body of literature that exists concerning SSE policy in Irish primary schools. Ultimately, policy enactment theory was chosen as it provides a powerful lens through which we can make sense of the realities of SSE policy work for those who are tasked with its enactment. This is particularly useful as it enables us to explain the similarities and differences that exist with regard to policy observed both between and within schools.

Policy actors, which in this instance refer to teachers and school leaders, are key in this theory as they make sense of, turn into action, and ultimately remake policies in response to the multitude of contextual influences that are at play (Braun *et al.*, 2011; Ball, 2015). These constructs of policy enactment are defined as interpretation, translation, and recontextualisation. Interpretation refers to the decoding of policy. For instance, this might refer to a principal reading a formal SSE policy document so that they can begin to make sense of what it entails. Translation then involves actors recoding policy for application in their unique contexts. This involves bringing policy ideas to action and may involve creating improvement plans and changes to teaching and learning practices in classrooms for example.

This process of interpretation and translation results in the negotiation of the original policy as written in text (Ball, 1993) which occurs against the unique conditions in which schools and their actors operate. As such, policy is viewed as a discursive process where actors negotiate policy and context, producing a new take on policy (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012; Maguire *et al.*, 2015). This process of negotiation serves to explain the differences that ultimately arise in the doing of policy between schools and the differences observed between policy and practice more generally (Braun *et al.*, 2011; Ball, Maguire and Braun 2012). These constructs are described in table 2.

Table 2. Key constructs within the theory of policy enactment

Construct	Description
Policy enactment	how schools 'do policy' (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012, p. 2)
Interpretation	'an initial reading, a making sense of policy' (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012 p. 43)
Translation	'an iterative process of making institutional texts and putting those texts into action' (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012, p. 45)
Recontextualisation	'schools produce to some extent, their own take on policy' (Braun *et al.*, 2011, p. 586)

It is important to note that teacher positionality needs to be accounted for when utilising such a perspective (Ball, 2015). For instance, research has brought attention to the influence of formal position and the resultant influence this appears to have on an actor's enactment of policy (Maguire *et al.*, 2010). Of course, principals have been shown to play a central role in the enactment of policy and this has also been identified in SSE specific literature in addition (Emstad, 2011; Schildkamp *et al.*, 2012; Schildkamp, 2019). However, middle leaders are also seen to be key (Brown *et al.*, 2021; Quinn, 2021) while teachers at various career stages have been observed to engage with policy in different ways. This is encapsulated in policy enactment theory in a variety of possible policy positions (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012; Maguire *et al.*, 2015).

Quite simply, position matters and it influences the enactment of policy. This is not only observed in relation to formal position but also evident in teachers' values and beliefs which account for some of the heterogeneity evident in enactment at a local level (Maguire *et al.*, 2015). For example, a teacher or leader might employ a policy for their own ends or may ignore it altogether, while policy may come more or less into focus as leadership within a school changes or an alternative priority arises (Bradbury, 2023). Furthermore, different actors can have differing degrees of agency in the enactment of policy (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012; Ball, 2015) and it

has also been argued that many factors which shape the enactment of policy are outside the control of in-school actors (Maguire *et al.*, 2020).

While the coming chapters provide description relating to how SSE is interpreted, translated, and recontextualised in Irish primary schools, the current research thesis also contributes further by providing explanation relating to why it is enacted in such a way. As such, it is pertinent that the influential factors that exert a shaping influence on the enactment of SSE policy are brought to the fore and that their shaping influence on enactment is elucidated.

Policy enactment theory provides further theoretical tools that enable engagement with this aim. This is evident in the theory's assertion that the contexts in which policies are enacted are of tremendous consequence (Braun *et al.*, 2011; Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012). Context, defined as the professional culture, external context, situated context, and material context in which policy is enacted will thus function as an illuminating theoretical device. The professional culture of a school refers to aspects including the values or ethos of the school or teachers' experiences and beliefs for example, while the external context encapsulates features such as policy expectations or accountability mechanisms at play more broadly. The material context can relate to more tangible contextual factors including staffing or financial resources while the situated context then brings a school's location, pupil intake, or history into view.

1.5. Research Questions

With respect to the research objectives, and drawing upon the structure of the theoretical framework, the questions guiding the research are as follows:

- How has SSE policy been enacted in Irish primary schools?
- How has context shaped the enactment of SSE policy in Irish primary schools?

1.6. Methodological Approach

This research is approached from a pragmatic perspective where a problem-solving orientation, contextual understanding, flexibility and adaptation, and a focus on utility and impact are at the forefront of consideration (James, 1907; Putnam and Putnam, 2017). Ultimately, the research employs a qualitative multi-site case study approach (Simons, 2009; Yin, 2017; Jenkins *et al.*, 2018) where the case comprises of nine individual school sites. For each site, qualitative data is gathered via interview, focus group, and documents. These documents include school improvement plans (SIP) and externally compiled inspection reports.

Data is then analysed over two broad phases where rigor, richness and credibility of findings are enhanced in the research by means of a combined approach (Crowe *et al.*, 2011; Jenkins *et al.*, 2018). In phase one, a deductive within-site analysis is first conducted. Here the enactment of SSE policy and the shaping influence of context on these enactments are depicted in each of the nine school sites. Following this, an inductive cross-site analysis is conducted which identifies themes at the level of the case (Eisenhardt, 1989; Jenkins *et al.*, 2018). This is achieved through a constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser, 1965), as recommended by Bingham (2023).

1.7. The Rise of SSE in Irish Primary

SSE is not unique to the Irish context nor is the proliferation of efforts to enhance educational standards in schools (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012). In fact, SSE is a common feature internationally, with many advanced countries employing the phenomenon in their systems (OECD, 2015). This should not be surprising. As is clearly evident in the literature, the field of education is immensely concerned with improving and assuring the quality of education that systems and schools provide (Kyriakides and Campbell, 2004). This is the central purpose of SSE.

This position has arisen in line with the commonly held perspective that education can perform as a device of great potentiality for human development (Scheerens and Ehren, 2015; Bell, 2020).

As a result, educational quality is now held as 'something that cannot be left to chance' (Ozga *et al.,* 2011, p. 2). This is consistent across public services more broadly where a significant field of interest has grown with regard to how we can reform education for the better and in an economically viable way (Wedell, 2009; McLaughlin and Ruby, 2021). This has been a particularly prevalent frame of thinking in public services since austerity measures were introduced post-2008 economic crisis (Robbins and Lapsley, 2014).

Importantly, policy, which is employed with the purpose of managing the present and shaping the future (OECD, 2020a; Berkovich, 2021) has come to play a central role in these endeavours. Policy can be defined as 'a consistent course of action designed to meet a goal or objective, respond to an issue or problem identified by the government as requiring action or reform' (OECD, 2016, p. 186). In education, it has become a highly significant feature (Ozga, 2000; Sykes *et al.,* 2009) which seeks to positively influence practice and subsequently raise educational standards in systems and schools (Braun, Maguire and Ball, 2010).

One particularly interesting policy trend emerging from this movement is a new vision of educational governance, an area which concerns how decisions are made in education systems (OECD, 2019). In countenance to a traditional top-down approach, governments are increasingly promoting localised systems of governance. Here, schools have the autonomy to make decisions that are responsive to the local context (Brown *et al.*, 2016; Ehren *et al.*, 2017). In extension, calls for greater involvement from a wider group of stakeholders, especially with regard to the incorporation of parental and student perspectives, are now commonly sought in policy (Brown *et al.,* 2020).

In Ireland, in accordance with the expectations that are exerted from supranational intergovernmental organisations such as the OECD, it is anticipated that progress in the system can be achieved through enhanced organisational functioning. This is anticipated to occur by means of a rational approach to decision-making in schools (Mandinach, 2012; Spillane, 2012;

Gelderblom *et al.,* 2016; Young *et al.,* 2018). Ehren (2016, p. 144) summarises this situation well stating, 'The rationale for shifting such powers to the local level are to enable schools to be more responsive to the needs of their students and local communities and to further enhance and improve service delivery and school quality'. From this, it is anticipated that productivity gains can result from greater autonomy and agency at the level of the school. However, it is also evident that governments are reluctant to completely remove themselves from the equation. Consequently, increased autonomy, and the resultant benefits that are anticipated, are positioned alongside a greater need for accountability and transparency (Ball, 2008). As such, schools, principals, and teachers are increasingly expected to account for their work, with such a scenario leading some commentators to argue that a performative turn has taken hold in education (Biesta, 2009).

In Ireland, these developments have been vividly clear. For instance, in the Action Plan for Education 2019, the Minister's forward outlines the goal of '…using education and training services in a flexible, adaptive and innovative way, so as to prepare people for the future' and that 'with such levels of investment, we are committed to transparency, evaluation and measurement' (DES, 2019a, p. 2). One particularly significant policy that encapsulates this trend very well is SSE.

This policy technology, what Ball defines as 'calculated deployment of forms of organisation and procedures, and disciplines or bodies of knowledge to organise human forces and capabilities into functioning systems' (Ball, 2008, p. 48), has become a central tool of change management in Irish primary schools (DES, 2012a). Here, the purpose is portrayed ostensibly as school improvement (O'Brien *et al.,* 2020), with teaching and learning positioned as 'the core work of every school' (DES, 2016b, p. 6). Leadership and management, as supporting necessities for quality teaching and learning, are also presented as areas of significance in SSE (DES, 2016c). The focus for SSE cycles so far has been directed at teaching and learning only, however (DES, 2016b, 2016c).

Further insight into the purpose for which SSE is to be employed is available in SSE Updates which have been published intermittently on an SSE website by the Irish Inspectorate. According to SSE Update 15 for instance, SSE is 'about empowering schools to examine how they teach and how pupils learn. It helps schools to make small but meaningful changes to improve outcomes for learners' (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2020, p. 1). In SSE Update 9, it is stated that the primary goal of SSE is 'to assist teachers and school leaders in implementing the most effective and engaging teaching and learning approaches for all pupils' (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2017, p. 8). The Inspectorate also provide a definition for SSE:

> School self-evaluation is a collaborative, inclusive, reflective process of internal school review. During school self-evaluation the principal, deputy principal and teachers, under the direction of the board of management and the patron and in consultation with parents and pupils, engage in reflective enquiry on the work of the school. It is an evidence-based approach which involves gathering evidence from a range of sources and making judgements with a view to bringing about improvements in pupils' learning.

(DES, 2016c, p. 10)

1.8. The Historical Development of SSE in Irish Primary

The roots of SSE in Irish primary education can be traced back to the formation of Whole School Evaluation (WSE) which was conceived of in a Governmental White Paper in 1995 entitled Charting our Education Future (DES, 1995). The paper appears as an influential blueprint for the direction education would take for the following 25 years in Irish education with very clear intentions regarding improvement and accountability permeating the content. In 1998, The Education Act developed upon the objectives set in motion for WSE, defining the role of schools and the Department of Education and Skills (DES), via the Inspectorate, in evaluation with The School Developmental Planning initiative. This formally introduced the concepts of cyclical developmental planning and SSE in 1999. By 2003, WSE was initiated as a feature of the Irish education system.

Significantly, the act compelled each school to create a school plan aiming to achieve objectives relating to 'access and participation, and the measures proposed by the school to achieve these objectives' (DES, 2016a, p. 1). This lead to the formulation of the Looking at Our School (LAOS) document that served as an evaluation framework for schools and the Inspectorate (Nayir and McNamara, 2015). This was enacted in 2004. The purpose of this document was to guide schools in undertaking self-evaluation and focused on five areas including quality of learning and teaching in subjects; quality of support for students; quality of school management; quality of school planning; and quality of curriculum provision. Each domain was further subdivided into a combined 143 themes (DES, 2003).

Supporting documentation was provided for the SSE process in 2006 when the DES published A Guide to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools. It is of note that during this period, engagement with the process was low with its significance in policy not being reflected in practice (McNamara *et al.,* 2011). Explanations for this have been presented with regard to a dearth in the provision of support for schools (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008), as well as a lack of necessary clarity and guidance in how SSE could be conducted (Nayir and McNamara, 2015). Furthermore, prior to 2012, SSE was an optional activity for schools and, in reality, evaluation was almost completely conducted in the form of external review by the Inspectorate (Nayir and McNamara, 2015).

The 'PISA shock' of 2009, where Ireland's standardised reading scores were seen to be in decline (Cosgrove, 2015), brought educational reform to the fore. In 2011, SSE came into focus with renewed importance as the Irish government detailed aims of improving literacy and numeracy in schools, with self-evaluation seen to be a central tool in achieving this. This perspective was pursued in Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020 (DES, 2011) which proved to be the litmus for mandatory SSE. This was introduced in 2012. This came with the mandate that all schools would create self-evaluation reports and improvement plans and publish a summary of these to stakeholders in 2013/14 (Eurydice, 2015).

This, of course, was silhouetted against the backdrop of an economic recession that resulted in widespread cuts to the resources available to schools and in pay for staff in addition (Coolahan *et al.*, 2017). Overall, it can be argued that the resulting atmosphere in the education system was less than positive, with increasing productivity expectations and a reduction in public service wages occurring (Carr and Beckett, 2018).

In any case, a first cycle of SSE, with the expectation of three foci, was expected to be completed during 2012 – 2016. This cycle had a specific target on literacy and numeracy which is regularly perceived as a significant benchmark of educational quality (Eurydice, 2015) and one other curricular area (DES, 2012c; Nayir and McNamara, 2015). At this point, School Self Evaluation Guidelines for Primary Schools (DES, 2012c) were published detailing expectations for the SSE process in schools and additionally, a formal circular was issued clarifying the expected requirement that schools engage in the process (DES, 2012b). In effect, SSE has been legally mandated since 2012.

Retrospectively, it is apparent that the 2012 - 2016 phase was, or was at least later reflected on being, an opportunity for schools to build capacity in self-evaluation with the DES describing the scenario in positive terms. Here, schools were portrayed as having, 'not only reflected on and evaluated aspects of their teaching practices and pupils' learning, but also gaining 'valuable insights into the process of evidence-based action planning for improvement' (DES, 2016a, p. 2). To some degree, it appeared that the reform was not as influential as hoped. Indeed, it was presented by Dr. Harold Hislop, the Chief Inspector of the Inspectorate at that time, that many schools had undertaken SSE but that issues were faced in the rollout (Hislop, 2015). This was explained somewhat by an overly complex LAOS standards document according to Dr. Hislop, who referred to SSE engagement as having been slow to develop, lacking robustness, and that a lot of work was required in embedding the process in the future. During the period from 2012 – 2016, and considering the challenges experienced, through communication with educational

partners and schools (Hislop, 2015), the inspectorate engaged in a redevelopment of the SSE process.

This development and dialogue culminated in the publication of a new circular (DES, 2016a) and support materials aimed at a self-evaluation cycle from 2016 to 2020. These supporting materials included a revised process guideline document entitled School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Primary Schools (DES, 2016c) and a revised LAOS document entitled Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools (DES, 2016b).

Of significant note, however, is that during this period, due to an industrial dispute between the primary school teacher's union, the Irish National Teacher Organisation (INTO), and the DES, a period of very genuine disengagement with SSE transpired. The INTO general secretary at the time, Sheila Nunan, summarised the reason for disengagement in that 'Teachers are not prepared to see the department continually ramp up requirements and pressures on schools while ignoring a ban on the promotion that has devastated school management structures' (O' Brien, 2016). In conclusion, the exacerbating disparities that existed between the DES and the teaching profession, represented by the INTO, was seen in that agreement between the parties was not reached. Consequently, the INTO published a directive for disengagement in March 2016, where 97% of teachers voted to cease engagement with SSE. This formally put an end to the process for two years.

A solution did occur in March 2018, along with the publication of circular 0016/2018 (DES, 2018b). This directed schools to reengage with the process following a negotiated resolution between the DES and trade union. Interestingly, the circular advised on some change regarding the expectations outlined in the 2016 version of the circular. It was stated that schools were to engage with 'a minimum of two and a maximum of four curriculum areas', and the focus was to be on teaching and learning (DES, 2018, p. 6). Further clarity was also offered regarding the role of supporting agencies. These included school supports from the Inspectorate, Professional

Development Service for Teachers (PDST), and the Special Education Support Service (SESS). Additionally, several supporting resources were made available on the national SSE website, and the role of SSE and its centrality to the WSE process was defined and communicated.

However, this period was only to last for two years. Further exacerbating the previous challenges to SSE in Irish primary schools, on Thursday 12th March 2020, a statement from the DES directed schools to close as a measure of public health resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. From this point, schools would remain closed until the following school year when in-person teaching would resume. The provision of online learning was mandated by the DES for some of this period.

At the end of the 2020 school year, Circular 0040/2020 (DES, 2020) was issued by the DES, shedding some light on the expectations that were held regarding SSE going forward. This outlined the arrangements for inspection and SSE for the 2020/2021 year. In parallel, it also highlighted the disfigured and disjointed experience of SSE to date. It stated that schools would not be required to begin a new, third cycle of self-evaluation as had previously been planned. Rather, schools would be asked to continue with and aim to complete the work they would have completed prior to the closure.

In conjunction with this, or as an alternative, schools could use SSE to address forthcoming measures that would need to be implemented because of the challenges that the Covid-19 Pandemic brought. The role of the Inspectorate was changed in addition for that coming first term, with inspectors now performing in an advisory and research role. Alongside academic support, inspectors were to provide support around public health advice in schools. For the second and third terms, inspectors were to return to some aspects of evaluation in schools.

Following face-to-face learning that would last for the entire first school term of that year, SSE Update 15 was released in December 2020, with schools being reminded that SSE was useful and offered practical utility in responding flexibly to the needs that arise with examples of

examining options for online communication with parents and reviewing how homework was given in a school (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2020). Clearly, although schools were facing very significant challenges, SSE was still presented as an important aspect of school life and was something that the DES were determined to continue to invest in.

Interestingly, the next phase of SSE was stated in this update to be starting in September 2021 with a consultation around SSE due to commence in January 2021. The tumultuous, and, from the perspective of the planning outlined by the DES, unexpected period that was to follow, culminated in further school closures for all schools. These occurred after the Christmas break in January and February 2021 amid a deteriorating public health scenario, again derailing established plans. In response to the highly interrupted year experienced in education and in schools, the renamed Department of Education (DE) again delayed the implementation of the third phase of SSE in circular 0032/2021 (DE, 2021a). Now, it was envisaged that the next phase would begin in September 2022 and consultation for this cycle would take place during the first term of 2021.

In terms of expectations, it was stated that schools should continue to address their plan for the second phase with flexibility to use the process to address pandemic related issues and new challenges that have arisen in the meantime. Of further note, it is interesting to observe in this document that reference is made to inspectorate led capacity development for SSE. Here, a sample of schools would be engaged with on a voluntary basis during the second term of the 2022 year. Additionally, advisory visits concerning SSE that initially recommenced in 2018 were set to resume in 2021/22.

1.9. Organisation and Conclusion

Chapter one has provided an overview of the thesis by introducing the key concepts, the research problem and questions, the guiding theoretical framework, and the background to the research. Next, chapter two provides a review of the pertinent literature. It does this by firstly examining

approaches to researching policy in contextualised practice before it progresses towards exploring the literature relevant to SSE as a theory, as a policy, and as a practice. Furthermore, it considers approaches to understanding policy in context. Chapter three then presents the development of the research methodology before chapter four presents the findings of the within-site findings. Chapter five communicates the findings of the cross-site analysis, with chapter six discussing the findings of the research in respect to the literature and research objectives. Finally, chapter seven concludes the research before outlining the research recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1. Introduction

Chapter two reviews the literature relevant to the research problem. Firstly, as this research seeks to elucidate the realities of SSE policy in practice, the literature relevant to understanding policy in context is examined. Next, the research context is examined and as such, the review explores the literature relevant to the Irish primary context specifically. Following this, the chapter examines SSE through the lens of theory, policy, and the available empirical evidence, concluding the review.

The review methodology employed aligns with that of the narrative review (Baumeister and Leary, 1997). This involves a systematic search of high-quality evidence sources (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) including peer review academic articles, reports, and books relevant to the topic. This was followed by a process of citation pearl growing which 'is the process of using the characteristics of a relevant and authoritative article, called a pearl, to search for other relevant and authoritative materials' (Ramer, 2005, p. 397).

2.2. Perspectives on Policy in Context

Policy in practice has been conceptualised in different ways. To help structure the research, it is first necessary to understand how policy has been conceptualised in the literature. The coming section portrays and considers both modern and postmodern perspectives regarding policy in context.

2.2.1. Modernist Perspective

The modernist perspective of policy is grounded in the principles of rationality, efficiency, and the scientific method. Often, this perspective appreciates policy from the top down, and this can be seen in definitions in the literature. Codd (1985, as cited in Codd, 1988, p. 237), for instance, describes policy as the 'official discourse of the state'. Others extend this understanding to

incorporate the impacts that policy is anticipated to exert on practice. Henry *et al.* (1997, p. 1) for example present policy as an effort 'to steer the conduct of individuals, such as teachers or students, and organisations, such as schools and universities'. This understanding of policy as a tool in which governments can direct action is a perspective held by the OECD, who understand policy as the actions governments take to shape educational practices but also 'how governments address the production and delivery of education in a given system' (Viennet and Pont, 2017, p. 19).

Comparatively, others progress their understandings of policy beyond these more general definitions and begin to define policy as a process. Berkovich (2021, p. 21) for example presents policy as 'a series of events' in response to political problems experienced in a system. Importantly, once problems are identified, the policy process then should include the examination of solutions, the selection of a solution, and the adoption and application of a solution, before finally, the effort is evaluated.

This interpretation aligns well with many conceptual models that have been created to explain how the policy process works. These centre on the idea that policy progresses through a series of phases which unravel in an orderly, stepwise, and chronological fashion (Viennet and Pont, 2017). While variation exists in respect of how these steps are named, they are most often presented as agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision making, implementation, and evaluation making up the stages of the policy cycle. Figure 3 portrays the policy cycle.
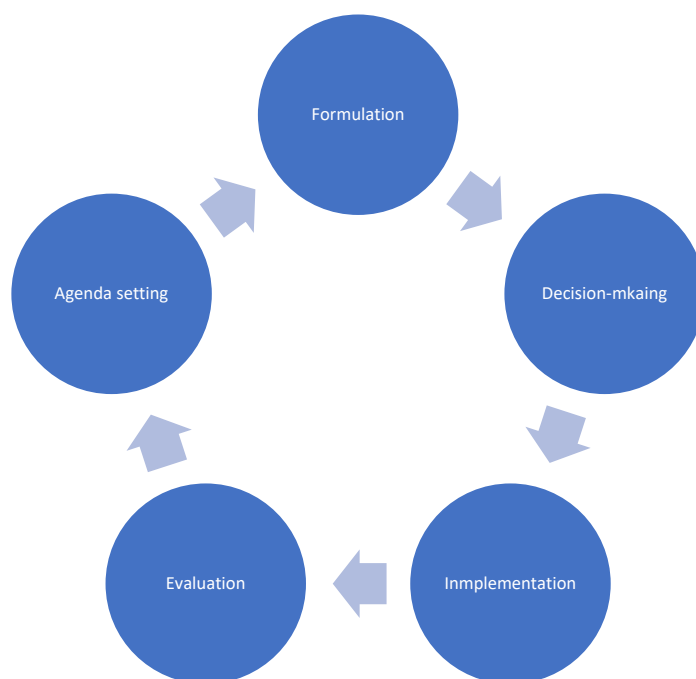
Figure 3. The policy cycle (Source: adapted from Howlett and Giest, 2015)

An important aspect of these models is that they present policy as a rational and linear approach to solving social problems (Wedell, 2009). Hill and Hupe (2015, cited in Hudson, Hunter and Peckham, 2019, p. 1) argue that such an interpretation relies on assumptions that 'a chronological order in which expressed intentions precede action; a linear causal logic whereby goals determine instruments and instruments determine results; and a hierarchy within which policy formation is more important than policy implementation'. This perspective, while useful in identifying where problems arise during the policy cycle, are argued to under theorise the importance of implementation. Rather, the emphasis is on intention or the '…aims or goals, or statements of what ought to happen' (Blakemore and Warwick-Booth, 2013, p. 1).

Increasingly, the literature is directing those with an interest in policy and its impacts towards the stage of implementation. As argued by Wedell (2009, p. 11), what ultimately counts is 'what teachers and learners do in a classroom that determines what educational changes will achieve in any setting'. With this, implementation and its fidelity are now understood as a highly significant determinant of a policy's success (McLaughlin, 1987; Cerna, 2013; Hall and Chapman, 2018).

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Implementation can be defined as 'The stage of execution or enforcement of a policy' (Jann and Weigrich, 2007, p. 51) or what O'Toole (2000, p. 265) describes as the point 'between the establishment of a policy and its effects on the world of action'. Within the modernist worldview, a commonly held perspective remains in that policy should be implemented in 'a straightforward and unproblematic way' (Henry *et al.,* 1997, p. 24). However, this position has been criticised due to the limited explanatory power it provides with respect to how and why policy materialises as it does in practice.

Of central significance, research time and again highlights that there is a divide between policy and practice in education (Schulte, 2018). Indeed, empirical experience identifies that formulating and introducing policy does not ensure improvement in outcomes (Hudson, Hunter and Peckham, 2019). Jann and Weigrich (2007, p. 51) for instance, explain that the 'decision on a specific course of action and the adoption of a program does not guarantee that the action on the ground will strictly follow policy makers' aims and objectives'. In sum, policy, even if brought to practice as envisaged in design, may not result in the changes sought.

Although many argue that the modernist conceptualisations remain the default position (Sin, 2014), such models of implementation have come to be challenged (Gornitzka, Kogan and Amaral, 2005; Honig *et al.*, 2009). This is evident in an appreciation of greater complexity in implementation (Braun *et al.,* 2011; Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012; Cerna, 2013; Hudson, Hunter and Peckham, 2019) where several influential factors have been isolated. These include a smart policy design, inclusive stakeholder engagement, a coherent implementation strategy, and a conducive context (Viennet and Pont, 2017). This reflects the sheer complexity of policy in practice (Ozga, 1990; Sabatier, 1991; Ball, 1993).

With this, policy implementation can now be better understood as 'a purposeful and multidirectional change process aiming to put a specific policy into practice and which may affect

an education system on many levels' (Viennet and Pont, 2017, p. 10). As Honig (2009, p. 333) argues:

> …whether or not a policy works is not an inherent property of the program or intervention itself. Rather, its outcomes depend on interactions between that policy, people who matter to its implementation and conditions in the places in which people operate.

Developing from these issues, approaches to understanding policy implementation have progressed in tandem with a burgeoning field of study in implementation science. Within this, research has been carried out in respect of the research context, understood as 'the dynamic forces working for or against implementation' (Damschroder *et al.*, 2022a), reflecting a strong outcomes-based emphasis. Within such approaches, the deterministic influences that contextual factors have on outcomes are elucidated (Damschroder *et al.*, 2022b).

A significant framework that has been applied in this regard is the Consolidation Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) (Damschroder *et al.*, 2009) which has been applied across various fields. Figure 4 provides an overview of the framework, exemplifying such a perspective.
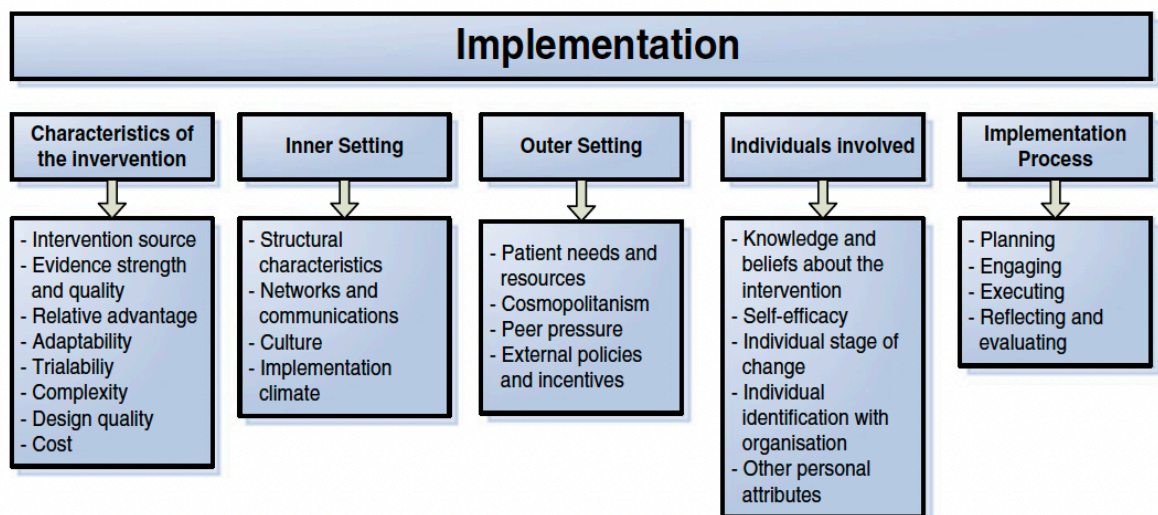
Figure 4. CFIR-Model Damschroder et al. 2009 in Ament et al. 2012.

2.2.2. Postmodern Perspective

An alternative conceptualisation of policy has come into view with the rise in postmodern approaches to knowledge. Ball (1993), for instance, portrays this progression in his conceptualisations of *policy as text* and *policy as discourse*. Policy as text understands 'policies as representations which are encoded in complex ways' and 'decoded in complex ways' (Ball, 1993, p. 11). Therefore, policy is represented in text but constantly in flux as those tasked with its interpretation recreate its meaning. Policy as discourse then introduces negotiation and compromise to policy work. As such, policy introduces a 'pre-established terrain' (Ball, 1993, p. 15) which binds and constrains what is considered valued truth and knowledge in a specific domain. As Ball (1993, p. 14) asserts, discourses shape

> …what can be said and thought, but also who can speak, when, where and with what authority. Discourses embody the meaning and use of propositions and words. Thus, certain possibilities for thought are constructed. Words are ordered and combined in particular ways and other combinations are displaced and excluded.

This is not a unidirectional process however, and actors are seen to have agency in how policy unravels in context. Now, policy is increasingly held to be 'complex, multifaceted and multileveled' and 'compounded by forces and interests operating simultaneously and shaped through negotiation, interpretations and compromise' (Hudson, Hunter and Peckham, 2019, p. 1).

Ball, Maguire and Braun (2011, p. 586) present it well in the argument that policy work emerges 'through reading, writing and talking - of the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices'. Consequently, it has been established that a greater emphasis should be placed on the realities of doing policy work in context so that we can understand 'what works for whom where, when, and why?' (Honig *et al.*, 2009, p. 333). Consequently, policy analysis must appreciate that there is more to policy work at the level of the school than mere implementation (Maguire *et al.,* 2020). Rather, we must bring into perspective the coalescence of a 'set of objective conditions'

and 'a set of subjective 'interpretational' dynamics' (Braun *et al.*, 2011, p. 588), and consider the resultant shape these place on policy in practice.

This approach, it is argued, provides us with a more accurate interpretation of policy in action and how it is 'understood, interpreted, acted upon and resisted in real world contexts' (Bradbury *et al.*, 2021, p. 6). This dynamic is further encapsulated by Bergmark and Hansson who state, 'A policy is not set in stone, it requires negotiating and meanings need to be constructed and interpreted' (2020, p. 3).

2.3. Policy Enactment Theory

Policy enactment theory (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012) draws on post-modern developments in the field of policy analysis and helps us to understand and explain 'how schools do policy' in contextually situated practice. Policy actors, those tasked with the enactment of policy, are rarely seen to undertake policy as envisaged in the original policies. Rather, actors recontextualise policy as they 'fabricate and forge practices out of policy texts and policy ideas in light of their situated realities' (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012, p. 142).

Enactment, therefore, is a concept which refers to the interpretation, translation, and recontextualisation of policy as it is undertaken in schools. Interpretation can be appreciated as 'an initial reading, a making sense of policy' (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012, p. 43), while translation is described as 'an iterative process of making institutional texts and putting those texts into action' (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, p. 45). Recontextualisation refers to a scenario where 'schools produce to some extent, their own take on policy, drawing on aspects of their culture or ethos, as well as on situated necessities' (Braun *et al.,* 2011, p. 586).

With this, policy, as it is presented in text, is argued to be dematerialised (Braun *et al.,* 2011) and 'the fact that policies are intimately shaped and influenced by school-specific factors which act as constraints, pressures and enables of policy enactments tends to be neglected' (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012). In sum:

Policies enter different resource environments; schools have particular histories, buildings and infrastructures, staffing profiles, leadership experiences, budgetary situations and teaching and learning challenges…differ in their student intake, school ethos and culture, they engage with local authorities and experience pressures.

(Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012, p. 19)

2.3.1. Policy Actors

To appreciate enactment of policy, it is paramount to consider the role of the policy actor. The term policy actor refers to those who do the work associated with any policy and this is a facet of the policy process which has not been traditionally focused upon in research (Ball, 2015). In contrast with alternative perspectives which viewed teachers and leaders as implementors of policy, policy actors are appreciated as both receivers and agents in the policy process (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012). As such, policy actors are seen to be shaped by policy but also shape policy in addition (Ball, 2015). This is influenced by various factors including interests and values, context and history, and necessity (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012).

Research has identified that actors can be categorised into different policy positions in enacting policy. Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012), based on data gathered in the English secondary context, portray eight fluid categories of actor which contribute to, or in some instances avoid, the enactment of policy in schools (see table 3).

Table 3. Policy actors and 'policy work' (Source: adapted from Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012, p. 41)

Policy actor	Type of policy work undertaken
Narrator	'Interpretation, selection and enforcement of meanings'
Entrepreneur	'Advocacy, creativity and integration'
Outsider	'Entrepreneurship, partnership and monitoring'
Transactor	'Accounting, reporting, monitoring/supporting, facilitating'
Enthusiast	'Investment, creativity, satisfaction and career'
Translator	Production of texts, artifacts and events'
Critic	'Union representatives (reps); monitoring of management, maintaining counter-discourses'
Receiver	'Coping, defending and dependency'

2.3.2. Contextual Dimensions of Policy Enactment

Within the theory of policy enactment, context is seen to be of immense significance in shaping how policy processes are brought to life in schools (Braun *et al.*, 2011; Bradbury, 2023). In this, context refers to the material, structural, and relational reality of schools (Braun, Maguire and Ball, 2010; Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012). As Ball asserts, 'Policy creates context, but context also precedes policy' (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012, p. 19). Braun *et al.* (2011) and Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) have created a heuristic framework to help us understand the significance of context in the shape of the four contextual dimensions of policy enactment. These are defined as situated context, professional cultures, material contexts, and external contexts which are outlined next.

2.3.2.1. Situated Context

The situated contextual dimension of policy enactment relates to a school or system's historical context and location. With this, factors, including the school's age, reputation, ethos and place or community in which the school is located, parental expectations and pressures, and its intake are pertinent.

2.3.2.2. Professional Culture

Professional cultures involve in-school actors. Considerable aspects of this dimension include school culture, individual attitudes, outlooks, beliefs, collaborative working culture, values and commitments, and leadership.

2.3.2.3. Material Context

Material contexts include factors that are physical, spatial, and temporal. In this, budget, staffing, infrastructure, technology, and time are important.

2.3.2.4. External Context

The external context refers to the influences that exist outside of the immediate school context. This includes the broader policy context, governmental and industry expectations, legal expectations, and national inspectorates.

2.3.3. Policy Enactment Research

Research concerning enactment of educational policy has developed increasingly of late. For instance, Candido (2020) investigated the enactment of quality assurance and evaluation policies in three primary schools in Brazil. With a focus on the impacts of datafication, the research drew on data from 28 qualitative semi-structured interviews. Here it was identified that quality assurance and evaluation policies had an influence on school routines and on how actors work and conceptualise education. A school-specific pervading discourse was seen to be evident in data use in the study. Ultimately, it was concluded that data has taken a central position in these schools and has transformed practice as a result where 'the functions and purposes of education' (Candido, 2020, p. 149) are altered.

How a policy is introduced is also seen to influence how it emerges in practice. This is visible in Maguire *et al.*'s (2015) study which explored the enactment of two policies; behaviour management and standards and attainment policy in four English secondary schools. The findings highlighted that whether or not a policy had been externally mandated influenced how it was received by schools.

Although this was significant, it became evident that the relationship was bidirectional. In essence, policy influenced actors practice but actors also influenced how policy was done. Notably, the positionality of actors was seen to be influential in how they enacted policy. This is similar to findings from Candido (2020). Here, even though a pervading logic of understanding quality in education through the lens of data and measurement was evident, variation in enactment was seen in terms of how actors understand and use the same policies in their work.

Maguire *et al.* (2010) find further evidence to support this. Here, the enactment of behaviour policy in four secondary schools in England were explored. Again, the influence of power and positionality in individual contexts arose as significant. In the research, the data set comprised of multiple forms of qualitative data including semi-structured interview, policy document analysis, observations, and the gathering of contextual information. What emerged was that policy underwent translation as it came into practice. This was seen to occur at the point of intersection between policy and practice, which existed at the level of the actor.

In the study, it was found that even when policy was centrally mandated, it was enacted in different ways by actors. This was the case even when these actors operated in comparable contexts and conditions and was even seen to be influenced by actor sensemaking and factors outside of formal policy. Influential aspects of this include previous experiences, practices, pedagogies, policies, and perspectives of colleagues. These factors ultimately combined to result in what was defined as 'a bricolage of disciplinary policies and practices, beliefs and values' (Maguire *et al.*, 2010, p. 166).

Power-structures in schools have also been shown to influence the quality of enactment, with actors of significance, such as school leaders, seen to determine the course of enactment by establishing a dominant interpretation and translation of policy which culminates in the approach enacted. Bergmark and Hansson (2020) examined how teachers and principals enacted a policy concerning evidence-based education in Swedish schools through the lens of sensemaking.

Data comprised of questionnaire responses from 272 teachers and 23 principals from pre-schools, leisure-time centres, compulsory schools, and upper secondary schools. The research identified challenges and opportunities presented by the specific policy in question. It became evident during the research that 'the need for understanding central policy concepts, alignment with previous experiences, and a social context within which the policy can be understood, negotiated, and enacted' (Bergmark and Hansson, 2020, p. 448) were important considerations. Furthermore,

supports were seen to determine the quality of enactment and included time, availability of resources, and professional development.

Some research has been conducted looking at the roles of policy actors in SSE in the Irish post-primary context. Drawing on data from five schools, Skerritt *et al.* (2023) found evidence of various categories of policy actor in schools but emphasised that stronger evidence existed for narrators, transactors, enthusiasts, translators and receivers in the schools.

What is interesting in this is the distinction between those who were most involved in the agentic work around policy and those who were positioned as receivers of SSE policy. Actors most involved in high-level policy work were often seen to be school leaders and those holding formal posts of responsibility. Comparatively, other teachers, especially junior teachers, often performed in a receiver role.

2.3.4. Contextual Dimensions of Policy Enactment Research

The literature also provides insights regarding the influence of context in enacting policy. Using a case study methodology where four schools provide qualitative interview data, Braun *et al.* (2011) determined that how policies are enacted is influenced by school specific factors. These include several contextual dimensions including situated contexts, professional contexts, material contexts, and external contexts. These are factors that are not traditionally considered in relation to policy. This is argued to be problematic as the conceptualisation of how policy unravels is inaccurate as to how it becomes manifest in localised contexts. Resultantly, it is presented that we must consider the material realities of a school's context to understand properly how policy gets translated in practice.

Developing upon this observation, Maguire *et al.* (2020) considered the experiences and perspectives of teachers in English secondary schools as they enacted reform policy in their work. Ball, Maguire and Braun's (2012) contextual dimensions provided the theoretical lens where situated, material, professional, and external factors, and their influence on how policy is brought

to practice were considered. The authors argued that policy is enacted in different ways in schools which share very many similarities, and this variance is explained by the contextual circumstances of each individual context.

The study was conducted by means of survey and case study where three different schools provided data. This included semi-structured interviews with principals and teachers and structural data concerning schools that was attained through school websites. The research highlighted the varying degree to which schools were capable of instigating policy in their own unique contexts. Ultimately, material factors including resources and professional resources such as strong leadership were seen to influence the degree to which schools were able to make use of a policy to progress their aims.

This is further evident in a study undertaken by Maguire *et al.* (2015). Here, policies were often only enacted during the tenure of a senior leader for example, while others might only be significant at certain points of the year. This underlined the significance of contextual factors including personnel, time, and space which here are seen to influence the enactment of policy in practice.

Comparatively, Bradbury (2023) explored primary school leaders' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in the English context using contextual dimensions of context as a guiding framework. From interviews with 66 teachers and leaders, they identified that 'Policy arrived in schools differently, and was enacted differently' (Bradbury, 2023, p. 1) and that this was because of the significance of the challenges that the pandemic brought.

What was striking was that, during the time of crisis, the dimensions of context that were most influential were altered by the crisis circumstances, with the material circumstances and values of the leader coming to the fore. In the work, the authors portrayed this phenomenon as crisis policy enactment which involved 'the enactment of policy quickly based on the immediate

priorities of the school community, knowledge of local circumstances and a clear ethical and moral stance' (Bradbury, 2023, p. 17).

Keddie (2013) explored the role of context in shaping a school's capacity to respond to the demands of audit culture in the English secondary context. Here, utilising Braun *et al.*'s (2011) contextual dimensions of context, the researcher explored how context enabled the school's ability to thrive under the expectations of a contemporary audit culture. It was found that the school's contextual circumstances were significant in the school's positive response, with the school's intake, a situated contextual feature, and values, a feature of the professional culture, being most influential. Interestingly, it was noted that the values held were shifted to embrace the new performative demands.

2.4. Significance of Context

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines context in relation to the 'interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs' (Merriam-Webster, 2024, no pagination). In education specifically, context can be understood from various perspectives. When looking at the world through the learners' lens, context can be understood as 'a multilevel body of factors in which learning and performance are embedded' (Tessmer and Richey, 1997, p. 87). This reality has been well illuminated in the literature in respect of the role of context on child development and learning (Darling-Hammond *et al.,* 2020). Here learning events occur within a set of contextual circumstances of influence (Figueiredo and Afonso, 2006).

For those with an interest in school improvement, this has brought into perspective the importance of immediate learning environment for instance (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2023). These include the physical, social, relational, and emotional environment (Darling-Hammond *et al.,* 2020), the significance of the places in which schools are situated (Lupton, 2011), and wider social and economic conditions (OECD, 2019). Here, factors

including parental expectations, education level, and income are isolated as influential variables in educational outcomes (Davis-Kean, 2005), for example.

Furthermore, context has been shown to be influential when viewed from the perspective of the teacher and school (Braun *et al.,* 2011; Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012; Maguire *et al.,* 2020). Saltmarsh (2009, p. 153) captures this reality well in her assertion that, 'As discerning practitioners themselves are well aware, no clinic, classroom or workplace can ever operate independently of the communities and contexts in which their work takes place'. For teachers and leaders, the contexts in which they work have been shown to shape attitudes and motivations, their relationships with colleagues and children, and ultimately their practice. As a consequence, it has become a pertinent area of consideration relating to the improvement of educational provision in schools, particularly when it comes to educational change and reform (Harris and Jones, 2018).

2.4.1. Irish Primary Context

The current research is focused on the Irish primary context. Irish primary education is the first level of a three-tiered education system that is completed by secondary (post-primary) and tertiary (higher) education. In the 2020/21 school year, 553,003 pupils were enrolled full time across 3,107 primary school Irish primary schools. A further 7,510 were enrolled in mainstream school special classes and 8,408 enrolled across 134 special schools. Primary education is compulsory from age six but in general, children begin between the ages of 4 and 5. Children remain in the primary system for 8 years before commencing secondary education at age 12 or 13.

Considering system expenditure, Ireland has a below OECD average outlay on education per pupil (DE, 2021c) while schools that operate in socio-economically disadvantaged areas are afforded extra staffing resources which is based on pupil enrolment numbers. Pupils spend 915 hours engaged in instruction time per year. Overall, enrolment figures in individual Irish primary

schools are about half the TIMSS average (Eivers and Chubb, 2017). Although Irish primary school enrolments endured a period of growth up until 2019, they are projected to decrease by around 120,000 by 2033 (DE, 2021e).

Ireland is an anomaly in terms of school privatisation. Essentially, Irish schools are privately owned and under the administration of private boards of management. However, they are funded publicly. In 2016, 97% of schools were under Church control, with 81% of this number under the patronage of the Catholic Church.

Ireland ranks number one for percentage of instruction time given to religious, ethics and moral education (DE, 2021c) at double the OECD average. Patronage became a significant issue in accordance with the changing demographic and religious make-up of the state and, following a forum on patronage and pluralism in the primary sector in 2012, it was identified that divestment of patronage was required (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012).

Ireland's primary education system is unique in many ways. Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) provide us with useful contextual information. Irish primary schools are mainly small and rural. Out of the schools that opened in 2016/17, 19% had less than 50 pupils and 41% had fewer than 100. The fourth-class pupil average was 25.8 pupils, according to TIMSS. Ireland has the 7th highest average class size in the OECD in 2018/19 (DE, 2021c) and children participate in class groupings and engage in curriculum based on age. Multigrade settings are common, with this existing as two or more age groups in one class, and 35% of children were taught in a multigrade classrooms according to Quail and Smyth (2014).

When looking at the academic features of the context, Irish primary school education occurs within a national curricular framework that involves the subject disciplines of Literacy (English and Gaeilge), Numeracy (Mathematics), Geography, Science, History, Music, Visual Arts, Physical Education, Social Personal Health Education, and Religious and Ethical Education. Except for the new Primary Language Curriculum and Mathematics Curriculum, the curriculum

documents are in practice since 1999. Here, the curriculum hopes to cater to the holistic development of the child and takes a child-centred approach to teaching and learning.

One of the greatest challenges that is reported in relation to the curriculum by teachers is time associated with curriculum overload (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2010). A NCCA report identified that the size of the curriculum, its expanding nature, and 'hurried schools and classrooms at the site of curriculum implementation', as contributing to curriculum overload in the Irish primary context (ibid., p. 9).

2.4.2. Teaching, Leading, and Managing in Irish Primary Schools

Irish primary schools employ teachers and principals to provide education to pupils. The profession is viewed favourably and respectfully by the public (Coolahan *et al.,* 2017) and is perceived as an attractive career (O' Doherty and Harford, 2018). School principals are the most senior positions of leadership and management within a school. These are appointed as either administrative principals or teaching principals who hold responsibility as a class teacher or special education teacher (SET). This is dependent on the number of pupils enrolled in the school, where a school with 174 pupils (114 for DEIS 1 or 141 for DEIS 2) and above allow the school to employ an administrative principal while 585 pupils (500 for DEIS 1 or 585 for DEIS 2) and above allow for the appointment of an administrative deputy principal.

Teachers can work as mainstream class teachers or can be appointed to a special education post, where teachers cater for additional educational needs within a school's student population. Teacher posts are allocated based on the number of pupils enrolled in the school where more pupils equate to more teachers, posts of responsibility, and whether or not a principal has administrative duties only or also holds a teaching role. Posts of responsibility relate to additional roles that staff can be promoted to as part of the school's formal leadership and management structure.

The Education Act 1998 outlines the duties of the school principal. Administrative principals are appointed based on enrolment numbers and consideration is also given to the number of autism class units that are provided by the school. Teaching principals are required to carry out full teaching duties in conjunction with school leadership and management duties. This has been recorded as less attractive due to the volume of administrative work and adjacent teaching responsibilities (Darmody and Smyth, 2016). Leadership roles are also evident in the role of administrative deputy principal, teaching deputy principal, assistant principal 1, assistant principal 2 and are filled by teachers (Darmody and Smyth, 2016).

Reform has been a prevalent feature in Irish schools. This is said to have placed significant pressures on the teaching profession (O' Doherty and Harford, 2018). This has been reported as most significant in relation to Irish principals where a large degree of stress and lack of satisfaction have been recorded. In this, principals report a growing workload, particularly in relation to legislative tasks unrelated to teaching and learning, as contributing factors (Darmody and Smyth, 2016). According to Coolahan *et al.* (2017, p. x),

> Reform efforts are afoot to change inherited patterns of school life and culture. Collaboration and greater co-operation between school staffs is being encouraged. Schools are now required to engage in whole-school planning and in school self-evaluation. New forms of school leadership, with an emphasis on educational leadership, are being fostered. The work of school leaders has been greatly extended in many ways.

The Irish Primary Principal and Deputy Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey (Rahimi and Arnold, 2022) provides interesting insight into these issues from a sample of 405 participants. It reports that 39% of school leaders were diagnosed with stress related medical conditions during 2022 and that 45% of respondents identified as either highly or severely burnt out. Health and wellbeing were identified as problematic in that 45% of respondents reported feeling that the work associated with their roles was unsustainable. Here, 30% of leaders identify that administration is taking up most of their time, much to the detriment of teaching and learning responsibilities.

Quantity and complexity of work and lack of time were identified as very significant challenges. In the survey, 61% of leaders reported working more than 40 hours per week, while 42% reported working more than 45 hours per week. Here, 61% of leaders reported experiencing work-life conflict. Indeed, data indicated that leaders rated their health lower than that of the healthy working population, had significantly higher levels of stress, and had an average burnout rate of nearly double the healthy working population. Furthermore, leaders' capacity to share leadership was reported as limited.

Of late, schools have faced challenges in recruitment and retention. O' Doherty and Harford (2018) determine that this is a consequence of the cutbacks that arose during the economic recession, alongside the changes in the length of initial teacher education programmes, and the significant degree to which teachers are now taking career breaks, working in other jurisdictions, or leaving the profession for more lucrative careers. By 2018, the authors outlined that primary schools were particularly struggling with attracting short-term staff and substitute cover. Attracting principals is also an issue for schools, with small, rural, disadvantaged, or schools of a minority denomination particularly struggling (Darmody and Smyth, 2016).

This issue has been in view since at least 2017 where the INTO identified that there were unprecedented problems with teacher supply. This was in relation to both substitute teachers but also contracted roles, particularly in Dublin (INTO, 2018). This, they argued, was having significant impacts on teaching and learning in schools and had arisen as a result of economic factors as teachers faced challenges in relation to the cost of living, better opportunities abroad, and high accommodation costs.

Teacher education is an important feature of the system with a recent emphasis placed on developing coherence between initial teacher education, teacher induction, and continuing professional development for teachers (Coolahan *et al.,* 2017). This is evident in the formation of the Teaching Council and the subsequent development of the continuum of teacher education.

Here, the trajectory of lifelong professional development is traced through specific policy relating to initial teacher education, induction and probation, and continuing professional development. Alongside this, teacher professionalisation has been formalised and evident within the Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers and the formulation of the Fitness to Teach Procedures (The Teaching Council, 2016).

Entry to the profession has also been a contentious issue as high entry, accreditation, and registration standards are seen as inhibitive to the development of a diverse teaching body (O' Doherty and Harford, 2018). Within the context of reform, teachers themselves have provided significant support in the upskilling of other teachers. This has been particularly evident in the secondment of teachers to roles in support services. With this, expertise is drawn from the classroom and, as a result, teachers are said to be lost to schools, further increasing pressure on teaching and learning (O' Doherty and Harford, 2018).

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) is the trade union associated with Irish primary teachers and principals. INTO membership stands at 44,307 in the Republic of Ireland, as of May 2023 (INTO, n.d). The INTO are influential and promote the politicisation of teaching as they argue 'Teachers' politicisation is crucial, given the tasks at hand to confront the root cause of teachers' disquiet, resistances, protests and challenges to myriad 'top-down' accounts coupled with imposed policies' (Carr and Beckett, 2018, p. 115).

2.4.3. Contextual Conditions of Practice

Irish primary schools exist in a diverse set of conditions when it comes to school buildings. Under the National Development Plan 2021 – 2030 (Department of Public Expenditure, 2021), between 150 and 200 school building projects are expected to be delivered every year, up until 2025. However, many schools operate within older buildings which are somewhat limiting for modern schooling (Darmody and Smyth, 2012).

Irish primary schools are funded by the state in the Capitation Grant which stands at 183 euro per pupil, with additional rates received in respect of children with special educational needs. An additional ancillary grant is received on a per child basis in addition which stands at 173 euro per pupil based on the full rate or 89.50 euro based on a reduced rate. In schools with less than 60 pupils, both grants are received for 60 pupils as the minimum, while the ancillary grant is capped at 500 pupils maximum. Notably, fundraising is a prominent feature in Irish primary schools, with the Financial Services Support Unit (FSSU) determining that 'Fundraising from the public is an essential and valuable source of revenue for many schools' (Financial Support Service Unit, no date). In fact, according to the INTO, fundraising is providing 46 million euro to Irish primary schools (FUSIO.net, 2022).

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) was introduced in 2005 as a means of reforming education to improve outcomes for students in this social milieu, whereby DEIS schools receive additional funding allocated in respect of the level of disadvantage in the community. The 2017 updated DEIS plan highlights the DE's primary ambition; 'To become the best in Europe at harnessing education to break down barriers and stem the cycle of inter-generational disadvantage by equipping learners to participate, succeed and contribute effectively to society in a changing world' (DE, 2017, p. 6).

The Irish primary education system has seen significant change on account of challenging economic circumstances arising from the 2008 economic recession (Darmody and Smyth, 2012). Because of austerity measures, educational funding was reduced and a number of impacts were visible. These included a cut in salaries for practicing teachers and a 10% reduction in salary for new entrants to the profession. Additionally, staff numbers were reduced by a moratorium on recruitment and promotion, alongside the initiation of an early retirement scheme. This has now progressed to a point where, since 2013, the Irish economy is no longer under austerity measures, and a period of strong economic growth has occurred since 2014 (Robbins and Lapsley, 2014).

2.5. SSE in Irish Primary

Having presented the research context in detail, it is now necessary to examine SSE as it is presented in policy in the Irish primary context. This section explores SSE within a wider evaluation model, the documents of significance, the purpose of SSE, the six-step process model, and additional relevant considerations.

2.5.1 Evaluation Model

Alongside external inspection carried out by the Inspectorate, SSE is one feature within a broader model of evaluation in Irish primary education. Overall, this model has an accountability and improvement function and seeks to both assure and improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools (Hislop, 2017). In policy, internal and external approaches are presented as complementary (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012; DES, 2016a; Hislop, 2017). This is consistent with many other jurisdictions where co-professional evaluation, or that of a combination of internally and externally conducted evaluation approaches, are employed in tandem (Mutch, 2012). This is so the strengths of each are capitalised upon (Brown *et al.,* 2016, 2018).

External inspection occurs in a variety of forms. These vary in intensity and duration and include incidental inspections, curriculum evaluations and evaluation of provision for pupils with special educational needs, whole-school evaluation, evaluation of action planning in DEIS schools, and follow through inspections (Hislop, 2017). Like self-evaluation reports, inspection reports are produced following some types of inspection which seek to report upon the quality of educational provision observed. These are published on the DE website.

2.5.2 Significant Policy Documents

SSE is communicated to schools via policy documents, circulars, and newsletters. These documents have been revised and evolved over time (Hislop, 2017). A set of guidelines providing an overview of how the process is to be undertaken have been developed for schools. The 2016 to 2020 version of these guidelines is most relevant to this research and is entitled School Self-

Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020 (DES, 2016c). This document outlines the purpose for SSE, the recommended process, the quality framework, statements of practice, evaluation approaches, and reporting on SSE.

A set of quality criteria have also been developed and are presented as a key document in facilitating schools to self-evaluate quality of educational provision. This has been titled Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools (DES, 2016b). This document is used to guide considerations of quality in relation to teaching and learning and leadership and management as schools undertake the process. Central to this is the provision of a set of quality descriptors for teaching and learning and leadership and management with statements of *effective* and *highly effective* practice, from which current practice can be assessed.

Some examples of these are provided in figure 5 and figure 6. This is particularly significant as SSE does not provide guidance in relation to teaching and learning quality. Rather, the SSE process merely describes a set of steps that schools can take to make explicit their current practices and areas in need of development (MacBeath, 1999).

STANDARD	STATEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE	STATEMENTS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PRACTICE
The teacher selects and uses teaching approaches appropriate to the learning objective and to pupils' learning needs.	Teachers meaningfully differentiate content and activities in order to cater for the varying needs and abilities of pupils.	Teachers meaningfully differentiate content and activities in order **to ensure that all pupils are challenged by the learning activities and experience success as learners.**

Figure 5. Sample standard, statement of effective practice, and statement of highly effective practice in relation to teaching and learning (DES, 2016b, p. 9)

STANDARD	STATEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE	STATEMENTS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PRACTICE
Build and maintain relationships with parents, with other schools, and with the wider community.	The board of management and principal facilitate and support the parents' association to fulfil its partnership and advisory role.	The board of management and principal facilitate and support the parents' association to fulfil its partnership and advisory role, **and to operate as an inclusive forum, supporting the involvement of all parents**

Figure 6. Sample standard, statement of effective practice, and statement of highly effective practice in relation to leadership and management (DES, 2016b, p. 9)

2.5.3. Purpose

While improvement is consistently presented as the primary purpose for SSE in the Irish context (Hislop, 2015; DES, 2016c; DE, 2021a), there is debate within the literature relating to what the true underpinning logic might be in Irish education. According to McNamara *et al.* (2022), alongside an improvement logic, SSE is underpinned, and perhaps predominantly so, by an accountability and economic logic. Importantly, they argue that the purpose for SSE in this context is blurred and that this may be detrimental to the quality of SSE in practice.

Brady (2019) extends upon this interpretation and sees accountability as a key purpose of SSE in Ireland. She views SSE as being a less punitive approach to teacher inspection but that ultimately it promotes performativity in teaching. This is due to the emphasis on measurable and mechanistic criteria of practice. Brady (2016) identifies evaluation criteria as a problem in this. She determines that due to self-evaluation criteria being externally 'imposed', SSE does not meet its true potential in that SSE is in fact '…a devolved, rigorous form of teacher inspection…' (Brady, 2016, p. 605). This perspective is further supported by Carr and Beckett (2018).

From such arguments, the question of whose purposes SSE serves in the Irish primary context arises. This appears to be a complex area of consideration. In certain policy communications such as circular 0039/2016 (DES, 2016a) and circular 0016/2018 (DES, 2018), SSE is described as

school led. This vision is further supported in Inspectorate SSE Updates where schools are recommended '…to focus on things that are important for them at that particular time' (DES, 2019b).

Conversely, in other communications, SSE has been presented as a means of introducing and embedding system reform. This was clear during the 2012 – 2016 process, where, alongside foci of the schools own choosing, a focus on self-evaluating literacy and numeracy were prescribed in policy. This was eased back upon to allow for schools to identify their own focus in 2016 - 2020. In the most recent communications, SSE is presented as an embedding mechanism for the Resource Allocation Model, the New Primary Language Curriculum, and the Digital Learning Framework. Should schools have plans in place in these areas, they are directed to engage with areas of need specific to their own contexts (DE, 2022).

2.5.4. Six-Step Process

Although SSE is mandated in Irish primary schools, the actual design of the process, how the results are used, and the stakeholders included in the process is up to schools themselves (Eurydice, 2015). However, a very explicit outline of the process is provided in the six-step model which is outlined in a set of supporting documents designed to support schools. These steps include identify a focus, gather evidence, analyse and make judgments, write and share report and improvement plan, put improvement plan into action, and monitor actions and evaluate impact (DES, 2016c). These steps are represented in figure 7 and address the following questions devised by the DE Inspectorate (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2018a, p. 2):

- **What is the current situation in that aspect?**

    Gather baseline data

- **Where would you like to get to?**

    Set your target

- **What actions / approaches are most likely to get you there?**

    Develop your action plan

- **How do you put them into practice?**

    Implement it

- **And how will you know that your action plan is working?**

    Monitor and measure

Figure 7. SSE process model (DES, 2016a, p. 112)

2.5.4.1. Step 1 - Identify Focus

Steps one, two, and three comprise of what has been called the investigation stage, which begins with the identification of a focus (DES, 2016c). A recommended means of identifying a focus is through collaborative discussion regarding how the school is performing in relation to a system level reform or in relation to an area that the school deems important (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2015). This can be scaffolded by the LAOS quality framework (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2019a) or based on the school's '…sense of their own context and where the school might profitably explore the potential for improvement' (DES, 2016c, p. 13).

2.5.4.2. Step 2 - Gather Evidence

Next evidence is gathered in relation to the identified area of focus. Evidence is to be gathered from several sources including students, teachers, parents, and school management (DES, 2016c). Specific methods of evidence gathering mentioned on the DE SSE website include reflection sheets, professional collaborative review, focus groups, interviews, questionnaires, and checklists with some examples provided (DE, no date).

2.5.4.3. Step 3 - Analyse and Make Judgments

Identifying strengths and areas for improvement follows engagement with the evidence. Here schools consider the current quality of practice. It is recommended that this be done by comparing evidence with statements of practice in the LAOS quality framework (DES, 2016c; The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2019a). Strengths and weaknesses in educational provision should be identified and made explicit.

2.5.4.4. Step 4 - Writing and Sharing Report and Improvement Plan

This final stage in the broader investigation stage requires schools to develop a report detailing their findings. This should be shared with the school community. Adjacently, a school improvement plan (SIP) should be developed with specific targets for improvement in learning

and the associated actions that teachers will undertake in classrooms, how these will be monitored, and how these will be evaluated.

A 3-page document where the process is summarised is to be shared among school stakeholders each year. In the self-evaluation report, examples on the DE SSE website indicate that the focus, school context, evaluation findings, progress from previous improvement targets, and a summary of the strengths and areas for improvement are to be presented. In relation to the school improvement plan, it is stated that schools should 'look to the future and identify the changes and improvements that you want to make to pupils' learning' (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2019b, p. 4). Guidelines propose the following points of consideration for planning (DES, 2016b, p. 13):

- An account of progress that has been made on implementing improvement in areas that were the subject of evaluation and improvement plans in the previous year
- The new curriculum area or aspect of teaching and learning chosen for self-evaluation, where relevant
- The areas that the school has prioritised for improvement
- Targets for improvement with a focus on learner outcomes
- The actions that are required to achieve the targets over three years
- Reference to who will undertake the actions outlined
- Reference to who will monitor and review the implementation and progress
- Reference to how parents can help
- A timeframe for the achievement of the targets

Target setting, linked to baseline data, is portrayed as being of immense importance at this stage, where a manageable number of targets with a clear set of actions attached to each is presented as significant. Targets can be quantitative or qualitative and can be based on any aspect that is influential on learner outcomes. These include pupil attitudes and dispositions, learners'

experiences, and teachers' practices (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2019b). An example of a school improvement plan is visible in figure 8.

School Improvement Plan; Numeracy

Summary of main strengths as identified in last SSE January 2014	• In all classes active learning, guided activity and cooperative and collaborative learning of maths is taking place • Pupils display a positive attitude towards numeracy • Parents also display a positive attitude towards the teaching and learning of numeracy • The school has invested well in maths resources and ICT resources to facilitate the learning experiences of the children. • Some teachers have engaged in CPD in Maths Recovery and RSGMaths. • The needs and abilities of pupils are catered for by effective teaching and collaboration between class teachers and Learning Support in 1st and 2nd classes.		
Summary of main areas requiring improvement as identified in last SSE:	• The amount of children scoring Sten 4 or less on Sigma T needs to decrease. • The children need to be taught advanced counting strategies so that they become less reliant on manipulatives. • The school needs to agree on a whole school plan for the teaching of mental maths to facilitate the progression of pupils learning as they move from class level to class level • Mental maths lessons need to be well structured and attention needs to be given to consolidate pupils learning at the beginning, during and at the end of lessons. • Assessment outcomes, especially in Maths Recovery need to be systematically analysed and used to inform subsequent learning experiences for children.		
Improvement targets	**Required actions (related to teaching and learning that will help to achieve the targets)**	**Persons Responsible**	**Timeframe For actions**
We aim to have 5% increase in the Sigma T scores on number items involving recalling facts and understanding concepts of number thus having 55-60% of children with an average STen score of 5 or more in three years.	Mental maths lessons based on the teaching methodology and application of knowledge and skills in RSGM and Maths Recovery, differentiated for the various class levels, will be adopted by all class teachers and supported by learning support teachers.	All class and LS Teachers	Immediate until June 2016
	A whole school mental maths plan specifically in number will be developed to facilitate progression from class to class using RSGM, Maths Recovery and other mental maths schemes such as Action Maths and/or Planet Maths.	Principal and teachers	Sept 2014-June 2015
	All maths lessons will have a 'round-up' section, where children can, in pairs/ groups or at class level explain what they have learnt, thus aiding them to conceptualise and to link learning to other aspects of their experience	All class and LS Teachers	Immediate until June 2016
That the children become confident and swift at responding to mental maths problems at each class level relying less on manipulatives to work with number and develop advanced	The children in 1st class will be assessed using Maths Recovery assessment, followed by three to four weeks intensive team teaching and concluding with reassessment to judge whether they have increased in competence and confidence in different contexts.	Class teachers (1st class), LS teachers.	Term 3 (2013-2014)
	Within three years, at least six teachers will have assessed and analysed Maths Recovery data and	Class and LS	

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counting strategies.	engaged in team teaching/Numeracy Lift Off to target the needs of the children in the class.	teachers	April 2014-June 2016
	All staff will be receive CDP through PDST based on the methodologies taught at the Maths Link seminars held in 2013.	All teachers and Principal	Term 1 2014 2015
	Quizpa, IXL and Mathletics ICT programmes will be trialled and teachers will be surveyed as to the most effective programme	All teachers	Term 3 2013 2014
	Parent maths lessons will be organised by the HSCL so that parents become familiar with the methods used in school.	HSCL	Term 3 2013 2014
	Number games will be organised by HSCL and sent home so that parents can duplicate the work done in school.	HSCL	Term 3 2013 2014
	Resources such as maths games can be shared. A maths for fun chest was started and if anyone has games they feel are particularly useful and specific to the mental maths	All teachers	Term 1 2014 2015
Success criteria / measurable outcomes	Development of whole school programme to facilitate the progression of pupils learning in oral maths, based on testing existing programmes and building on best practice. Improved competence confidence and swift answers in Maths Recovery assessments after team teaching. 55-60% of children scoring a STen of 5 or more in three years An improvement in scores on Sigma T items directly related to recalling facts and understanding number concepts.		
Review dates	SSE will be discussed at all staff meetings from March to June 2014 From September 2014 the SIP will be reviewed once a term		

Figure 8. Sample school improvement plan (DE, no date)

Finally, school boards of management are also expected to complete a legislative and regulatory requirement self-evaluation checklist and attach it as an appendix to the improvement plan.

2.5.4.5. Step 5 - Implementing Improvement Plan

Implementation occurs in the next instance where teachers implement the actions outlined in the SIP. This has been presented as the key stage in the process where action for change is undertaken (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2019a).

2.5.4.6. Step 6 - Monitoring and Evaluation

As actions are undertaken, it is anticipated that leaders, In school management (ISM), and teachers actively monitor actions and progress (DES, 2016c). Student learning is seen as highly significant as the effectiveness of the process can only be judged by the 'quality of learning that results from its implementation' (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2016, p. 6). The Inspectorate provide two types of monitoring in this regard. In SSE Update 13, they refer to capital M monitoring where the in school management team formally monitor agreed actions, pupils' work, and progress reports. In addition, they refer to small m monitoring where the DE Inspectorate give the following guiding examples (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2019a, p. 5):

- Discussion at every staff meeting about SSE and how actions are progressing
- Gently keeping the conversation going on a regular and often informal basis, so the agreed changes remain live
- A small SSE notice board in a staff room or other prominent area that highlights the agreed actions
- Reminders on the school's planning and monthly progress report templates of the agreed SSE actions

- Teacher pairings - where two teachers arrange to have a short informal conversation on a regular basis – to help keep each other motivated and to problem solve when they were having difficulties

- Cluster planning – in larger schools where teachers plan together – spending a few minutes each time talking about the SSE priority actions

- Co-teaching to introduce new practices – where a teacher who has experience of a new practice works in-class with another colleague in a supportive way to develop the practice together

- Members of the ISM team regularly touching base with groups of teachers in a supportive capacity

Evaluation is a separate but interlinked aspect of this step. It is suggested by the Inspectorate that evaluation occur in reference to the original targets set out in the improvement plan. They further identify that baseline data should be compared with current data in pre and post-test design (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2019a). The following is given as guidance in the SSE Guidelines (DES, 2016c, p. 14):

- Has practice changed in classrooms?

- What are teachers' experiences of the agreed changes?

- What are pupils' experiences of the agreed changes?

- What is the impact on pupil learning?

- How monitoring will occur?

- Who will be responsible for monitoring?

- How progress will be determined and reported?

- When and to whom progress will be reported? (for example, at staff meetings, planning meetings, board meetings)

- If targets and actions are realistic or need to be changed

2.6. Additional Considerations

There are a number of additional considerations of significance relevant to undertaking SSE in this context. These include a timeline for implementation, SSE in the DEIS context, informal SSE, and supports. Each is discussed in the coming paragraphs.

2.6.1. Timeline for Implementation

SSE is outlined as a cycle process that takes place over four years. As envisaged during the 2016 – 2020 SSE guidance, the four years are broken into an investigation year, an implementation year, a consolidation year, and finally a review year (see figure 9). Interestingly, the process was expected to begin again each year with a new focus while maintaining the process that began concerning the focus selected the previous year, resulting in overlapping foci.
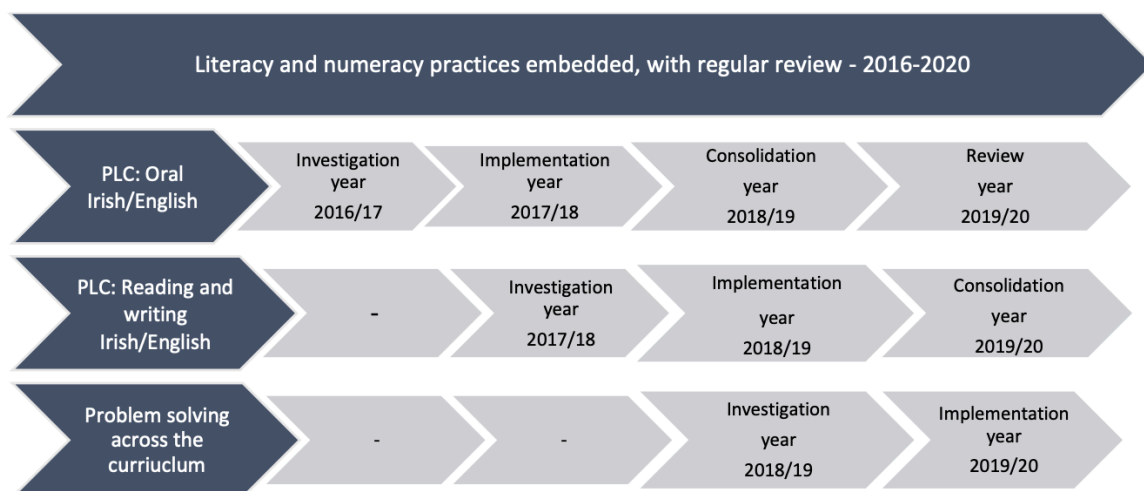
Figure 9. SSE process 2016-2020 'For illustrative purposes only' (DES, 2016a, p. 3)

However, this plan was disrupted by industrial action from 2016 to 2018 and the Covid – 19 Pandemic. This resulted in the 2016 - 2020 phase being extended to June 2022 (DE, 2021b). More recently, guidance provided in circular 0056/2022 (DE, 2022a) outlines for the 2022 – 2026 period that 2023 will be a review year while the years 2024 – 2026 will see schools identifying

their own foci again. It is of note, however, that a caveat in regard to this freedom is subject to the school having a three year plan that addresses:

- Context-specific school priorities related to teaching, learning, equity and inclusion

- National wellbeing goals

- National curriculum goals

- Other national strategies, for example, the Digital Strategy for Schools and the National Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development

2.6.2. SSE and DEIS

In Ireland, schools that are situated in communities facing disadvantage and social exclusion are defined as DEIS schools. These schools work toward alleviating this disadvantage and are said to offer 'a proven pathway to better opportunities' (DES, 2017b, p. 6). DEIS schools have been expected to operate in a fashion that uses targeted measures to address challenges of disadvantage. This has been in place since 2005, following recommendations made by the Educational Disadvantage Committee (Educational Disadvantage Committee, 2005), and schools receive additional supports by comparison to non-DEIS schools.

DEIS schools are expected to operate using the exact same SSE process model and under the same mandated requirements as non-DEIS schools. The inspectorate clarify that 'the SSE process is the DEIS action planning process' (DE, 2022c, p. 6). The only exception is that DEIS schools are not required to create a school improvement plan. Instead, DEIS schools create a DEIS action plan. The following details the structures of the DEIS plan in individual schools:

> School action plans will be developed on the basis of an assessment of the school's current situation, involving both self-evaluation by the school and the input of the Department's Inspectorate. The finalised plans will include locally developed targets under each of the agreed indicators. These targets will need to be agreed at whole-school level, with all staff members then taking them into account, as appropriate, in their individual short-term and long-term planning.

(DES, 2017b, p. 56)

The DEIS plan is different to that of school improvement plans in some ways. In essence, DEIS schools are required to engage with evidence-based planning in the seven DEIS themes comprising of attendance, retention, progression, literacy, numeracy, parent and community partnership, and partnership between schools and links with other agencies. However, it is stated in SSE Update 11 (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2018b) that the specific focus during SSE in DEIS schools needs to be on teaching and learning, and not on the additional pillars of DEIS.

Reference to challenges experienced by DEIS schools in undertaking SSE as a meaningful feature of DEIS planning are evident in the literature with only a minority of DEIS schools said to have achieved effective levels of use. With this, the Inspectorate have recommended that capacity be built for SSE in DEIS schools. This was to be focused around improvement planning and self-evaluation by means of Inspectorate visits and support from external support services for schools, with an enhanced awareness of the link between SSE and DEIS planning clarified (DE, 2015, 2022b).

2.6.3. Informal SSE

A further interesting development is evident in the formal and informal categorisation that has been applied to SSE in Irish primary schools. In policy documents, SSE is clearly depicted as a systematic and highly structured process. However, the Inspectorate have communicated the observation of informal approaches being undertaken in schools and these appear to be held as acceptable. In SSE Update 13 for example, informal SSE is explored while Update 14 brings into perspective the practice of utilising the LAOS quality framework outside of the formal process in schools. Here, it is mentioned that schools are observed in some cases to be using the logic of the process to address challenges in addition to the mandated process.

This would indicate that the process is somewhat experimental from the perspective of the DE, and what is being observed on the ground is being looked at in terms of the value it might add in

line with the overall aim of quality improvement. This is further evident in the willingness to make significant adjustments to the expectations held for schools in undertaking the process. This has been visible in the reduction of concomitant processes expected to be undertaken in 2018 and regarding the use of the process to address the challenges of the Covid-19 Pandemic from 2020.

2.6.4. Supports

Support for the implementation of the process in the Irish primary context is catered for in several ways. For instance, the provision of SSE guidelines and supporting documents including a standards framework and intermittent updates are provided, alongside clear expectations concerning focus and frequency of evaluations. Furthermore, an SSE process model, an SSE website with tools and supporting materials, an evaluation model that promotes SSE, and training and advisory visits provided by the Inspectorate and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), have been provided (O'Brien, McNamara and O'Hara, 2014; Eurydice, 2015). Adjacently, the PDST provide a dedicated SSE section on their website where seminar materials, useful resources and templates, along with external websites and links and an FAQ section are available for schools, with the DES providing seminars periodically (Hislop, 2017).

The literature frequently refers to issues experienced with supports, however. Here, some commentators highlight that supports are oftentimes experienced as ill sustained and unfit for purpose (Coolahan *et al.,* 2017). Significantly, some view supports in key areas of the SSE process as absent and this has been seen to bring significant challenges. For example, principals are positioned as responsible for identifying time for SSE to occur and school staff are in a position where they need to find time to develop expertise in SSE of their own accord (O'Brien, McNamara and O'Hara, 2014).

The DE have been responsive to these challenges however, and a redesign of the process and quality framework with input from stakeholders has occurred (Hislop, 2017). Indeed, for the

coming 2022 – 2026 iteration of SSE, the Inspectorate has described three variations of support available under the titles of Level 1 Supports for SSE, Level 2 SSE and Inspection, and Collaboration with and between schools.

2.7. SSE as a Phenomenon

This section comprises of a review of the literature relevant to the phenomenon of SSE more broadly. The rationale for undertaking this section of the review is manifold and includes establishing the existing state of the art, extrapolating the strengths and weaknesses evident in the current body of knowledge, and synthesising relevant published work. Additionally, it serves the purpose of identifying an important research gap and informing the development of a framework in which we can ground the research (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

2.7.1. Where Does SSE Come From?

In education, specifically, SSE has existed for some time, with clear evidence of the concept in practice available since at least the mid-1950s (see Liebenberg and Fulmer, 1956). While popularity is seen to have ebbed and flowed in systems since (Clift, Nuttall and McCormick, 1987), SSE is now widely employed throughout developed education systems (Eurydice, 2015). How this has come to be is an important consideration. In the coming section, the foundational roots of SSE are presented. Themes that are discussed include pragmatism and organisational learning, school effectiveness and improvement research, and evaluation and new public management.

2.7.2. Pragmatism and Organisational Learning

Many elements of SSE can be traced back to the pragmatic philosophy. A core belief of pragmatism is that the truth value of beliefs or theories can be judged by their practical consequences (James, 1907). As such, inquiry, activity, and experiment are key to accumulating knowledge in any domain and progressing human experience. These ideas have been drawn upon in several fields of practice including psychology, particularly in the work of Kurt Lewin

(Chapman and Sammons, 2013), and found further practical application in business in the Total Quality Management model (Nelson *et al.,* 2015; Tichnor-Wagner *et al.,* 2017).

In the current study, the view that organisations can and should learn and improve over time if they wish to be successful is embraced (Senge, 1990), with continuous and systematic approaches to inquiry positioned as the strongest approach. An obvious example exists in the highly systematic and iterative cycle of the Plan-Do-Check-Act model, or what has been referred to as the Shewhart Cyle. This involves the performance of multiple tests and monitoring the associated effects, with continuous improvement being the end goal (Lorino, 2018). These ideas have clearly made their way into the design of SSE, where inquiry is the preeminent feature (MacBeath, 1999) and in policy more broadly where comparable models of action are observed (DES, 2016c).

2.7.3. School Effectiveness and Improvement Research

Others attribute the growth in appreciation of SSE as an approach to attritions that arose from the fields of school effectiveness and school improvement research (Chapman and Sammons, 2013). School effectiveness research sought to identify and measure significant variables relating to effective teaching and learning and, for the most part, relied on quantitative methods in a search to isolate the variables that make up the 'effective' school.

Correspondingly, school improvement research aims to improve student learning by enhancing the school's capacity to improve (Kyriakides and Campbell, 2004). This is somewhat less reductive and post-positivist in philosophy by comparison, and was influenced by the belief that variables interact in context. As MacBeath (1999, p. 10) outlines, 'In the real world of schools, these dimensions of school culture do not have lives of their own but are interdependent and cumulative. The whole is always larger than the sum of the parts'. Consequently, the school was considered to be the significant unit of change and analysis and researchers sought to identify approaches and practices by which schools could enhance their practices and associated

outcomes. As time progressed, the learning accumulated in each field has been compounded and SSE has come to be identified as a mechanism by which these learnings could be embraced in practical application.

2.7.4. Evaluation and New Public Management

Why SSE has become so intensely prevalent of late is a highly important question (Nayir and McNamara, 2015). The literature often relates SSE and its rising profile to new public management or the neoliberal agenda (McNamara *et al.,* 2021). Within this ideology, enhanced quality, efficiency, and effectiveness are sought through the reform of public services. Alvik (1995) determines that this has resulted in a rise in the need for evaluative practices as governments move away from traditional governance approaches that centre on budgets, regulatory mechanisms, and rules.

Evaluation is an almost universal feature of education systems globally and has become a central facet of educational governance in European countries and many others in addition (Brown *et al.*, 2016). At its core, evaluation is a systematic approach to judge the value, merit, or worth of an object (Scheerens, 2002). In education, this functions to provide evidence about systems, schools, and pupils and in turn, the information that arises from evaluation is intended to be acted upon 'to support decision-making and learning' (Scheerens, 2002, p. 41).

Evaluation is prevalent in education in accordance with the argument that it can play a role in developing and assuring quality (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2015). This is theorised to occur by exploring school level factors including structures and processes, adherence to policy, student attainment, collaboration, and improvement planning (OECD, 2019) and by ameliorating issues of transparency, accountability, and financing (Brown *et al.*, 2016).

Traditionally, evaluation has performed as an 'instrument for controlling and promoting the quality of schools' (Gustafsson *et al.,* 2015, p. 47), aiming to ensure compliance and accountability in schools (Brown *et al.,* 2016) and a central element of this has been external

inspection (Nelson, Ehren and Godfrey, 2015; Ehren *et al.,* 2017). Evidence in support of these approaches is generally in the form of quantitative data due to the importance placed on objectivity (Ehren *et al.*, 2017). While some evidence is available to suggest that evaluation can be effective in improving schools (Van Gasse, Vanhoof and Van Petegem, 2018), it is a contested area within the educational debate. This is because of the secondary effects, which can be negative, and in the difficulty that arises in attempting to identify its impacts on the more complex areas of schooling including teaching and learning.

The use of evaluative information for improvement is also key (Scheerens, 2002; Ehren *et al.,* 2013) and recently, in accordance with new thinking regarding governance and management of public services more generally (Brown *et al.*, 2016), evaluation has been focused on impact, emphasising 'the application of evaluation processes, products, or findings to produce an effect' (Johnson *et al.,* 2009, p. 378).

Alongside this, an enhanced appreciation of the role of school staff as active agents in the evaluative process has come to the fore. This has led to a reconfiguration of external evaluation as an approach, and goes some way to explaining the profound emphasis on SSE which now exists (Nayir and McNamara, 2015). Increasingly, SSE and external evaluation are seen to coexist under a variety of constitutions (Kyriakides and Campbell, 2004; Nelson *et al.,* 2015). Particularly, external evaluation is seen to provide evidence that can be used to inform stakeholders if and how efforts are resulting in improvements, in what timeframe, and whether this is by the most reasonable and efficient means (OECD, 2019).

This progression toward a combined evaluation approach has led to interesting consequences in the field. An important development of late is the polycentric model of evaluation. This presents a decentralised approach which combines the strengths of internal and external evaluation (Brown *et al.,* 2018). Here, polycentricism 'implies that the power and control over who defines and monitors school quality is more fragmented' (Ehren *et al.,* 2017, p. 369). Interestingly, this

has redefined the role of inspectorates to some degree and a clear transition away from inspection as judgement toward the development of capacity for self-evaluation is now evident (Nayir and McNamara, 2015).

Brown *et al.* (2018, p. 76) describe this as 'the emergence of a genuinely co-professional as opposed to co-existent mode of evaluation between the inspectorate and schools'. Here, there is now an expectation for schools and inspectors to become openly engaged in forward and back dialogue for the sake of school improvement (Ehren *et al.*, 2017). Hertting and Vedung 2012 (p. 164) further describe:

> Instead of using sanctions, rewards and interventions in single schools, addressing school principals as the main authority in charge of school change; Inspectorates of Education now need to develop a set of strategies that would enhance the performance of the entire network by purposefully providing relevant actors with information to act on inspection findings, and putting consequences in place to shift the power balance to improve relations in the network and increase openness to external stakeholders and information.

In education, this has translated into a desire for schools to have more agency in decision making, to have more responsibility for the success of their pupils in education, and also to provide assurance to the public regarding the quality they provide (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008). SSE has become a key element of achieving these objectives in practice.

2.8. What is SSE?

SSE is commonly understood as a process where schools seek to improve and assure the quality of education they provide (Chapman and Sammons, 2013). This is done with the ultimate aim of improving student learning. While this description represents a simple, rational, and straightforward idea, some commentators judge SSE to be a complex, nuanced, and challenging concept. This section explores this actuality and tries to make sense of what has been described as 'a concept replete with paradox and ambiguity' (MacBeath, 2004, p. 87). To achieve this, this section examines, contrasts, and integrates relevant academic commentary, theoretical perspectives, and policy perspectives relating to SSE.

2.8.1. Theoretical Conceptualisations of SSE

SSE has been understood, presented, and interpreted in different ways. Some have described SSE in very broad terms, with little reference to specific features. Scheerens (2002, p. 36), for example, sees SSE as 'a type of educational evaluation that is initiated and at least partly controlled by the school itself', while Devos and Verhoeven equate SSE to the systematic production of recommendations (2003).

Others still tend to present the concept with an emphasis on the systematic nature of the process (Keiny and Dreyfus, 1993; Meuret and Morlaix, 2003; Van Petegem, 2005; Chapman and Sammons, 2013) and very clearly define the features and structure of SSE in practice. Hofman *et al.* (2009, p. 48) are a good example here, taking a school-centric perspective, determine SSE to be 'cyclic activities such as goal-setting, planning, evaluation, and defining new improvement measures'. While such interpretations of SSE are key to understanding what it is, the theoretical basis in which they are grounded is also important to consider.

When looking at SSE as a theory, a good place to begin is with the work of John MacBeath. While the foundational roots of SSE theory stretch back further than MacBeath's work, his work is particularly useful in that it presents an empirically grounded attempt at theorising SSE in action. In this, MacBeath (1999, p. 1) describes SSE simply as schools 'speaking for themselves' and this represents the foundational idea in which SSE is grounded. In this, he suggests that effective schools are continually 'self-reflecting, self-motivated, and self-improving' (MacBeath, 2010, p. 713).

Central ideas that underpin the concept are self-reflection and inquiry where MacBeath argues that self-reflecting schools are capable of exposing their inner life. This can be understood as the quality of education provided to the children in their care. In effect, schools hold the potential to make their practices explicit, to tell their story, celebrate their strengths, and to guide their efforts

at improvement in areas that they deem significant should they look inward and explicate the strengths and weaknesses evident in their practices.

Others have presented arguments along similar lines. Drawing on an appreciation of the complexity of what is involved in teaching, Alvik (1995, p. 316) describes a vision in which SSE is '…a systematic inquiry with the intention of getting a deeper insight into the interplay between conditions, processes and outcomes as well as the possibilities of further development' in which democratic participation is key.

Of course, reflection upon educational quality is not where the novelty within this idea lies, nor is it found in the quest for school improvement. What makes SSE distinctive from alternative approaches to evaluation is that it is carried out by teachers and leaders in schools, 'by themselves and for themselves' (Swaffield and MacBeath, 2005, p. 239) and in relation to their own work (Vanhoof and Van Petegem, 2010). This approach has arisen from the belief that school improvement is best achieved from within (Devos, 1998; MacBeath, 1999) and that schools will be more receptive to an evaluative process that is lead from the inside (McNamara *et al.,* 2020).

Furthermore, what differentiates SSE from traditional approaches to improvement, what MacBeath describes as the 'conglomeration of good ideas and interesting practice' (MacBeath 1999, p. 97), is the phenomenon's formalised structure. This is most apparent in what MacBeath describes as an underpinning framework which accompanies the broader concept of self-evaluation, giving it a tangible identity, or 'a picture that holds things together, an outer shell or scaffolding' (MacBeath, 1999, p. 97).

While MacBeath (1999, p. 97) recommends a framework based on four key elements including an 'overarching philosophy', 'procedural guidelines', 'a set of criteria or 'indicators'', and 'a tool kit', others have provided alternative perspectives. Saunders (1999) provides an informative set of guiding principles for SSE, for example. For him, SSE is not just a series of steps that seek to validate the value a school adds to pupil performance. Rather, it is creative, democratic, fun, and

motivated by an interest in understanding real-life experiences. Furthermore, in alignment with MacBeath's views, he states that SSE needs to begin from a point of genuine curiosity while seeking to infuse ethical and value based considerations.

2.8.2. Policy Level Conceptualisations

Significant variation in conceptualisation is evident once policy level interpretations of SSE are considered. Here, it becomes obvious that there is no single approach to how systems approach SSE (Welsh Government, 2022). Variability manifests itself in the summative or formative essence of the policy, whether it is externally or internally driven, whether it is a top-down or a bottom-up process (Chapman and Sammons, 2013, p.2), and whether or not it is legally mandated (Nelson *et al.,* 2015). Furthermore, SSE has been examined in contrasting ways including as a product (Hofman, Dijkstra and Hofman, 2009), a one off event, or the use of a single instrument in some cases (Schildkamp *et al.,* 2009). Others have held true to the vision of a continuously evolving, systematic process (Garira, 2019).

Interestingly, two general categories of structure are identifiable in SSE policy. The first involves a general set of guidelines in which schools have much autonomy while the second involves a more prescriptive externally designed approach (Chapman and Sammons, 2013). For instance, a good example of a more general approach to SSE is utilised in the Scottish context and is described in the How Good is Our School (Education Scotland, 2015) policy document. Benefits of this approach are related to an appreciation of teacher agency and professional capacity and a general approach is used to facilitate this. In comparison, some policy defines specific process model-based approaches, as is the case in Ireland, and this represents an alternative way of thinking about SSE. Benefits of a more prescriptive approach are associated with a clear model of action that is said to support schools as they undertake the process.

2.8.3. Comparable Concepts

Concepts of a highly related nature are also observed in the literature. Examples include data-driven decision making, data-based decision making, internal review, self-review, and internal accountability (Nelson *et al.,* 2015). This scenario should not be surprising. As is the case with educational policy translation more generally, similarities are evident across policy level depictions of these interrelated phenomena. Ultimately, these processes can be referred to under the umbrella of internal evaluation (O'Brien *et al.,* 2019) or school-based evaluation (Alvik, 1995). These are worth considering when trying to come to a complete understanding of the phenomenon in question.

This becomes problematic in some respects however, and care has to be taken when setting parameters concerning what SSE is and what it is not. An important distinction that arises in the literature is in relation to self-inspection and self-evaluation. Here, self-inspection relates to a top-down, one-off, accountability focused process (Chapman and Sammons, 2013). Here the use of externally created criteria checklists can be a significant element. Data use is also often taken as being synonymous with SSE, and justification for this interpretation is provided once significant frameworks of data use, such as those presented by Spillane (2012), Schildkamp, Lai and Earl (2013), and Coburn and Turner (2011) are considered.

However, a significant difference can arise in that data use is often drawn on to refer to approaches that pertain to individual teachers or is focused on individual students, for example. Approaches such as data-based decision making can pertain to the use of standardised test data only, while additional referents above can feature varying starting positions from which the process is initiated. For instance, some of these phenomena are driven from a starting point of data examination, such is the case with most interpretations of data-driven decision making. Similar practices pertain to the broader concepts of assessment or action research for instance, and broader still concepts such as communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) or

organisational learning (Senge, 1990), all of which feature some crossover in an epistemological sense.

2.9. Features of SSE

Important features that are observable in the literature include SSE as an internally driven reflective inquiry, its systematic nature, the centrality of evidence, its focus on planning for improvement, and its collaborative and participatory nature. Each facet is now interrogated.

2.9.1. Internally Driven Reflective Inquiry

SSE centres on the idea that schools must reflect on the quality of educational provision that they provide. This is represented in different ways in policy. In the Scottish context for example, effective self-evaluation is framed as 'knowing ourselves inside out' (Education Scotland, 2015, p. 9). This is explicitly evident in SSE as schools identify strengths and weaknesses in practice. This is anticipated to occur by way of professional dialogue, which MacBeath hopes will become 'implicit in the way people think and talk about their work' (MacBeath, 2008, p. 396).

This is based on the premise that student learning can be enhanced as a consequence of teacher learning (Devos and Verhoeven, 2003; MacBeath, 2008). As such, the key players in true school improvement are teachers and those in leadership positions while a fundamental feature of improving schools is a culture of self-reflection (Education Review Office, 2016). With this, schools are understood as learning organisations (Welsh Government, 2022) in which capacity building is a key objective (MacBeath, 2008).

Such a position aligns well with an increasing interest in inquiry as a feature of the work of the teaching profession. This has developed as teachers and school leaders are understood as agentic professionals who 'generate knowledge' (Dana and Yendol-Hoppey, 2023, p. 8). Here, the 'process-product' (Shulman, 1986, p. 6) conceptualisations of the teacher's role are rejected. This is in conjunction with the widely accepted assertion that teacher quality is the most significant determinant of student attainment within our immediate control (Sinnema, Meyer and Aitken,

2017). This view, alongside the decentralisation of modern education systems, has meant that inquiry, a process in which teachers ask questions about practice and identify solutions (Dyson, 2020, p. 1), has become significant.

2.9.2. Systematicity

Frameworks for SSE are grounded in a systematic design. In Scotland for instance, SSE is portrayed as key in enabling '…a sustained focus on improving educational outcomes for all children…' (Education Scotland, 2015, p. 5) while in Ireland SSE is argued to be 'a way of working' (DES, 2016b, p. 11). Resultantly, the process is designed to be continuous and generally takes on a circular design facilitating repetition. In this, it is expected that quick feedback on the performance of actions chosen will occur, allowing for the monitoring of effect.

Adjacently, iteration is often a feature allowing for the redesign of approach should it be necessary (Tichnor-Wagner *et al.,* 2017). Such an approach is supported by findings from the field of improvement science where evidence demonstrates that feedback and goal-setting theory can provide impactful gains in outcome (Visscher, 2021). Furthermore, SSE is envisaged as a rigorous process aligned with a scientific approach to knowledge creation.

2.9.3. Evidence Informed Decision Making

SSE is grounded in the idea that schools are intelligent and best placed to make decisions about improvement (Devos and Verhoeven, 2003). Even so, it is anticipated that this approach be underpinned by evidence. This expectation for decision-making based on evidence coincides with calls for evidence-based governance in education more widely (Brown *et al.,* 2018). Here an overarching aim to 'refine formal structures of education systems to streamline decision making, setting ambitious and measurable goals to steer the system in a coherent direction, and engaging a greater variety of stakeholders' (OECD, 2019, p. 144), is strongly communicated.

Overall, efficiency in service delivery is an increasingly important objective (Janssens and Ehren, 2016), with evidence a key feature and existing usually in the form of data (Ozga, *et al.,* 2011).

Evidence is gathered in relation to practice, experiences, and perspectives in an area of focus and often comprises of student standardised test data, student work data, survey, interview, or focus group data collected from staff, students, or parents. From this feedback, it is theorised that decisions can be augmented by the knowledge extrapolated from engagement with evidence (McMillan and Schumacher, 2014).

This approach is seen to offer many positives including in the development of deeper understandings of factors influencing student outcomes in combination with enhanced knowledge of how processes and practices can be improved in schools (Biesta, 2010; Fullan, 2011; Chapman and Sammons, 2013). Although this portrays an alternative to the traditional approaches used in schools, it is hoped that enhanced organisational functioning will arise from such a rationalised approach to decision-making (Mandinach, 2012; Spillane, 2012; Gelderblom *et al.,* 2016; Young *et al.,* 2018). Previously, teacher intuition in the absence of scientifically gathered evidence was more prominent (Vanlommel *et al.,* 2017).

2.9.4. Planning for Improvement

An important feature of SSE is that it is orientated towards the future (Welsh Government, 2022). This is tacitly evident in the improvement planning element of the process that seeks development and curricular change. This is explicitly referred to in the Irish framework for instance, where SSE is described as a further development in school developmental planning and an enabler in introducing curricular change (DES, 2016c).

School improvement planning can be understood as schools strategically identifying where they wish to achieve progress, how they are going to achieve progress, and how they will know they have achieved progress. Of note, progression is often guided by quality frameworks which provide guidance regarding school development. This is evident in the Irish education system where the Looking at Our School quality framework has been developed to direct and enable judgements on quality in schools (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012).

2.9.5. Collaboration and Participation

Collaboration and participation are central features of SSE (Scheerens, 2002). Collaboration is particularly pertinent in relation to teachers and school leaders who are directly tasked with driving the process. Benefits of a collaborative approach include shared ownership, enhanced buy-in, clarity of strengths and weaknesses, and inclusion of various perspectives (Saunders, 1999). Additionally, it is expected that the voice and perspectives of students, parents, and the wider community are incorporated into the process (DES, 2016a; Brown *et al.,* 2020). SSE, therefore, should usually include not only school staff but parents and students themselves (Meuret and Morlaix, 2003).

The benefits of this are seen in that dialogue is fostered between interested parties and in that democratic values are promoted in addition (Simons, 2002). For instance, Lorino (2018) depicts SSE as being grounded in the argument that the collective hold greater knowledge and capacity than the individual. In essence, the whole is theorised to be greater than the sum of its parts (MacBeath, 1999), and SSE is positioned as a process of inquiry that 'is trans-actional, and, thus, it involves a group of inquirers whose sociality is based on continuous dialogical relationships and changes in perspective' (Lorino, 2018, p. 158).

2.10. Purpose of SSE

The purpose underpinning SSE is a key area of the academic debate. What emerges in the literature is that SSE can be used for various purposes. In the coming section, the themes of improvement and assurance of educational quality are discussed before the economic logic and its influence on SSE is examined.

2.10.1. Perspectives on Purpose

SSE is seen to be underpinned by various purposes. McNamara *et al.* (2022) contend that the purposes overlap in ways that are complementary and contradictory. Kyriakides and Campell (2004) outline that, like all evaluative approaches, SSE can have a political, accountability, and

professional development function. MacBeath similarly identifies three general purposes for which SSE can be employed. These include the purpose of reducing costs by getting schools to implement evaluation on their own behalf, the purpose of raising accountability in schools and in teaching, and for school improvement through developmental planning (MacBeath, 1999).

Simons (2002) provides further clarity in emphasising the key facets of the theory that make it appealing. These include the belief that teachers are best positioned to evaluate what is going on in a school, that educational quality can improve in response to teacher and school professional development, that the development of a participative and collaborative culture of evaluation fosters progress, and finally, that such an approach appeases the democratic aspirations of modern education.

Alvik (1995, p. 314) determines that perspectives exist on a continuum with action research at one end and bureaucracy on the other. In this, SSE can be perceived as a 'culture of wondering' where genuine curiosity fuels the evaluation, or a 'culture of answers' based on top down change. With this approach, gaps between the alignment of efforts and outcomes are identified and action is taken to 'correct' this misalignment. Alvik understands such conceptualisations to be limited when one considers them in relation to the realities of teaching.

2.10.2. Improvement Purpose

It is clear that the primary purpose of SSE is to improve schools (Chapman and Sammons, 2013) and this is strongly communicated in theory and policy (Scheerens, 2004; Hofman, Dijkstra and Hofman, 2009; Vanhoof and Van Petegem, 2011). By undertaking SSE, schools can improve with students as end beneficiaries (European Commission, 2020). This represents the formative function of SSE. How this has been explained varies in the literature, however.

Kyriakides and Campbell (2004) see SSE as targeting improvement in the quality of the school organisation and the quality of teaching and learning. Other commentators emphasise the view that improvement in pupil achievement is the end goal. Schildkamp *et al.* (2012) for example,

have described this in terms of the value schools add to achievement scores. Saunders (1999, p. 415) describes this interpretation as the 'English model' where schools work towards targets for incremental gains in measurable outcomes. This is expected to occur by improving specific constructs including learning processes and outcomes, improved capacity, increased professional learning, enhanced self-reflection, participation, internal accountability, and assurance of quality (Vanhoof, Van Petegem and De Maeyer, 2009).

2.10.3. Assurance and Accountability Purpose

Arguments for accountability as a function of SSE are based on the idea of intelligent accountability. In essence, through SSE, schools are enabled to demonstrate their effectiveness in a cost-saving way (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008; Anderson, Leithwood and Strauss, 2010), become aware of their strengths and weaknesses (MacBeath, 1999), and demonstrate these publicly (European Union, 2016). This emphasis on SSE as an accountability mechanism has become increasingly prevalent as education systems become more decentralised and schools, teachers, and leaders hold more autonomy (Kyriakides and Campbell, 2004; Brown *et al.,* 2016). As such, the need to demonstrate and make transparent the quality of practice has arisen in parallel and SSE is often portrayed as a useful tool in this regard (van der Bij, Geijsel and ten Dam, 2016; McNamara *et al.,* 2020). This represents a summative purpose for SSE.

In policy, it is very common for SSE to be employed for the dual purpose of improvement and accountability. However, arguments against the use of SSE for accountability purposes are included in the literature. Chapman and Sammons (2013) portray the duality of purposes of SSE as confusing, in that it is often less than certain whether the process is aimed toward school improvement or accountability. This is evident in the Welsh Government's interpretation, when they define SSE as 'an accountability and evaluation mechanism' but go on to state it 'is typically a formative and reflective exercise' (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 8). It has also been highlighted that schools can engage in SSE to prepare for inspections, to raise standards, or for professional

development (NSCL, n.d.). Saunders (1999) forwards this argument and further determines that it is irrational for self-evaluation to be utilised to achieve the same aims as external evaluation.

2.10.4. Economic Purpose

SSE is sometimes interpreted as holding an economic purpose. Most obviously, the underpinning economic logic is evident in the cost-savings it offers by comparison to external evaluations but also incorporates the perspectives that schools should be self-managing and competitive to meet the needs of modern society (NSCL, n.d.). A less explicit purpose is also evident. This is seen in the use of SSE to achieve broader economic goals (McNamara *et al.,* 2020). Here, nation states interpret education as a determining factor of economic success and is further visible in policy pursued by international organisations including the OECD and Worldbank. Measurement is thus often positioned as key in this, with student performance identified as 'a proxy economic indicator' (NSCL, n.d., p. 5).

2.11. SSE in Practice

This section aims to present the knowledge available regarding SSE in practice. To do this, the empirical evidence available from SSE in comparable contexts is examined before the Irish primary context is engaged with specifically. The section determines that while SSE has become increasingly accepted as a feature of a school's work, and that capacity appears to be growing for SSE in schools, it has been experienced as highly challenging in practice. The section concludes with the identification of a need for further study in this regard, identifying a significant gap regarding how SSE has been undertaken under real world conditions in Irish primary schools with a further dearth evident in explaining why it has been undertaken as it has.

2.11.1. Effects Associated with SSE

SSE is associated with a variety of effects. These are observed at the level of the student, at the level of the teacher, or at the level of the organisation. In a systematic review of internal evaluation literature, Nelson *et al.* (2015) determine that effects can be categorised in terms of

change in a school's reflection on their quality and intentions to improve, the effect on student achievement, and the effect on conditions of learning. Adjacently, effect quality can vary with distinct categories including positive effect, negative effect, no effect, and unintended effect.

2.11.1.1. Positive Effects

Positive effects on student achievement have been empirically recorded. In quantitative research sampling 81 primary schools and 2,099 students, Hofman, Dijkstra and Hofman concluded that schools who utilised SSE had better student achievement in maths by comparison to those who implemented very few SSE measures. They went on to argue that 'Some SSE perspectives seem positively related to student achievement' (2009, p. 47). Demetriou and Kyriakides (2012), in a group randomisation measuring student achievement in mathematics over one year, found SSE to be associated with improved student attainment, although the effects and sample are seen to be small. Schools who targeted their efforts towards improvement were seen to have the greatest effect sizes, with schools who employed SSE to address factors of significance identified in school effectiveness research, having the greatest effect.

SSE has been associated with positive impacts beyond student achievement also. For instance, SSE has been associated with an improved school culture and school climate or is seen to lead to improved teaching practices. Furthermore, professional development as a result of SSE has been observed (Bubb and Earley, 2009; Schildkamp, Visscher and Luyten, 2009), as has improved leadership and management and enhanced organisational practices including increased evidence use, developmental planning, and stakeholder involvement.

For example, SSE has been recorded as having a positive effect on the quality and quantity of collaboration and inquiry in schools. In the Dutch context, Schildkamp *et al.* (2012) found that the use of an SSE instrument led to increased frequency in discussion around quality of practice and evaluation of lessons in some of the schools studied. Additionally, SSE was seen to result in increased levels of inquiry and encouraged school personnel to focus on improvement goals.

2.11.1.2. Limited or No Effect

In contrast, research is available where impacts are limited or unobserved altogether. Such a finding was recorded in Schildkamp, Visscher and Luyten (2009) where a SSE instrument showed no evidence of influence on student achievement. A further example is seen in Staman *et al.* (2017) who examined the effects of what is referred to as a data based decision making intervention on student achievement using a quasi-experimental study in the Netherlands. Here, no effect was measured. Of significance, the overall outcome of no effect was explained by the researchers as teacher inability to turn the information generated in the process into adapted instruction. This finding is seen despite teachers having received process training from academic coaches.

2.11.1.3. Unintended Effects

Unintended effects are also evident in the literature. For example, Dyson (2020) outlines in the New Zealand secondary context that practitioner inquiry resulted in accountability-oriented practices where an overemphasis on narrow student outcomes was evident. Consequently, reflective opportunities were observed as necessary to appease expectations rather than achieve progress.

Such unintended effects can be highly influential. Gustafsson *et al.* (2015), in a study drawing from schools in six countries, saw an increase in engagement with SSE due to accountability pressures. However, a significant unintended consequence was seen in the stifling of innovation. The authors interpreted that an accountability focus resulted in the narrowing of the curriculum and instructional approaches taken by schools. Janssens and van Amelsvoort (2008) determine that this problem is often associated with scenarios where accountability demands can exceed improvement demands with detrimental effects to the SSE impact.

2.11.2. Influential Factors in SSE

It is clear that SSE can have various effects on students, teachers, and schools. Research highlights that the effects associated with SSE are influenced by the quality of its undertaking (Vanhoof and Van Petegem, 2013). This reality is borne out in the coming sections where significant variables are identified and discussed. Key features of the debate include school culture, actor skills and knowledge, actor attitudes, beliefs, and motivations, external supports and pressures, and resources.

2.11.2.1. School Culture

School culture is identified as significant in the literature. In their systematic review of relevant research, Nelson, Ehren and Godfrey (2015) determine that trust and an orientation towards improvement are key elements of a supportive culture in which SSE can thrive. This has been described as a learning organisational culture in some commentary. This is observed in Hofman, Dijkstra and Hofman (2009, p. 65), where schools with stronger organisational cultures were seen to 'optimize the talents of their staff so that they can contribute maximally to the quality of the school' and have 'high innovation capacities that are able and willing to respond optimally to contextual changes'. Furthermore, the schools that had more positive attitudes towards school improvement were more likely to succeed.

Other literature draws links between school culture and how SSE is received. While researching the impact of SSE on teachers' work in the English post-primary context, Hall and Noyes (2009) describe three variations of school culture and the influence this imparts on subsequent SSE process quality. These cultural variations were defined as collaborative, centralised, and resistant. In schools with a collaborative culture, staff worked toward improvement as a team. In schools where the culture was centralised, leadership drove the evaluation and a division existed between leadership and teaching staff. Finally, in schools where a resistant culture existed, self-evaluation was perceived by staff as being imposed on them externally.

2.11.3. Actor Skills and Knowledge

Skills and knowledge in SSE have been observed as significantly influential in addition. This is vividly evident in relation to the rigour with which SSE is undertaken and challenges arise in relation to many of the process features. For instance, for SSE to be effective, schools need the have the ability to engage systematically in the process (Chapman and Sammons, 2013; Garira, 2019). Furthermore, the literature points towards specific skills and knowledge concerning evidence gathering, analysis, and interpretation (Mandinach and Gummer, 2016).

These skills are not always in evidence, however. In some instances, the instruments utilised when conducting SSE are seen to be invalid (van der Bij *et al.*, 2016; Faddar, Vanhoof and De Maeyer, 2017) while in others, socially desirable responses have caused issues with validity (Faddar *et al.*, 2018). Observations of teaching and learning have been interpreted as challenging in terms of reliability in addition. In this, the utility of employing lesson observations in SSE, and the resultant ability to generalise findings for the purpose of whole school improvement, have been questioned (Taut and Rakoczy, 2016).

In the Irish context, problems concerning evidence use have been identified. Young *et al.* (2018) observed no integration of data sets to triangulate findings in their study concerning best practice post-primary schools, for example. Furthermore, O' Brien *et al.* (2019) noted shortcomings in user data literacy, with a tendency for teachers to attribute student level characteristics to explain patterns in the data, rather than factors associated with instruction. Teachers reported not knowing how to conduct the data use process effectively and were unclear about concepts such as quantity and type of data necessary.

Following evidence gathering and analysis, schools are required to create improvement plans with relevant actions enabling improvement. Caputo and Rastelli (2014), in research sampling 248 schools and 13,816 students in Italy, identified that schools differed with respect to planning strategy. Importantly, schools that were more capable of analysing their contexts were more

effective in identifying and implementing effective improvement actions and aims and were more effective at selecting and undertaking improvement actions in school improvement planning of a highly comparable quality to SSE.

Interestingly, Devos and Verhoeven (2003, p. 418) outline that, even when schools successfully and systematically engage in data collection, analysis, and interpretation, actions chosen for improvement are inconsistent with these analyses. It is oftentimes the case that actions planned for and identified are not undertaken or embedded. This is witnessed in Schildkamp and Visscher (2010), for example, and similar is evident in a study conducted by van der Bij *et al.* (2016) in the Netherlands. There, it was suggested that schools must focus more intently on implementation of actions to achieve improvement goals. In finality, the authors present that, 'After formulating a development agenda, schools generally do not pay sufficient attention to implementation and the identification of feasible targets with clear evaluation points' (van der Bij *et al.*, 2016, p. 48).

Leadership is also viewed as significant. In the evidence, effective leaders are observed to provide support and coordinate resources to ensure process success. In a study concerning the use of SSE results in the Netherlands and Flanders, where Schildkamp *et al.* (2012) observed that leadership was seen to play an important part in implementation process features including ensuring clarity with respect to the goal of the evaluation, and encouragement of the school team. Furthermore, the principal has been shown to play an important role in the use of evaluation findings (Emstad, 2011).

2.11.4. Attitudes, Beliefs, and Motivations

Attitudes, beliefs, and motivations contribute to the quality of SSE (Vanhoof, Van Petegem and De Maeyer, 2009). O'Brien, McNamara and O'Hara (2015) identified that successful engagement is influenced by actors' perceptions of the process being useful, for example. Drawing on evidence from MacBeath (1999), Meuret and Morlaix (2003) present that staff

attitudes are mostly determined by staff's judgement as to whether SSE has had an impact on a schools' effectiveness and its ability to improve. This would indicate that SSE needs be undertaken and experienced positively so that amenable perceptions can grow over time. This is further supported by quantitative evidence provided in Hofman, Dijkstra and Hofman (2009, p. 64) where it was found that 'schools that have already accomplished a high level of SSE seem to possess certain internal characteristics that are of importance to SSE'.

How teachers perceive the process is linked to feelings of ownership and perceived levels of support. Findings from Karagiorgi *et al.* (2015) determine that teacher feeling of ownership of the process were promoted by a focus on improvement and it is suggested that going forward, consideration must be paid to supporting the implementation of SSE, building capacity, and developing the culture of SSE.

The literature presents a scenario where attitudes vary greatly, however. Vanhoof, Van Petegem and De Maeyer (2009) determine that in the Flemish context, attitudes towards the process can be problematic. This was attributed to the perceived challenges of undertaking the process rather than the anticipated outcomes of the process. School staff believed that the product of SSE would offer strong benefits but were deterred by the perceived difficulty and time costs. Interestingly, the study tied staff perceptions of SSE to the overall school culture using multilevel analysis. For instance, actors who operated in schools where organisational learning and professional learning communities were stronger, held more positive perceptions of SSE.

Differences were related to positionality in addition with principals displaying more positive attitudes towards the process. It was also interesting that large differences existed in attitudes to SSE within schools and not necessarily between schools. This indicated that variation in attitude could have a correlation to position. Additionally, certain school characteristics were argued to be necessarily developed prior to SSE being introduced for it to be successful. These included the reflective capacity of staff being appropriately developed before engaging in the process.

Attitudes towards SSE have been recorded as growing in positivity over time (Faddar, Vanhoof and De Maeyer, 2018; Aderet-German, 2021) but certain aspects of the process are less accepted than others by those who undertake SSE. This is particularly evident in relation to attitudes towards student and parental voice. This is seen in the Irish secondary context where evidence indicates that teachers are somewhat resistant to change in this area (Brown *et al.,* 2020).

Additionally, the continuous nature of SSE has been resisted in some contexts. For instance, O'Brien *et al.* (2019) found that SSE was viewed as a positive by staff, but they did not think continuous engagement with the process should be a facet of all teachers' work. Rather, it was posited, if a teacher undertakes the process, the next iteration should be passed onto another teacher or group of teachers.

2.11.5. Resources and Supports

Resources and supports have also been identified as significant. The 2015 Eurydice report entitled Assuring Quality in Education: Policies and Approached to School Evaluation in Europe provides good insight into the picture of SSE in Europe in this respect. Categories of supporting measures that are identified in the report are training, an evaluation framework, comparative indicators, guidelines, online forums, external specialist support, and financial support (Eurydice, 2015, p. 45). Ireland is recorded as receiving all of these, apart from comparative indicators and financial support.

Empirical accounts identify challenges in supports and resources, however. In a study by O' Brien *et al.* (2019), participants identified resourcing for SSE as a problem. Interestingly, this was interpreted as being closely tied in with staff beliefs and attitudes. Very regularly in the literature, time is seen to be a limiting factor. Time was especially seen to be an inhibiting factor again in O' Brien *et al.* (2019). This was consequential in that it was found that teachers were aware of online support documents for SSE but described not having the time to access these. This finding

is supported by findings in Schildkamp *et al.* (2012) and Karagiorgi (2012), for example, who document time as an inhibiting factor in the Dutch and Cypriot contexts.

Grek and Ozga (2012, pp. 10-11) assert that the labour and time intensive nature of SSE is a threat to meaningful engagement. When examining SSE in the Scottish context they identify challenges here and argue that 'there are many indications of fractures and difficulties in the reception of the instrument, that suggest that there is scope for either superficial conformity or active dissent in some spaces and places'. Furthermore, time can have some influence on the quality of impacts arising from SSE. As seen in Bubb and Earley (2009), in order for staff to develop as a result of self-evaluation practices, time needs to be made available. However, barriers to the provision of adequate time were seen in the study as school leaders were reluctant to upset teaching and learning time by allowing teachers to access professional development. Some schools responded creatively, however, by looking at ways to provide professional development experiences outside of teaching time.

2.11.6. Accountability Pressures

Mandates to undertake SSE have been interpreted as important in motivating schools to engage in SSE. Jansens and van Amelsvoort (2008, p. 22) identify 'accountability demands imposed on the SSE generate accountability-oriented SSEs, while improvement demands generate improvement-oriented SSEs'. The significance of this situation is drawn into view by Brady (2019) who theoretically explores SSE in the Irish context with the central constructs of interest being teacher performativity and anxiety of performance. The paper explores how in one respect, SSE facilitates teacher autonomy, while in another, it increases levels of accountability which comes with negative implications.

2.12. An Empirical Picture of SSE in Irish Primary Schools

At this point, it is appropriate to look at SSE in practice in the Irish primary context specifically. While the body of literature here is not as well developed, useful insights are available.

An important study regarding SSE was undertaken by Ní Chróinín *et al.* (2012) who investigated how schools promoted physical activity in pursuit of an Active Schools' Flag using SSE. In a secondary analysis of school action plans, the authors concluded that SSE could contribute to improvement in school provision of physical education and physical activity.

In structural terms, there was evident in that schools improved their alignment with the PE curriculum. Examples included schools implementing the mandated time expectation for PE and the teaching of all curricular units within PE. Interestingly, schools increased PE provision through focusing discretionary time on its provision. Physical structures were also changed in the form of developing the playground, for example, and through overcoming issues of space by making the most of internal space available and in the improvement of organisational structures in addition. This included the creation of committees and assemblies that put a focus on developing PE policy and planning. It was commented that this made physical activity 'an integral part of school life' (2012, p. 286).

An important finding emerged in that teachers' understanding of practice were observed to change. This was evidenced in teacher engagement in collaboratively critically reflecting on practice and identifying gaps in professional practice. Examples of this included schools identifying that they were inadequate in their practice for inclusivity and responding to address this as a result. Furthermore, partnerships were seen to develop with external organisations and schools reflected on how these partnerships were functioning. In some cases, schools identified that teachers should co-teach with external coaches, allowing for development of professional capacity. In others, teachers were sent forward for CPD in areas of need. Parents were reportedly more engaged in physical activity and monitoring of physical activity, while children took on a more significant role in decision making.

McNamara and O' Hara (2012), in research concerning the Whole-School Evaluation process in the Irish school system, provide a contrasting account around a similar time period. Here the

researchers engaged in a deconstruction of policy documents and an analysis of the relevant empirical literature regarding evaluation and inspection. From the review of the policy documents, the authors questioned whether schools had the capacity in terms of resources and skill to meet the requirements of SSE.

From the literature, the authors drew several significant points. They observed that in many respects, engagement with the Looking at Our School document was often seen as a one-off event. Furthermore, evidence indicated that engagement with SSE was focused towards compliance. It was also highlighted that there was a perceived lack of access to quality data in Irish schools, a point which is also referred to by then Chief Inspector of the Inspectorate (Hislop, 2013). Interestingly, the authors highlighted that there were several data sources available already, but it was suggested that these had not been embraced by the Inspectorate as valued evidence. In extension, it is posited that in some cases, school leaders felt that the WSE process was very impressionistic and not conducted with a view to exploring evidence, as is expressed in SSE policy.

In addition, the literature indicated that inspectors had not made use of evidence gathered by schools, and that support provided to schools in undertaking SSE was limited. Furthermore, it was common that schools felt that they were not able to analyse data effectively due to a lack of capacity and there was evidence of a mismatch between what the Inspectorate expected and what school leaders felt they could achieve. This was seen to be significantly detrimental to the WSE process as internally derived data was simply not available or was unavailable in a useable form. This inhibited capacity for evidence-based judgements.

Further research undertaken by McNamara *et al.* (2011) portrayed a similar picture with a focus on the experience of those tasked with undertaking the process. Here, Irish teachers and leaders were observed to be sceptical about the value and practicality of SSE up to that point. In the study, data was collected by means of interview with 38 school leaders, 30 teachers, and six

inspectors between 2005 and 2009 and it indicated a pervading feeling of being under-resourced and under-skilled in implementing SSE. Here, it was perceived that there was a lack of resources and encouragement provided by DES, with an inadequate provision of training given to teachers and an associated lack of skill as a result. The researchers highlighted this as a possible explanation for low engagement with the process.

More recent evidence is presented by the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection who conducted the National Survey of Principals Attitudes Towards School Self – Evaluation 2014-2015 (O' Hara *et al.*, 2016). From a sample of 296 Irish primary school principals, a picture of SSE practices was gathered. The process was reported to be highly collaborative with principals and staff recorded as being regularly involved in the process. Interestingly, nearly 80% of principals were either in agreement or strong agreement with the statement that SSE results in better management, while nearly 88% agreed or strong agreement with the statement that SSE results in better teaching and learning.

Of note, findings indicated that almost 75% of schools had a set of procedures in place for SSE. Although this was the case, almost 70% of respondents did not have a SSE policy in place. In addition, although the process was held to be easy to understand, it was reported that school principals, deputies, and teachers very often felt that they required further training on conducting the process and skills for evaluation and planning at school board level were seen to be inadequate in most cases. Unintended consequences were apparent in addition, with a majority believing SSE places a lot of stress on staff and that it takes up a lot of time. The statement *SSE is popular with the majority of staff in this school* was a polarising issue in the data.

Overall, in comparison with the previous two studies referenced, the above study indicates that attitudes toward the value of SSE had certainly improved over time and that clearly, based on the experiences of school principals, there are perceived benefits and challenges associated with SSE in the Irish primary sector.

Work conducted by Brown *et al.* (2021) provides more recent insight. This study examined SSE in four European countries with Irish secondary and primary schools adding to the data set. The paper concluded that SSE was a core component of school life in the Irish schools that took part.

Interviews with principals in Irish schools lead to the conclusion that these schools engaged to a high degree with SSE and that the Looking at Our School guidelines were being utilised. SSE was motivated by a wish to improve as opposed to a focus being on accountability according to school principals. Middle leaders were perceived as having a central role in the process while principals highlighted that the concept and philosophy of SSE was now well understood. However, more training was called for by participants in data use and target setting specifically. As seen elsewhere, time was an issue that inhibited implementation with full, collaborative, and continuous engagement hindered by teachers having a full teaching timetable.

Further to this, school leaders found that the process was a useful tool in improving school leadership and management. However, training and time were seen as challenges to the success of the process, with specific challenges evident at the point of setting targets, data collection, monitoring, and evaluating. The authors linked these shortcomings to inadequate supports available to schools and point out that gaps remain in supporting materials, for instance.

In an unpublished EdD study, Quinn, (2021) explored the role and impact of middle leadership and management on the implementation of SSE in Irish primary schools. The study employed a mixed methods approach where document analysis of policy documents, questionnaire, and interviews completed the data set. Here it was found that schools had come to a point where SSE was embedded and valued. It was felt by most participants that SSE was worthwhile and resulted in improved teaching and learning. However, significant challenges were being experienced in implementation. This was specifically seen in relation to time, resources, paperwork, the distribution of leadership relating to the process, and a lack of training for the process. In relation

to time, this was observed to be influential as the collaborative element of the process was held to be particularly central but time intensive.

Interestingly, the profile of a school was seen to influence how self-evaluation was managed. In large schools, SSE was often undertaken with a more formal structure. This was often evident in the formation of specific committees. Small schools, in contrast, often featured a whole of staff involvement. Volunteerism was a significant feature of the study in addition, with the success of the process reliant on teachers offering good will in taking part.

A very similar portrayal is presented in masters research by Reynolds (2020). Using semi-structured interviews with six primary school principals, the researcher identified that positive attitudes and experiences relating to SSE were evident and that a distributed leadership style was employed during the process. Autonomy in evaluation and the process's perceived utility in improving the school was identified as an important feature in principal's positive perceptions. Negatives associated with the process were paperwork, time constraints, initiative overload, and evaluation fatigue.

Supports have been shown in the literature to be paramount to any success in delivering the aims of SSE in schools and systems. However, these are seen to be inadequate and inconsistent when the Irish primary context is examined, particularly from the perspective of staff. Supports have been enhanced over the years but can be interpreted as still not being fit for purpose. Coolahan *et al.* (2017, p. xi) identify that any successes we may achieve with implementing educational reform are reliant on 'resources, goodwill and time' and these have not necessarily been in abundance in the Irish context since the 2008 financial crisis. Although specific supports have been allocated to SSE, the primary education system suffered significant deterioration during the financial crisis years, the same years during which SSE policy was rolled mandated.

2.13. Conclusion

In conclusion, an interesting picture of SSE emerges. From the process documents, SSE is presented as a simple, six-step process that facilitates schools in delivering effective change for improvement in teaching and learning and leadership and management (DES, 2012c, 2016c). Once this vision is compared with the empirical evidence of the process in practice, a more complex scenario appears to exist, however. Early on, it is apparent that SSE was often experienced as problematic and challenging in Irish primary schools, a point accepted by the DE (2022). Here, clear issues of capacity were augmented by inappropriate supports and training (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012). By 2016, Brown *et al.* (2016) determined that overall, in the Irish context, school capacity to carry out self-evaluation was not yet particularly strong and remained a challenge to an effective inspection model.

Over time, there appears to have been progress in relation to some of these aspects. This is evident in more recent studies where staff, particularly school principals, see the process as worthwhile, valuable, and impactful on teaching and learning. This may be due to several developments including a redesigned model and process capacity growing with practical experience. Importantly, evidence suggests a high level of compliance with the process now and a positive attitude pervades, according to the samples in the above studies in any case.

Specific challenges still remain, however. These can be summarised as time, additional workload, training, management of the process, a reliance on goodwill, and the absence of adequate resources and supports. Variance in experience and degree of robustness is also observed between schools with the DE outlining that 'There are some schools in which SSE is not yet well embedded…There are also many schools that have established a strong, collaborative whole-school SSE culture' (DE, 2022, p. 3).

Ultimately, it remains far from clear what is actually going on in relation to SSE in Irish primary schools. In extension, and arguably of more significance, we have little insight providing us with

explanation for why SSE is undertaken as it is in Irish primary schools. From this, it is pertinent to reflect on where we are regarding SSE and where we are heading next. This is particularly important considering what is at stake. As MacBeath (1999, p. 9) identified in his seminal writings, 'Learners and learning organisations construct learning in their own context by dealing with the contingencies which they face in their daily work'. This is striking absent from the picture here.

This work is argued to be significant due to several coalescing realities. These include the central position which SSE has come to play in the Irish primary education system; the problematic development of SSE in practical application; and the lack of deep and rich empirical research which exists in relation to schools undertaking SSE in context. Ultimately, our ability to reflect accurately upon the quality of SSE in practice is limited, and a dearth in knowledge exists regarding the contextual realities that exist in undertaking SSE work. Accordingly, the ways in which these contextual realities shape how SSE unravels in practice is unknown and discussion, reflection, and progression in respect of the overall aims of SSE are inhibited.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

Chapter three outlines the methodological design underpinning the research. Section one provides an introduction and a brief overview of the specific design underpinning this study, before presenting the background literature that informed the research design. Here, the various ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological arguments that can inform research are considered. Section two presents in detail the specific research design undertaken and approaches to ensure high standards of ethics, credibility, and quality in relation to the research problem. Here the methods of data collection are described before the relevant modes of data analysis employed are delineated. Finally, an overview of the case and each individual site is provided.

3.1.1. Research Design Overview

The research aimed to establish a deep and rich understanding of the research problem and, as such, a qualitative case study approach was identified as the most appropriate. The specific design chosen was a multi-site case study approach where nine schools were engaged with in an intensive research project. Data was gathered from each site from interviews, focus groups, and relevant documents including school improvement plans, WSE reports, and WSE MLL reports. Each site was first analysed as a standalone data set, before findings were elucidated at the level of the case using a cross-site analytical approach. This established six themes and enabled an overall interpretation that was grounded in both deductive and inductive analytical approaches (Yin, 2017; Bingham, 2023).

3.2. Methodological Background

Prior to conducting research, several considerations of research design were essential. This process was undertaken so that the highest rigour of research could be ensured, that the goals of

the research were reasonable, and that the philosophical underpinnings and assumptions were strongly articulated and justified.

To achieve a reliable and valid research design, it was necessary to investigate how the different components of research fit together and make explicit assumptions and positions from which the research is grounded. This is taken to involve what has been described as 'the intersection of philosophy, research designs, and specific methods' (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 43). Howe (1988, p. 15) concludes that 'numerous assumptions, hunches, conjectures, and value judgments loom large in designing and conducting research, and in evaluating proffered conclusions'. As a result, deep consideration of ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological perspective was an essential consideration of the research process (Guba and Lincoln, 2005).

3.2.1. Philosophical Assumptions

To begin, a deeply significant and consequential element of any scientific endeavour involves an examination of the philosophical assumptions that underpin it. It is accepted that this research is grounded in philosophy which is considered to be integral to the scientific process (Coates, 2021). Rossman and Rallis (2017, p. 34) define assumptions as 'fundamental propositions that you take for granted'. Centrally, assumptions are an unavoidable facet of human involvement in the research process and are important to consider as they differ from researcher to researcher and study to study. Philosophical perspective is of immense consequence in this regard. This is due to the influence that it has on research decisions, interpretations, and outcomes. Although the significance of this influence is debated in the literature, it is generally accepted that we cannot engage in research without imparting certain biases during the process (Creswell, 2013).

Clearly, any rigorous research needs to begin from a position where biases are made explicit (Ivankova and Plano Clark, 2018) and their influence acknowledged and controlled for as much as possible. With this, we must acknowledge as scientists that pure objectivity is impossible, and

whether we are directly aware or not, our deeply held philosophical assumptions certainly influence the course of any research effort (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

This is seen as increasingly important of late where a common criticism of research arises in that appropriate consideration and explanation of philosophical perspectives is oftentimes not sufficiently accounted for (Coates, 2021). Morgan (2007) develops this idea further in an ethical and political sense by noting that axiological perspectives are important considerations when developing research approaches. In essence, our choices are influenced by 'our personal history, social background, and cultural assumptions' (Balnaves and Caputi, 2001, p. 69). As a result, a clear understanding of the research purpose and why it is a worthwhile engagement is necessary.

In establishing this in relation to the current research, Teddlie and Tashakkori, (2009) provide a useful topology by which an appropriate justification can be grounded. Personal reasons are presented as an area of consideration in the first regard, with the goal of advancing knowledge, and the goal of influencing society completing the topology. In this, it is apparent that each of these three aspects influence the motivations for this research in an interconnected way. Regarding personal reasons and the advancement of knowledge, this current research is motivated by a desire to improve educational quality and equity through the process of SSE; in gaining professional and academic knowledge as to how and why SSE is enacted in real world contexts as it is; and to progress our knowledge and abilities to improve Irish primary education. From this perspective, the value of the research is underpinned by a strong argument which is pragmatic in nature.

3.2.2. Ontology

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and relates to what we can know (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Blaikie summarises ontology as 'claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and

how these units interact with each other. In short, ontological assumptions are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality' (Blaikie, 2000, p. 8).

Ontology, in a traditional sense, has resulted in the formation of two contrasting worldviews that have spawned two contrasting paradigms, where paradigm can be understood as 'a basic set of beliefs that guide action' (Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p. 17). These include the perspectives of objectivism and constructivism.

Objectivism is defined by Mertens (2015, p. 58) as 'the belief that the social world can be studied in the same way as the natural world, that there is a method for studying the social world that is value-free, and that explanations of a causal nature can be provided'. Here, a single, objective reality is seen to exist irrespective of observer and that this is out there and available to us should we engage in an appropriate process of inquiry.

This contrasts significantly with the constructivist worldview which is grounded in the belief that the world consists of 'multiple-constructed realities' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As a result, post-positivist conceptions of reality must be rejected as we are unable to come to know reality in a perfect sense, as we are limited in our sensory ability and intellect to achieve this (Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

In the constructivist paradigm, reality is argued to be interpretive and can only be presented from the subject's viewpoint (Mertens, 2015). In this, the researcher is viewed as research instrument and 'data are filtered through the researcher's unique ways of seeing the world - his lens or worldview' (Rallis and Rossman, 2003, p. 36). Where quantitative researchers aim for objectivity, qualitative researchers embrace the influence that values can impart on research, while rejecting the view that only one reality is to be uncovered irrespective of observer (Mertens, 2010). In this interpretation of reality, the social construction of knowledge is appreciated where researchers 'construct understandings of their topics through the questions they ask, the contexts they study, and their personal biographies' (Rossman and Rallis, 2003, p. 35).

3.2.3. Epistemology

Epistemology, or theory of knowledge, is concerned with that which constitutes valid knowledge and, as a philosophical domain, its central concern is how we can come to know something. This is elucidated by engaging with concepts referred to as 'rational belief, probability, plausibility, evidentiation and—additionally but not least—erotetics, the business of raising and resolving questions' (Rescher, 2003, p. xiii). Rescher describes four types of knowledge which we can come to know, as presented in table 4.

Table 4. Types of knowledge (Source: adapted from Rescher, 2003, p. xiv/xv)

Knowledge type	Example
Knowledge-that (knowledge of facts)	2 plus 2 is 4
Adverbial knowledge	Knowing what, when, how, why, and so forth
Knowledge by acquaintance	I know the owner of that car
Performatory (or "how-to") knowledge	I know how to swim

Importantly, epistemological beliefs are associated with and justified by their associated parent ontological beliefs. Objectivist and constructivist ontologies spawn specific sets of epistemological possibilities that are often held to be only compatible with their respective worldviews. In a practical sense, this is evident in that quantitative methods are associated with the objectivist worldview whereas a qualitative approach is associated with the constructivist worldview (Greene, 2008).

3.3. Methodological Approaches

In preparation for the current research, three methodological approaches were considered. These include qualitative research, quantitative research, and mixed methods research. The potential of each is now discussed in detail.

3.3.1. Quantitative Research

Quantitative research can be understood as that which 'emphasizes a deductive-objective-generalizing approach' (Morgan, 2007, p. 73) and is the methodology associated with the objectivist worldview. This approach is grounded in empiricism, the philosophy which asserts that knowledge can be captured through sensory experience, and positivism, the philosophy which asserts that the scientific method can assess the truth of hypotheses. Central to this approach is experimental and quasi-experimental research where data is gathered, quantified, and interpreted for the purpose of supporting or refuting hypotheses. Here, the measurement of observations is of significance (Balnaves and Caputi, 2001) which provides quantitative data. Quantitative data refers to data that is in numerical form and it is commonly analysed using statistics.

The strengths of a quantitative approach include the opportunity to study many subjects which facilitates a broad understanding of a phenomenon. This is argued to generate findings that are generalisable outside of the research context and across a target population. Additionally, quantitative data is purported by many as being the most subjective form available to us in enabling objectivity and reducing bias in hypothesis testing (Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Historically speaking, in educational and psychological fields of inquiry specifically, positivist and post-positivist approaches to research have dominated (Mertens, 2010). The benefits of quantitative design in educational research relates to 'rich information on educational processes for whole populations or very large samples, or might provide very detailed data about smaller samples' (Reardon and Stuart, 2019, p. 567). More recently, positivist approaches have expanded on methods used, with randomized and quasi-experimental designs added to more traditional correlational and regression-based approaches to research (ibid.). In respect of these strengths, positivism is often presented as useful for theory verification.

Limitations of quantitative research arise when one brings human behaviour and emotions into view (Mertens, 2010). Quantitative research assumes that by using a quantitative methodology, the researcher can determine a singular, objective reality and that the reality of the experiences of the population can be observed free from researcher influence. This is a heavy claim to make, once one considers that the approach relies on measurement instruments deigned by humans and that confounding variables cannot be controlled for in complex settings. Resultantly, causation cannot be identified without question.

Additionally, the authenticity of response from the participant is an assumption that raises issues. Fowler (2014) outlines two error types in survey-based research which is a highly utilised instrument of quantitative research. The first is sampling error and the second is bias. Sampling error occurs because data is collected from a sample of the population. Therefore, it is not certain that it can be generalised across the entire population accurately. Bias in this vein can be defined as 'the possible error that stems solely from the fact that data are collected from a sample rather than from every single member of a population' (ibid., p. 10).

Due to the nature of the research goal being the generation of data based on subjective states, errors are also known to occur due to misinterpreting questions, a lack of knowledge needed to answer questions, and a misreporting of answers to questions to improve perceptions of the respondent themselves. Each of these can lead to bias errors. Both error types may result in threats to the validity of the data generated and any interpretations made in analysis. Additionally, the questionnaire instrument carries several limitations. Response rates may be low, inhibiting representativeness, while employing closed questions in questionnaires can result in constrained responses from participants.

3.3.2. Qualitative Research

An alternative to the post-positivist worldview emerged in the form of qualitative research methods during the late 20th century (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014; Creswell and

Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research is summarised by Morgan (2007, p. 73) as being inductive, subjective, and contextual, while its foundation is attributed to the emergence of phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophies. Here meaning is seen to be socially constructed (Mertens, 2010).

Essentially, the goal of this approach is the generation of 'detailed, rich, and thick (empathic) descriptions' (Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 14) while it relies on interactions in the field that facilitate the development of interpretive knowledge which is contextually situated (Rallis and Rossman, 2012). As Bourke (2014, pp. 2-3) outlines, 'Qualitative research seeks to provide an understanding of a problem through the experiences of individuals, and the particular details of their lived experiences'.

Strengths of this approach include an allowance for complexity and insight as 'qualitative data are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of human processes' (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014). Further strengths lie in the fact that this worldview facilitates an understanding of a problem as it exists under real world conditions, it values participant perspectives on a problem, accounts for contextual factors, and facilitates a deep exploration of research questions through the lens of existing concepts (Yin, 2015). From this, personal meanings become accessible, marginalised voices are included, and power imbalances between participant and researcher are reduced (Pistrang and Barker, 2012).

Qualitative methods are also based on several assumptions including that reality is socially constructed, context bound, and that researchers can make interpretations based on participants experiences of reality (Mertens, 2015). In this regard, it is assumed and embraced that the researcher and participant will provide accurate depictions of the phenomenon under scrutiny. It is assumed that the researcher has adequate skills in conducting qualitative research and will also carry with them a lens through which the data will be analysed and interpreted. Furthermore, it is assumed that participants will answer the interview questions honestly.

Limitations of the qualitative research project include arguments against the ability to generalise the research findings outside of the research context, with some positing that the utility of research findings in the real world is weaker than a quantitative approach. This is due to qualitative research not being statistically representative of the target population alongside the challenges to validity which arise in an approach that is highly interpretive, complex to analyse, and time intensive (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014). The researcher may also be seen as influencing the findings with the maintenance of researcher integrity becoming a significant consideration. This is often embraced in that 'the impossibility of a neutral stance' is accepted as a fundamental aspect of the paradigm (Wellington, 2015, p. 100).

3.3.3. Mixed Methods Research

Following periods of prevalence in using either quantitative or qualitative approaches to research, the combination of each method has become increasingly prevalent. This has allowed researchers to ascertain new opportunities and unearth previously unattainable insights in a credible way (Youngs and Piggot-Irvine, 2012). It is now accepted by many scholars 'that no single method can capture the whole and complex reality' of phenomena (Freshwater, 2007, p. 145), with mixed methods often argued to be a suitable approach to provide both breadth and depth in relation to complex research problems.

In response, a mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods has begun to be convincingly established as a distinctive, standalone approach (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Biesta, 2010a; Torrance, 2012) with its own philosophical underpinnings in pragmatism and paradigm-specific methods of research (Morgan, 2014). Here, the mixing of methods of data collection is presented as a legitimate approach to a research problem that can transcend the use of a single method (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Ultimately, this is argued to enable a deep and broad phenomenological understanding, including in education and health specifically where 'generality and particularity' are regularly sought in

respect of research problems (Greene, 2008, p. 7). This approach is described as mixed methods research (MMR) and with respect to the continuum of research approaches, it can be conceptually situated between the traditional quantitative and qualitative approaches to inquiry (Creswell, 2014).

In practice, the mixed methodologist draws on the strengths of each available methodological tool as is necessary to address the needs of the research question (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Mixed methods research, therefore, can be defined as 'the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study' (Balnaves and Caputi, 2001, p. 17).

Importantly, however, this cannot be done ad-hoc. Rather, the choice to combine methods must be justified, with Ivankova and Plano Clark (2018) asserting that combination must be done in a meaningful way. Centrally, this relies on the assumption that a pluralistic combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, undertaken in a systematic manner, will facilitate a greater understanding of a problem (Balnaves and Caputi, 2001; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Creswell, 2014).

The legitimacy of mixing methods remains a controversial and contested subject, however, and it is of importance to note that the significance of converging two contrasting, and in the view of some, incompatible paradigms together is, without doubt, a tough task (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). As can be seen in the previous paragraph, mixed methods are perceived to be on a somewhat contentious philosophical footing when purist conceptions of paradigm are drawn into view. Significant conversations that remain contested in discourse include how mixed methods can be defined and what its benefits pertain to (Denzin, 2012).

Criticism has been directed at the use of mixed methods research on a philosophical level and a practical level in social science research also (Youngs and Piggot-Irvine, 2012). For some, it is held that quantitative and qualitative paradigms are incompatible, and thus the primary criticism

is entitled the 'incompatibility thesis' (Howe, 1988, p. 10; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009, p. 20). Generally, the criticisms wagered at MMR focus on 'the opposing paradigm's applications of rigor and the commensurability of epistemologies' (Freshwater, 2007, p. 140).

Furthermore, on a practical level, employing mixed methods research is challenging (McKim, 2017). It involves both quantitative and qualitative research methods, each of which require their own specific set of skills and the necessity of training to implement these processes rigorously (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2012). This is not just the case regarding the establishment of a strong philosophical rationale for employing the approach, but also in relation to justifying the significant undertaking that mixed methods research entails.

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) remind researchers of the necessity for engagement with seminal texts from the quantitative and qualitative traditions in conjunction with those of the MMR tradition to ensure an appropriate level of skill and understanding is brought to the project. Furthermore, using the data generated in an integrated fashion, so that genuine mixing of methods occurs, is a significant consideration. In the literature, it is often suggested that these challenges are best approached using a large and multidisciplinary research team (Youngs and Piggot-Irvine, 2012).

3.3.4. Summary

Overall, quantitative and qualitative research can be conceptualised as existing at opposite ends of a continuum. Qualitative research is presented as focusing on language and context (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014), which Colin and Michele (2004, p. 29) argue requires '…paying attention to history, to politics, to language use, to the participants in a particular event, to other events happening at the same time'. Quantitative approaches by comparison make use of statistics (Muijs, 2004), numerical data, and mathematical models to explain phenomena (Aliaga and Gunderson, 1999).

Mertens (2012) draws our attention to the utility of each approach when she builds on Biesta's (2010) observation. Here she argues that the methods of each of the traditional approaches to research are only a means to conduct research within a particular philosophical framework. In this, qualitative methods are employed as a tool for induction and quantitative methods as a tool for deduction (Morgan, 2007). The movement towards mixed methods represents a new turn in methodological approaches and is useful to consider. However, a strong rationale for its use is required. Table 5 summarises the research approaches considered.

Table 5. A summary of methodologies (Source: adapted from Morgan (2007))

Quantitative research	Qualitative research	Mixed methods research
Deductive	Inductive	Abductive
Objective	Subjective	Intersubjective
Generalizing	Contextual	Transferable

3.4. Research Design Utilised in this Study

The following section outlines the specific research design utilised in this research. In summary, the research is underpinned by a pragmatic worldview, employs a qualitative research approach, and utilises a multi-site case study design (see figure 10). This position is defended in the coming section with an emphasis on detail to portray the research's strong rigour and credibility.
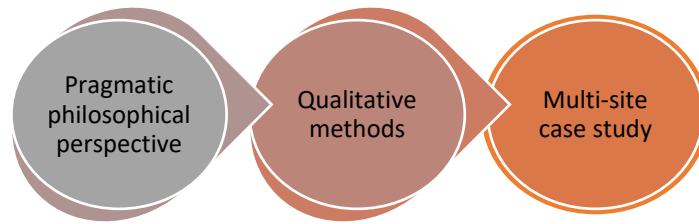
Figure 10. Research design used in this study

3.4.1. Philosophical Perspective in this Research

This research is positioned within the pragmatic paradigm. Pragmatism is a unique approach of philosophical, metaphysical, and methodological consequence that offers an alternative perspective on truth, belief, and knowledge (Bernstein, 2010). It is a school of philosophy that is a result of the culmination of ideas presented by several thinkers including Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey (Biesta and Burbules, 2003; Morgan, 2007; Denzin, 2012). This group of intellectuals aimed 'to reintegrate the living flow of social experience into philosophical thought' (Lorino, 2018, p. 22) and identified pragmatic thought as a means of doing so.

A straightforward account of what exactly pragmatism pertains to is somewhat challenging (Putnam and Putnam, 2017) but ground can be made by taking an apophatic approach where we explore what it is not. Centrally, a search for objective truth - that of the ontological certainty that has been commonly sought in traditional philosophy, is cast aside (Dewey, 1920; Lorino, 2018). Contrastingly, that which is determined to be 'true *instrumentally*' (James, 1907, p. 58, original emphasis) is understood to be of utmost value. This is possible if we engage in a framework focused on impact and where we 'interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences' (James, 1907, p. 45).

It is important to note that pragmatism is a wide and deep tradition that has inspired multiple perspectives as to what pragmatism itself is, and there is tremendous variation in interpretation

of the philosophy and how it can be utilised in research. This is certainly evident once comparison is drawn between the original pragmatists of the metaphysical club who emerged in the late 1800's (Lorino, 2018) and more modern interpretations including Richard Rorty's and Hilary Putnam's for example.

For the original pragmatists, the philosophy was seen to transcend the insignificance of many debates in philosophy by emphasising for the practical impacts of any claim (James, 1907). Ultimately, both ontological and epistemological arguments were held to be irreconcilable in the first hand and not useful in the other. As a result, pragmatic thinkers turned to what James describes as 'concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power' (James, 1907, p. 51). In essence, a new aim of philosophy is brought to the fore in pragmatic thought in that of functioning as a means of valuation and judgement (Hickman and Alexander, 1998, p. x). Here, beliefs and actions are determined to be inseparable and should therefore only be judged as true or false based on their practical consequences (Spencer, 2019).

The incorporation of the pragmatic worldview into this research is justified as the practical utility of knowledge is what is valued by the researcher and drives the research. In essence, this research is conducted for a practical impact in that understandings of SSE policy in practice are improved and as such, the philosophical underpinnings are supported by the underlying assumptions of the pragmatic philosophy. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, it is held by the researcher that the traditional arguments concerning ontological and epistemological grounding are unhelpful regarding the problem at hand. SSE is a phenomenon that is theorised, designed, and implemented by those with varying worldviews, and as such ontological and epistemological questions of knowledge become unrelated to what is at stake in this research. Regardless of how we view knowledge, SSE can only be judged by its practical implications in relation to the actions taken by actors within school contexts.

Due to the constitution of the pragmatic worldview, it is very commonly seen as an appropriate philosophical foundation for mixed methods research (Howe, 1988; Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morgan, 2007; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). In this sense, pragmatism can be understood as intersubjective (Morgan, 2007). Here an abductive approach to reasoning using inductive and deductive logics are applied in respect of a problem (Balnaves and Caputi, 2001). Significantly, the researcher can collect and interpret data as objectively as possible, while infusing subjectivity into the research in addition (Shannon-Baker, 2016). Balnaves and Caputi (2001, p. 16) argue that this is reasonable in 'that research approaches should be mixed in ways that offer the best opportunities for answering important research questions'.

Although pragmatism is often associated with mixed methods research, this is only justified where there is reason and value in combining the methodological approaches. Centrally, a pragmatic worldview alone does not mean that methodological approach can be justified without question. Lorino (2018, p. 2) points out that misunderstandings of pragmatism are often based on an interpretation of the philosophy as 'a search for practical success without any founding principle' or 'practical action for its own sake' (Hickman and Alexander, 1998, p. 3).

In the current research, although the possibility of utilising a quantitative methodology in addition to the qualitative fieldwork was considered strongly, it became unnecessary due to the nature of the research aims. However, in the analytical approach, the research does employ deductive and indicative reasoning. Putnam and Putnam (2017, pp. 29-30) describe the position held in this research well when she describes pragmatism as a philosophical perspective irreducible to the mixed methods research design alone. Rather, pragmatism is:

> …to see oneself not as a spectator of but as an agent in the world. And that means that one often confronts the question "What is to be done?". That's what taking pragmatism seriously means to me: to try to philosophize in ways that are relevant to the real problems of real human beings.

3.4.2. Pragmatism in Educational Research

In educational research, pragmatism has come to play an important role. In essence, the argument from a pragmatic perspective is that educational research should be, or at least aspire to be, *for* education in that it relevantly informs practice and action rather than *about* education. Importantly, it 'should generate knowledge that is relevant for the day-to-day practice for educators' (Biesta and Burbules, 2003, p. 1). Additionally, pragmatism encourages single and multiple interpretations of reality to be appreciated and empirically investigated (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011).

An interesting and relevant debate that exists in relation to pragmatism is that of the ability to generalise the findings of research drawing on this approach. A traditional positivist perspective would argue that pragmatism does not offer the adequate structures for this, but a strong argument is available in response. In pragmatism, there is an assumption that 'theories can be both contextual and generalizable by analysing them for "transferability" to another situation' (Shannon-Baker, 2016, p. 322). It is posited that by undertaking such an approach, we are constantly moving toward more accurate interpretations of reality.

With this, pragmatism can ultimately be depicted as a radical form of empiricism (James, 1907, p. 51) where the impact that philosophy can make on experience is argued as its preeminent justification. Bernstein describes this as 'a nonfoundational self-corrective conception of human inquiry based upon an understanding of how human agents are formed by, and actively participate in shaping, normative social practices' (2010, p. x). Based on this understanding, pragmatism leaves behind ontological debate concerning metaphysical truth, with the uncovering of the objective nature of reality seen as an unreasonable and ultimately unattainable goal.

Consequently, the notion of fallibilism is held in that 'knowledge is conditional and must continually be revised in light of new experience' and 'the idea that even the best supported claim is conditional upon, and subject to revision in the light of, future evidence and experience'

(Spencer, 2019, p. iv). This is presented as possible through inquiry and interaction that is grounded in notions of evolution and the constantly fluctuating nature of lived experience (Dewey, 1909). John Dewey, one of the preeminent pragmatic thinkers, appropriately conceptualises pragmatism as it is understood in this research as 'the process of (scientific) inquiry and its relationship to human action' (Biesta and Burbules, 2003, p. 3). Here the instrumentality of the philosophy is the preeminent consideration.

3.4.3. Methodological Approach Utilised in this Research

Successful research relies on effective design that is grounded on data collected using systematic methods appropriate to the research question asked (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). It is presented in this research that based on the philosophical assumptions, overarching aims, and resultant research questions formulated, a multi-site case study approach is not only justified, but is the most appropriate approach to rigorously achieving the research objectives. As the research aims to understand how SSE has been enacted in the first instance, and to understand why in the second, a qualitative approach to gathering and analysing data is argued to be the most appropriate means of addressing the research questions. Pistrang and Barker (2012, p. 7) describe the qualitative approach as 'exploring and understanding the phenomenon in question' and as such, naturalistic inquiry is the strongest approach available in achieving the stated research aims (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

3.4.4. Case Study and Multi-Site Case Study

Case study is a research design that seeks depth in analysis of a case. This analysis is undertaken with the goal of determining 'what it is, how it works, and how it interacts with its real-world contextual environment' (Yin, 2017, no pagination). The strength in this design is evident in its effectiveness in answering questions of *how* and *why*, facilitating rich depictions of problems in context (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2017). This methodology offers an excellent means of generating the required depth of understanding of a phenomenon in action (Simons, 2009) and is a

particularly strong approach for understanding a phenomenon in its natural context and outside conditions of experimental control (Yin, 2017).

The goal of the current research aligns with what Yin (2017) describes as good case study research, that of collecting, presenting, and analysing data in a legitimate way to pave way for deep and rich understandings of what is going on in real world contexts. Although there exist multiple variations of case study, this research makes use of an explanatory approach. Yin (2014) states that this approach focuses on explaining how a phenomenon manifests and why it manifests as it does. This approach requires the researcher to collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures which are drawn from multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2014, p. 14).

Number of cases or sites included in case study research is a pertinent question that arises in accordance with this methodology. The literature identifies that the sample size selection should not necessarily be based on numbers (Morrow, 2005). Rather, it depends on the problem at hand, what will provide credibility, the resources available, and what the research aims to find out (Patton, 2002). Centrally, the richness of the data collected is what is most significant (Patton, 2002) and once the research questions were considered, it was decided that multiple sites would provide the greatest insight into the problem.

Multi-site case study research differs to traditional case study in that it moves beyond a focus on an in-depth study of a single site. Rather, similar methods are employed across multiple sites, helping to overcome limitations and criticisms associated with the case study methodology more broadly. As Jenkins *et al.* (2018, p. 1969) state, 'mulitsite qualitative case studies have aimed to enhance transferability and trustworthiness of findings in other contexts by comparing data across sites, while preserving the site-specific understandings foundational to the methodology'.

This study therefore utilises an established approach that 'involves collecting and analysing data from several cases' or sites which is argued to facilitate a stronger and more compelling

interpretation (Merriam, 1998, p. 40). This also strengthens the accuracy and credibility of interpretations (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

3.4.5. Case Protocol

Yin (2017) asserts that a case protocol is central to guiding the case study approach and is especially useful in studies that extend beyond single sites. An overview of the case study protocol anchoring this research is provided in table 6.

Table 6. Case study guiding protocol

Guiding research questions	*How has SSE policy been enacted in the Irish primary context?* *How did context shape the enactment of SSE policy in the Irish primary context?*
Guiding theoretical framework	Develop tentative explanations from SSE literature, Irish primary literature, and policy enactment theory
Collect data	Recruit schools using selection criteria (see section 3.4.5) and collect various forms of qualitative data (see section 3.5)
Analyse evidence 1	Deductive within-site analysis (Bingham, 2023)
Product 1	Individual site reports explaining *how SSE policy was enacted* and *how context shaped enactment?* Strong citation of evidence
Analyse evidence 2	Inductive cross-site analysis (Glaser, 1965)
Product 2	Evidence informed themes applicable at the level of the case

3.4.6. Site Selection

In case study research, it is paramount that cases be clearly defined and bound (Yin, 2017) with Merriam (1998, p. 27) arguing that the 'single most defining characteristic of case study lies in delimiting the object of study'. In this instance, the target bounded system, is defined as the mainstream Irish primary school context situated in the Dublin Area. This decision was made

due to their existing more than 3,000 primary schools in Ireland and the implausibility of researching all of these sites. Consequently, the research was limited to the Dublin area.

While the above definition pertains to the case, it was also decided that due to the nature of the research questions, the inclusion of multiple sites would be necessary. This was so that findings and subsequent interpretations were trustworthy and hold the potential to be transferable and carry broader applicability (Punch, 2005). In this research, while all sites are primary schools located within the Dublin area, sites included within the broader case were sought based on several differentiated characteristics. These included variations in ethos, size, location, demographic, and degree of engagement with the SSE process.

Variations sought in relation to ethos included schools with a Catholic ethos, a Church of Ireland Ethos, and at least one other category of school ethos. For size, small (>150 pupils), medium (150 – 400 pupils), and large schools (>400) were sought for inclusion. Regarding location, variations included urban, suburban, and rural schools alongside the inclusion of DEIS schools. For degree of engagement with SSE policy, all qualities of engagement with the process were sought so that a rounded interpretation of enactment could be attained. Thus, it was not necessary to require that the schools had engaged with SSE to a particularly strong degree. This was on account of all schools being mandated to engage in the SSE process since 2012. Even where potential participants described uncertainty about the quality of their engagement with the process, they were reassured that they would offer great value to the research endeavour by presenting an account of the reality of SSE in their schools.

To achieve such a sample, the sampling approach was particularistic and purposeful. Merriam (1998) differentiates particularistic case study from heuristic and descriptive case studies in that they focus on a particular phenomenon which is illuminated by engagement with the specific contexts. With respect to the purposeful nature of the research, this is a central aspect of

qualitative methodologies, with Morrow determining that qualitative research samples are always purposeful (Morrow, 2005).

Emmel (2014) identifies that there are different interpretations of what purposeful sampling can be, however. This research takes the approach provided by Michael Quinn Patton (2002) in which he argues that, although theory is significant in the research, a theoretical underpinning is not paramount at this stage of research. Rather, by drawing on purpose, context, and audience, we can justifiably do what is practical and pragmatic in making decisions to answer the research questions (Emmel, 2013).

What was practical and pragmatic in this instance was to provide what Patton (2002, p. 230) describes as information-rich cases and where access was possible and ethical (Crowe *et al.*, 2011). To do so, the specific purposeful sampling approach chosen was maximum variation sampling. Maximum variation sampling looks 'at capturing and describing the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of participant or program variation' and portrays the uniqueness of each case in descriptive detail while also portraying shared patterns of significance' across sites (Patton, 2002, pp. 234-235). The strengths of this specific approach lie in that it enables the elucidation of each site's individual and unique experience, while also allowing us to capture commonalities across sites (Emmel, 2013).

Finally, case study requires that participating sites are in a position to engage with the research and as such, access was a very significant consideration (Crowe *et al.*, 2011). While nine research sites were identified as viable with regard to the maximum variation sampling criteria, two schools which had agreed to take part were not included in the research. This was due to a combination of access and ethical issues. In the schools, the principal was the only staff member who was in a position to take part. Consequently, research was not undertaken at these sites as gathering a wide perspective of enactment would not be feasible.

It is of further note that this project was undertaken in line with the principle of 'point of redundancy' presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Here, once an adequately rich picture of the phenomenon had been determined in line with the selection criteria, the empirical fieldwork concluded. Sites included and the constituent categories of their make-up are displayed in table 14 at the end of this chapter.

3.5. Data Collection Methods for Each Site

To provide a high-quality data set from which the research could rigorously achieve its aims, various methods of data collection to be undertaken at each site were considered. Case study research does not identify any specific methods of collection or analysis, but the goal of the research should drive method selection (Merriam, 1998). The research questions in this study ultimately seek explanation with regard to the how and why of SSE policy in context and as such, qualitative data was chosen as the most appropriate approach.

Qualitative research often centres on speech (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), and this is the case in this research where semi-structured interviews and focus groups are utilised to capture the perspectives, beliefs, experiences, and attitudes that school staff held regarding SSE, its enactment, and the shaping influence of context on this. Furthermore, relevant documents were collected at each site to strengthen the evidence available (Bowen, 2009). This choice was based on the argument that multiple sources of data enhances internal validity in case study research (Crowe *et al.*, 2011).

In summary, the specific sources of data collected for each site included interview data, focus group data, and data from relevant documents including school improvement plans, and externally compiled evaluation reports. The data collection plan and sources are presented in table 7.

Table 7. Data type and source for each site

Data type	Source
Interview	Principal
Interview	SSE Lead
Focus group	Teachers
Document	WSE & WSE MLL

3.5.1. Recruitment

After completing the ethical approval process, participant recruitment was undertaken. This point in the research involved significant planning to enlist participants successfully and ethically against a backdrop of increasing workload and research fatigue in the context. Research fatigue is an increasingly appreciated challenge of research defined as 'a state of psychological and emotional exhaustion both towards and as a result of research participation' (Ashley, 2021, p. 271). Considerations of research fatigue are important from an ethical perspective. These considerations need to be taken in intensely researched areas and areas that experience occupational burnout. The Irish primary context can be interpreted as such an area. As such, it was a key consideration for the researcher.

To begin the recruitment process, an email describing the research was sent to all schools in the Dublin area with a flyer attached explaining the research. Email addresses were secured from publicly available data on the DE website. Overall, 442 schools were contacted. Using this approach, two schools meeting the requirements immediately agreed to take part in the research. Following this, the researcher began to phone schools in follow up phone calls to identify suitable participants. This resulted in a further nine schools meeting the participation criteria agreeing to give the researcher an unprecedented level of access to the inner workings of SSE in their schools.

Once agreement to participate had been reached with the principal, through phone and email

contact, each school identified participants that would add value to the research in their taking part. Initially, each school was asked to provide an interview with the school principal and SSE lead while an ideal constitution of focus group was designed and communicated with the principal. This was to comprise of at least one teacher on the school's ISM, at least one teacher not part of the school's ISM, and at least one SET.

While this guided participant recruitment, this constitution was not possible in all sites. Such a challenge is commonplace in recruitment of participants for qualitative research and it has been called for in the literature for 'researchers to be flexible, innovative, and persistent, despite the challenges faced, and to use recruitment strategies tailored to the individual needs of the target population' (Perez *et al.*, 2022, p. 29).

As the researcher sought to capture the contextual realities of enacting SSE policy, it was decided that recruitment of participants would need to be considered on a site by site basis and through further liaising with the school principal and potential participating staff. For instance, in some of the larger schools, it was possible to include a larger number of participants in focus groups. Comparatively, in a school with only three staff members, the entire staff participated, while in the other small school in the sample, it was only possible to engage two of the four staff members.

As such, the approach taken took into consideration the research objectives and the school's own needs and requirements in relation to release and time tabling for instance. The final constitution of participants for each site is presented in table 14. Informed consent was attained from each of the participants in each school before data collection commenced.

3.5.2. Interview and Focus Group

Evidence concerning the SSE process in the schools was collected from semi-structured interviews with principals, semi-structured interviews with the SSE lead, and focus groups with teachers. The inclusion of multiple perspectives allowed for rich and deep insights and enabled the comparison and corroboration of perspectives and experiences in each site.

Both approaches to data collection used a schedule of open-ended questions (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The rationale for using interview with principals and SSE leads was due to their significance in the literature in relation to SSE. Interviews were understood in line with Brenner's (2006, p. 357) framing in 'which the intent is to understand informants on their own terms and how they make meaning of their own lives, experiences, and cognitive processes'. In finality, the principal and SSE lead was interviewed in all sites. In some sites however, the principal was also the SSE lead. In this instance, the additional features of the SSE lead interview protocol were utilised with the principal.

The rationale for using focus group as a means of gathering data from staff was so that, firstly, the voice of teachers would be captured, enabling wider perspectives and a stronger representation and insight regarding SSE policy as it was enacted at each site, and secondly, to capture a group perspective. In this, participant interaction was particularly useful in exploring 'not only what people think but how and why they think that way' (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299).

In some sites, due to constraints of time and staff responsibilities, it was necessary for the researcher to be reflexive to the needs of the participating schools. Consequently, some teaching staff members were interviewed as opposed to being part of a focus group. Such flexibility is argued as a necessary facet of multi-site case study research. Crowe *et al.* (2011, p. 6) for instance suggest that data gathered in such a scenario needs to be 'broadly comparable for this purpose even though they may vary in nature and depth'. Ultimately, what was sought was a clear picture of SSE policy as it was enacted in each site. This was possible by ensuring that a stratified sample of actors were included for each site and by ensuring that further documentary analysis was undertaken to bolster the pool of evidence (Bowen, 2009). Interview and focus group data collected at each site is presented in table 8 below.

Table 8. Data gathered through interview and focus group at each site

School	Data source 1	Data source 2	Data Source 3
Scoil na nÓg	Principal/SSE lead interview	Focus group	NA
Churchtown	Principal/SSE lead interview	Focus group	NA
Longfield	Principal/SSE lead interview	Focus group	Focus group
Brisk	Principal/SSE lead interview	Focus group	NA
St. Cormac's	Principal/SSE lead interview	Focus group	NA
Riverway	Principal interview	SSE lead interview	Teacher/ISM member interview
St. Paul's	Principal/SSE lead interview	Teacher/ISM member interview	NA
Scoil Mairtín Buachaillí	Principal interview	SSE lead interview	Focus group
Scoil Breandán	Principal interview	SSE lead interview	Teacher/ISM member interview

3.5.3. Interview and Focus Group Schedule Development

In the development of the interview and focus group protocols, the researcher was guided by the case study protocol (Yin, 2017) which was itself informed by the research questions, the literature review, and the theoretical framework. This allowed for the development of relevant topics to be explored which were broken down into questions that would yield insight in respect of the research objectives. These were then crafted into questions that were appropriately framed for participants (Kvarle, 2007).

Pertinent topics for exploration identified by the researcher related to two broad areas. Topic one pertained to *SSE at the site* with topic two pertaining to *the influence of context at the site*. SSE at the site was further broken down into questions the researcher sought to understand and were targeted toward the *who, what, when, where* and *how* of SSE policy at each site (Honig *et al.*, 2009). Adjacently, the influence of context was structured explicitly in line with the theoretical framework. Here, questions were designed to capture perspectives relating to the influence of external context, the influence of professional culture, the influence of material context, and the influence of situated context, as per Ball, Maguire and Braun's (2012) contextual dimensions of policy enactment. Table 9 below provides an example of the stated approach.

Table 9. Interview and focus group protocol development

Research question	How has SSE policy been enacted in the school?	How has context shaped the enactment of SSE policy?
Broad topic	SSE at the site	Influence of context at the site
Sample researcher question	Who is involved in enacting SSE policy in the school?	How did the professional culture shape the enactment of SSE policy?
Sample participant questions	What does SSE look like in this school? What is your role in SSE? Is anyone not involved in SSE?	Is SSE a collaborative process here? How so? What is the role of leadership in SSE? Is SSE worthwhile? Why?

Protocols were adjusted depending on whether they were guiding the principal interview, SSE lead interview, or focus group with teachers. The protocol for the principal interview explored the topics of *school context*; *SSE in the school*; *the participant's role in SSE*; *skills and knowledge for SSE in the school*; *enablers and barriers to SSE*; *impacts arising from SSE*; *conditions for successful SSE*; and an opportunity to add anything they felt was not captured. Principal interviews were designed to last about one hour.

The protocol for the SSE lead, which was in some instances also the principal, involved exploration of the above topics but also included questions relating to *the focus of SSE*; *evidence gathering, analysis, and judgement*; *writing and sharing improvement plan and identifying actions; the taking of, monitoring, and evaluation of actions*; *the perceived impacts of SSE*; questions relating to the school's most recently completed SIP document specifically; and an

opportunity to add anything they felt was not captured. These interviews were designed to last about one hour and twenty minutes.

Topics explored in the focus groups included *SSE in the school*; *the participants' role in SSE*; *experiences in, awareness of, and skills for SSE*; *perceived impacts of SSE*; *attitudes towards SSE*; *enablers and barriers to SSE*; and an opportunity to add anything they felt was not captured. These focus groups were designed to last less than one hour.

While all questions on the protocols were asked in all interviews and focus groups, follow up questions were also asked to gain deeper insight from participants (Kvarle, 2007). These questions varied depending on participant answers.

3.5.4. School Improvement Plan, WSE Report, and WSE MLL Report

McCulloch (2004, p. 1) states in strong terms that to '…understand documents is to read between the lines of our material world'. As a result, documents were seen as being highly valuable in addressing the research aims. As determined by Bowen (2009, p. 28), documents provide data that has not been influenced by the researcher and are useful in helping the researcher 'corroborate findings across data sets and this reduce the impact of potential biases that can exist in a single study'. As such, documents gathered provided additional insights and sources of evidence with regard to SSE policy in the schools.

The specific document types collected included all available school improvement plans (SIP) at each of the nine sites with Whole School Evaluation (WSE) reports and Whole School Evaluation Middle Leadership and Management (WSE MLL) reports gathered at sites where these had been undertaken. Documents created pre-2012 were excluded from the data set. While WSE and WSE MLL reports were available in some sites, these had not been undertaken by the Inspectorate in every school during the time period from 2012 up until the point of research. As such, these documents were not available for analysis in five sites. While exclusion of these documents was considered for consistency, these were included in the analysis as they provided additional

valuable sources of information for the schools in which they were available. Documentary

evidence gathered at each site is presented in table 10.

Table 10. Documentary evidence gathered from each site

School	SIP	WSE	WSE MLL
Scoil na nÓg	✓	✗	✗
Churchtown	✓	✓	✓
Longfield	✓	✓	✓
Brisk	✓	✗	✗
St. Cormac's	✓	✓	✗
Riverway	✓	✓	✗
St. Paul's	✓	✓	✓
Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí	✓	✗	✗
Scoil Breandán	✓	✗	✗

The use of documents in the analysis performed several functions. Firstly, documents were utilised to support and inform the interviews and focus groups undertaken at each site. For example, site-specific questions were developed based on SIPs relating to why certain focus areas or actions were chosen at the site. This allowed for participant confirmation, reflection, and discussion based on the documentary evidence.

Secondly, documents provided descriptive data which were drawn upon to inform the descriptions of SSE developed at each site. Here, aspects such as the overall timeline in which SSE was engaged with or the specific targets chosen were included in each of the site reports.

Finally, documents were included in the formal analysis for each research site. This involved the inclusion of documents in the coding process at the data analysis stage (see section 3.6). For instance, WSE and WSE MLL reports provided insights into the quality of SSE in the school which fed into the formation of site reports which included explicit reference to this data. This allowed the researcher to garner new insights and also allowed for corroboration with accounts provided by participants in the interviews and focus groups.

3.6. Data Preparation and Analysis

A hugely significant consideration arose in how to make sense of the data collected. Pistrang and Barker (2012) identify multiple means of approaching the analysis of data. These include thematic analysis, narrative approaches, language-based approaches, and ethnographic approaches. While the current analysis is qualitative in nature, the multi-site case study design requires additional consideration to ensure rigor and clarity in communication of methods employed.

This is due to the large volume of data that is collected in the multi-site case study design which is both a challenge and a strength. To succeed in such an approach, it is suggested that data be analysed in individual sites in the first instance before it is compared across sites (Crowe *et al.*,

2011; Jenkins *et al.*, 2018). This was the approach utilised in this research where an initial within-site analysis identified site specific findings. Following this, a cross-site analysis was undertaken to establish themes that were applicable to the case (Miles, 1982; Eisenhardt, 1989; Jenkins *et al.*, 2018).

Because of the complexity of the study, an organising framework was chosen and was structured in line with an approach outlined by Bingham (2023) in the International Journal of Qualitative Methods entitled From Data Management to Actionable Findings: A Five-Phase Process of Qualitative Data Analysis. This flexible approach is strongly grounded in analytical approaches that are well established in the tradition of qualitative research. Each step is outlined in the coming sections.

3.6.1. Phase 1: Organising the Data

The first step in the analytic process involved engagement with documents collected from the research sites. These were collected prior to interviews and focus groups and were engaged with following Bowen's (2009) description of documentary analysis. Here, an initial skimming took place before the documents were read thoroughly and notes made with regard to questions that would be asked in interviews and focus groups. While documents were also formally coded, this did not occur until after the interview and focus group evidence had been gathered at each site.

Once fieldwork had been undertaken, transcription of the interview and focus group recordings was completed. Here, audio recordings from interviews and focus groups were transcribed in Word immediately after its collection at each site. Interview and focus group data was transcribed verbatim, with the original authenticity maintained, and no alterations made to the original recordings.

Once composed, these transcripts were read through in their entirety and along with the site documents were uploaded to Nvivo and organised by site. Here, an initial deductive analysis was conducted on all of the data collected at each site (Bingham, 2023). This involved applying

attribute coding to the transcripts and to the documentary evidence collected at each site. Attribute codes were developed as a priori categories to organise the data by site and included data type (Interview/Focus group/SIP/WSE/WSE MLL), participant identification (Role identifier/Participant number), location (School Pseudonym), and research date. While this facilitated organisation of the data for subsequent analysis, this initial coding also allowed for familiarisation with the data set (Bingham, 2023).

3.6.2. Phase 2: Sorting the Data

Phase two then involved further deductive analysis whereby data were aligned with the research questions, research purpose, and theoretical framework (Crowe *et al.*, 2011; Bowen 2009; Yin, 2017). In this vein, *SSE in Practice* and *Influence of Context* provided broad codes by which the evidence was organised for each site. Each transcript and document underwent coding based on these topic codes on a site by site basis. Applying these codes to the evidence gathered at each site was required as it facilitated an integration of data sourced through different methods (Bowen, 2009). Furthermore, this process focused the analysis by identifying data that was most pertinent to the study objectives (Bingham, 2023).

To further focus the analysis, these broad topic codes were next examined with respect of a priori categories that were formulated by the researcher based on the overall theoretical framework and research questions (Yin, 2017). Concerning broad topic *SSE in practice*, topics were further broken down into sub topics of *how was SSE enacted*; *who enacted SSE policy*; *when was SSE enacted*; *where was SSE policy enacted*; *what was the focus of SSE*; *what were the impacts of SSE*. Concerning broad topic *influence of context*, the data was sorted in accordance with the contextual dimensions of policy enactment as established in the theoretical framework. These included *influence of external context*, *influence of professional culture*, *influence of material context*, and *influence of situated context*.

Table 11. Coded sample for code 'influence of situated context'

Code	Coded extract
'Influence of Situated Context'	we needed to make that transition to more playful pedagogy that just is central to the whole of the infant school (P01, P)
	we learned very quickly that we can do a lot of our teaching through that Aistear process (P03, CT/AP1)
	I do find it hard to hear the voice of the children because they're so young (P01, P)

3.6.3. Phase 3: Understanding the Data

Multi-site case study researchers often advocate for an initial within-site analysis before a further cross-site analysis is undertaken (Yin, 1981; Miles, 1982; Crowe *et al.*, 2011). This argument is presented as such an approach allows the researcher to maintain contextual specificity initially before 'enhanced applicability' is achieved in comparing findings across sites (Jenkins *et al.*, 2018). This was a key aim of this research project.

In phase three therefore, the data had been organised and sorted for each of the nine sites by means of a deductive analytical approach. Then, it was possible to begin to interpret for meaning the data on a site by site basis. This involved the production of rich, explanatory, narrative site reports replete with vivid extracts and examples. These are presented in chapter four. The process of moving from coded data to site report involved an iterative explanation building approach (Yin, 2017). This involved the comparison of all deductively coded data against the initial researcher questions. The layout of each of the nine site reports aligned with the a priori analytical framework applied (Yin, 2017) and is presented in table 12 below.

Table 12. Layout of site report

Contextual Information and SSE in Practice

Site Name

Site Profile

Account of SSE in Practice

SSE Timeline (table)

Overview of Most Recent Process (Table)

Sample Targets and Actions from SIP (Table)

The shaping Influence of Context

Features of Context that Shaped Enactment (Table)

External Context

Professional Culture

Material Context

Situated Context

Following this, the cross-site analysis was undertaken. This process involved utilising Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method of analysis, as recommended by Bingham (2023). This was especially useful due to there being a large number of research sites in the case and variations in some of the influential features observed between these sites. Key in this approach is the comparison of incidents applicable to each category identified in the analysis up until this point. Here, Glaser (1965, p. 439) determines that insights can be garnered by 'coding an incident for a category' and 'compare it with the previous incidents coded in the same category'.

To progress from deductively coded data, which had provided the researcher with a very strong degree of familiarisation with the data, the researcher engaged in an inductive coding approach. Here, the researcher 'reads through the data in each category, creating, defining, and applying codes as they read' (Bingham, 2023, p. 6). This enabled the researcher to code widely and capture

not only how SSE policy was enacted or what features of context were influential, but also highlighted the specific shaping influence that each of these features exerted.

With coded data pertaining to the category of *Role of principal* for instance, the shaping influence was repeatedly coded for, enabling the researcher to 'generate theoretical properties of the category' (Glaser, 1965, p. 439). Here, it was possible to identify the properties *Principal enables* or *Principal constrains* (see table 13) and to record specific instances and qualities of these instances as they arose in the data. This comparison was undertaken for each category in the data set, allowing for the identification of the clear properties for each category.

Table 13. Cross-site inductive coding example

Code	Coded extract examples
'Principal enables'	I'm determined to keep it going…I have to say it's a fantastic tool (P27, P, Scoil Máirtín Buachallí) the principal, makes a big deal about that every month (P30, CT, Scoil Máirtín Buachallí)
'Principal constrains'	I just don't believe it's a two-year cycle or a one-year cycle thing (P31, P, Scoil Breandán) it doesn't need to be this big palaver - oh you have to start a cycle and it goes on for this long and…it's happening all the time (P31, P, Scoil Breandán)

3.6.4. Phase 4: Interpreting the Data

To interpret the inductive codes and to ascertain meaning, it was then necessary to turn inductive codes into patters, and patterns into themes. To achieve this, Glaser (1965) suggests integrating

categories and their properties. This involves the researcher creating memos and concept maps in an effort to draw logical conclusions based on the data. By repeating this process across all categories, clear patterns began to emerge and it was possible to further refine the overall properties of each category by drawing on the theoretical framework as an analytical apparatus.

With this, by continually aiming for a higher level of abstraction, it was possible to observe clear patterns in the data. For example, in each category of context, it became apparent that there were three consistent shaping influences regarding the enactment of SSE policy. These included that each category could *promote school improvement*, *promote compliance*, or *promote an avoidance or alternative approach* in the enactment of SSE policy. For instance, with respect to the principal's enabling or constraining influence coded above, the properties of *Principal promotes school improvement*, *principal promotes compliance*, or *principal promotes an avoidance or alternative approach* were possible to define.

3.6.5. Phase 5: Explaining the Data

Bingham (2023) advocates for a systematic approach to explaining the data in the final phase and Glaser's approach to delimiting and writing the theory was employed to achieve this. Here Glaser (1965, p. 441, emphasis in original) determines that a reduction in complexity amongst categories is first necessary and states, 'By reduction I mean that a higher level, *smaller* set of concepts, based on the discovering underlying uniformities in the original set of categories or their properties' are developed.

Here each category was aligned with a broader category. For instance, the codes *Other policies promoted school improvement* and *SSE policy promoted school improvement* were combined under the code *National policy context promoted school improvement*. This approach of abstraction was taken as far as possible. For example, the code *National policy context promoted school improvement* was combined with the codes *External agents and agencies promoted school improvement* and *Broader national context promoted school improvement*. This allowed the

researcher to create an encapsulating top level code defined as *External context promoted school improvement* which was applicable at the level of the case.

When this process was applied to all codes, the development of themes was achieved 'by synthesising the remaining inductive codes into theme statements that describe the patterns seen in the data' (Bingham, 2023, p. 7). For instance, the codes *External context promoted school improvement*, *External context promoted compliance*, and *External context promoted avoidance or an alternative approach* were synthesised with the shaping influences observed in the Material and Situated Context. This created the final theme entitled *The shaping influence of external, material, and situated context* for example. Themes are presented in chapter five, cross-site findings.

The final step in the process involved the writing of the theory. Here, the six themes developed were explained in relation to the underpinning theoretical framework and pertinent literature. This facilitated the development of a literature and theory-based discussion chapter presented in chapter six. Here, each of the six themes were explored for alignment and novelty with respect to the established body of knowledge. From this, the researcher was able to provide an overall interpretation concerning the study's research questions. In this, the researcher presented two propositions that emerged from the overall process of analysis. These theoretical propositions are entitled 'The Enactment of SSE Policy is Shaped Deeply by Context' and 'Context Orientates the Enactment of SSE Policy' and are presented and explained to the reader in chapter seven.

3.7. Research Integrity and Ethical Considerations

Central to quality research are reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability (Fondation Européenne de la science and Allea, 2011, p. 4). This research aims for the highest standards of integrity and good practice in research. Resultantly, the researcher holds the eight basic principles of research integrity and good practice, as defined by the European Code of Conduct for Research, as integral to each decision made in the project. To avoid pitfalls in these areas, the researcher followed the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for

Educational Research (BERA, 2018) and the European Commission European Textbook on Research Ethics (European Commission. Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture., 2010). The research project has also been granted ethical approval by the DCU Research Ethics Committee.

Ethics, 'the moral principle and guiding conduct, which are held by a group or even a profession' (Wellington, 2015, p. 113), is a central component of consideration in research. Several philosophical perspectives of morality must be engaged with in designing research (Smeyers and Depaepe, 2018, p. 1). These include the arguments presented in dealing with ethical decision-making including utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, and ethics of care, with each offering insight into the necessary conditions by which the research can be conducted in an ethical manner of the highest standard (European Commission. Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture., 2010). Above all else, this research is conducted with due respect for the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of the research, and academic freedom (BERA, 2018, p. 4).

Wellington (2015, p. 113) identifies five areas where ethical considerations are important during research. These include in the design, the methods, the analysis, the presentation, and the findings while Burgess (1989) identifies four ethical considerations for educational research specifically. These include research sponsorship, research relations, informed consent, and data dissemination. The integrity and ethical considerations as they pertain to the current project are delineated in the following paragraphs.

3.7.1. Participants

Even though the research was determined to be low level during the DCU ethics process, Ashley (2021) determines that three significant ethical principles are relevant to consider in regard to participants. These are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. In terms of respect for persons, the research was designed to be as unintrusive as possible. It was decided that, due to

the demanding nature of the work that schools are currently engaged in, the research would be as short as possible in time length for each individual participant and that any identifying data relating to the participant or school would not be removed from the study.

In terms of beneficence, the potential benefits and harms had to be considered at all decision points. In sum, it is argued that although the research may add to the research fatigue of some individuals, informed consent would allow each participant to make their own decision to partake. Alongside this, the research is argued to provide significant benefits to the Irish primary education system as the reality of contextualised practice can now be better appreciated. With this, it is anticipated that the research can provide a benefit of progressing justice for the participants. Through the research, school staff can share the realities, challenges, and complexities of their work, and with this, a more appropriate conversation can occur around SSE in Irish primary schools.

3.7.2. Consent and Right to Withdraw

Valid consent is founded on adequate information, voluntariness, and competence (European Commission. Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture., 2010, p. 37). Participants have been made aware that they have the right to withdraw at any point, for any or no reason. This is outlined in the informed consent form, which all participants read and signed before taking part. Informed consent 'refers to the voluntary consent of the individuals to participate in research' (Burgess, 1989, p. 5). Here participants 'understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway' (BERA, 2018, p. 5).

3.7.3. Handling of Data

Participant data was treated confidentially and with anonymity. Data was stored in accordance with data protection law and participants were made aware of where it was to be held, who had access, and for what it would be used. Data was recorded clearly and accurately with integrity

and held with the highest regard to security (Research Integrity National Forum, 2014). This procedure was outlined in the informed consent form.

3.7.4. Methods

'Researchers must employ methods that are fit for the purpose of the research they are undertaking' (BERA, 2018, p. 9) and full transparency regarding these has been described in this methodology chapter.

3.7.5. Interpretation of Data

Interpretation of data is a key stage in the research process where steps must be taken to ensure credibility and integrity. These steps are outlined in the data preparation and analysis sections in conjunction with the research quality section.

3.7.6. Publication

Findings will be made available publicly for consideration of educational researchers, professionals, and policy makers. Participants are made aware of this in the informed consent form.

3.8. Research Quality

In any research endeavour, it is paramount that steps are taken to ensure the research is appropriately undertaken and the claims it makes are of the highest quality. In the positivist paradigm, validity and reliability are identified as the most significant aspects of quality to consider. Reliability relates to 'the idea of replicability or repeatability of results or observations' (Golafshani, 2003, p. 599) and validity relates to the idea of whether the result measures what it truly seeks to measure. These concepts do not transfer directly to qualitative research, however. In the current study, several considerations are taken to assure the quality of the research. These

are articulated within the concept of trustworthiness which Shenton (2004) argues to contain the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

3.8.1. Credibility

Credibility aligns somewhat with the positivist conception of internal validity. Here, we seek to establish findings that align with reality (Merriam, 1998). Shenton (2004) presents several means of enhancing credibility in research. The first involves utilising well established methods of research. This research employs a multi-site case study research methodology that is underpinned by a strong epistemological and ontological framework. In addition, the specific methodological choices, such as using data collection and analytic approaches for instance, are aligned with tried and tested theory.

Next, Shenton describes the necessity of developing an understanding of the culture of the participating organisations in advance of data collection. Due to the researcher's experience working in a variety of Irish primary schools from various professional perspectives, a strong understanding of culture was carried into the research. For instance, qualitative research is seen to be enhanced when the researcher has long-term engagement with the research contexts, and this can be said of the researcher in this instance who has spent over ten years working in and with Irish primary schools. This is significant in that the researcher was the instrument of data collection and interpretation in the research.

Random sampling is suggested to be a means of enhancing credibility in that it enables the inclusion of a wide variety of voices in the research. Although each site was purposefully selected based on a set of inclusion criteria, a wide variety of participants were engaged in each study from school leadership and teaching staff. In this research multiple data gathering methods are employed including interview, focus group, and from documents. Furthermore, perspectives are gathered from various actors. In addition, multiple sites are included and are comparatively analysed enabling development of theory.

Participants were chosen based on their willingness to take part and share their honest insights. This was communicated in the informed consent form. With this, honesty in response is argued to be enhanced by those who were willing to take part. Iterative questioning was used in addition to cross reference points of contention that arose for the researcher at each site. Debriefing sessions between the researcher and his supervisors who have expertise in the field provided further credibility in that flaws and further opportunities for rigour and insight were obtained. Peer scrutiny of the research was also embraced by engagement with research conferences where further insights and critique were extrapolated.

The aim of the research was to provide thick and rich description of SSE across multiple sites. In provision of this, credibility is enhanced in that cases become transparent and accessible for those reading the research. Finally, a strong engagement with the research literature was undertaken before, during, and after the collection and analysis of data. This situated the work in established knowledge and enabled the researcher to relate findings to those previously outlined in the field.

3.8.2. Transferability

Transferability relates to the application of findings to other contexts outside of those researched and aligns with the idea of external validity (Merriam, 1998). Shenton (2004) outlines that the wider qualitative literature insists that extreme care be taken in this. However, once a strong degree of credibility has been achieved, it is argued that the reader of the research can make use of the research findings to draw on insights that are applicable to their own research or practical contexts.

3.8.3. Dependability

Dependability is the concept that should the research be undertaken again in an identical fashion, the findings and results will be aligned. For this, it is presented by Shenton that qualitative theorists have argued for the significance of ensuring high degrees of credibility in research. This

is particularly so in relation to the design and undertaking of data collection and analysis where all details should be reported. This has been undertaken in the course of this chapter.

3.8.4. Confirmability

Confirmability relates to the objectivity achieved in judgements made by the researcher. Here it is important to ensure that the researcher's bias does not infiltrate the research and that findings reflect accurately the evidence gathered in the field. The specific approaches taken in this research involved the researcher's efforts to make their biases and preconceptions explicit before and during the research along with the development of a research design that sought to make all decisions and approaches taken transparent.

3.9. Researcher Positionality and the Reflexive Process

Positionality relates to the worldview and standpoint held by the researcher (Rowe, 2014). As stated earlier, ontological and epistemological perspective influences any research (Morrow, 2005; Bourke, 2014; Holmes, 2020). This is very much so in the realms of qualitative research where the idea of self as research instrument takes prominence. Qualitative researchers accept that data collection and analysis in the paradigm are subjective processes (Morrow, 2005). Bourke outlines the argument that research is a process that features reflection at each point in the endeavour. This should involve considerations of our own position and the position of participants in the research (Bourke, 2014). It is also necessary not make assumptions about a participant's perspective (Holmes, 2020).

Resultantly, the current research was undertaken with consideration given to the researcher's own position, the position of participants, the nature of the research, and possible repercussions of this for the data gathered and its analysis. To achieve this, the research was undertaken in a reflexive way. In summarising Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011), Holmes (2020, p. 2) describes reflexivity as 'the concept that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their selves in their research, seeking to understand their part in it, or influence on it'. Reflexivity

requires that we reflect on the influence we are having on the research as we are undertaking it. In sum, by making implicit bias explicit, we can enhance rigour (Morrow, 2005).

Before the research was undertaken, the researcher identified several areas that needed to be considered. A key aspect of researcher positionality existed in the position held relevant to the research participants. In this study, the researcher perceived themselves to be in a fluid position where perception of insider/outsider varied by situation (Yip, 2024). This scenario arose from the researchers' experiences as teacher and deputy principal but also held the position of outsider in the specific contexts in which the research was undertaken.

For instance, the researcher was a primary school teacher for several years prior the research and the researcher had experience in leadership roles. This, of course, goes much of the way in explaining the interest in undertaking the research but also has resultant repercussions that must be acknowledged. It was identified that due to the researcher having had experience with undertaking the phenomenon in his own work, many preconceived notions could exist. It was therefore of high importance that these were interrogated prior to the collection and interpretation of data to maintain integrity in the research. Therefore, it was necessary that assumptions, beliefs, and judgements were scrutinised at all points in the process through 'observation and reflection, and through interaction with colleagues' (Attia and Edge, 2017, p. 36).

Even with this being the case, the researcher concomitantly held the position of outsider in that the researcher was not a member of any of the research sites. This meant that efforts to ensure that the researcher gained strong understandings of each research sites was necessary and that participant responses needed to be considered in light of a variety of evidence types collected at each site. From the outset, it was intended that the research be undertaken in as objective a fashion as possible. Additionally, no assumptions were accepted in the data collection process. Instead, the research interviews were undertaken from a position of 'naïve inquirer' (Morrow, 2005, p. 254). This involved clarifying perspectives and going into great depth around areas of interest.

Importantly, the researcher had engaged with alternative perspectives by engaging deeply with the literature for many years prior to undertaking empirical work. Furthermore, the research was conducted in schools where the researcher was unknown.

3.10. Multi-Site Case Study Overview

In this section, an overview of the schools involved in the research is presented. The format undertaken is structured with consideration to the research objectives. This required the presentation of a school profile, a description of the process in the school, and a description of impact that became apparent in the data gathered. All schools met the selection criteria in that they were all mainstream Irish primary schools in the Dublin Area. This meant that the schools shared several significant characteristics. For instance, all schools operated under the direction of the DE, all schools were mainstream schools for primary aged pupils, and all schools utilised the same curriculum. Central to this research, all schools had been mandated to undertake SSE since 2012.

Correspondingly, schools also have many differences. These include the location, the size and enrolment numbers, demographic constitution, the school ethos and patron, the number and composition of staff, and the community in which they operated. All schools were asked to give access to leadership and teaching staff and, due to many variables, the constitution of participants differed somewhat between research sites. All schools and participants were given pseudonyms to protect anonymity. A profile of the sites within the case study is provided in table 14 and an overview of the case is provided in table 15.

In finality, nine school sites were included in the research. The data collection process took between one and two days in each research site but involved several weeks of interaction with each school. The overall timeframe for the recruitment of participants was two months from March to May 2022. Prior to site visits, school improvement planning documents were gathered via email from school principals and the researcher collected reports from the DE website. Data

was then collected during site visits organised by the researcher and at the convenience of the

school principal and the research participants.

Table 14. **Overview of sites**

Sites (n=9)	School location	School Ethos	Pupil enrolment	Staff size (Principals, teachers, SETs)	Participants
Churchtown	Urban	Church of Ireland	27	2.5	(3) Principal/Teacher Deputy/Teacher SET
Scoil na nÓg	Urban	Catholic	371	19	(4) Principal Deputy/Teacher Teacher SET
Brisk	Rural	Catholic	735	44	(5) Principal Deputy SET SET Teacher
Longfield	Urban	Church of Ireland	225	12	(6) Principal Deputy/SET Teacher Teacher Teacher Teacher

Sites (n=9)	School location	School Ethos	Pupil enrolment	Staff size (Principals, teachers, SETs)	Participants
Riverway	Urban	Educate Together	381	18.2	(3) Principal Deputy/SET Teacher
St. Cormac's	Urban	Catholic, DEIS band 1	290	22	(3) Principal Deputy HSCL
St. Paul's	Rural	Church of Ireland	76	5	(2) Principal/ SET Deputy/Teacher
Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí	Suburban	Catholic	562	28	(4) Principal SET Teacher Teacher
Scoil Breandán	Suburban	Catholic	692	37	(4) Principal SET Teacher Teacher

Table 15. Overview of case

Total Number of staff in schools	188.7	Total number of principals	9 (7 admin., 2 teaching)	Total number of SETs	7
Percentage of total staff participating	18%	Total number of deputy principals	7 (1 admin., 6 teaching)	Total number of HSCL teachers	1
Total number of pupils in the schools	3,323	Total number of teachers	10	Total number of participants	34

3.11. Conclusion

This chapter presented the research design and its undertaking from start to finish. This was done with credibility, integrity, and transparency at the forefront of consideration. Firstly, the background methodological literature was engaged with to inform the researcher before the research design as it was undertaken was described. Next research ethics, integrity, and credibility procedures were explained before finally, a picture of the participating schools was presented along with an overview of the case as a whole.

The findings from the within-site analysis are presented next in chapter four.

Chapter 4: Within-Site Findings

4.1. Introduction

Chapter four now presents the findings from each of the nine school sites. The research set out with the objective of understanding how SSE policy has been enacted and to further explain how context shapes these enactments in the Irish primary school context. To inform interpretation, SSE was examined and explored in nine school sites. Data was primarily collected via interviews, focus groups, and from documents and was analysed using a deductive approach (Bingham, 2023). Given that the research is underpinned by a case study design, it has been deemed appropriate that the findings are presented in a narrative format, in keeping with the case study tradition. Here, thick and rich descriptions illuminate the findings emerging from the analysis (Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

In order to ensure integrity and facilitate a deep and rich understanding, the chapter features significant reference to data which is organised by school site. Sites are reported individually to ensure that integrity remains with respect of contextual differences. Where reference is made to participant quotations, a systematic approach to identification is utilised. This includes only information that is necessary in respect of the research aims, thereby maintaining anonymity for participants. Adjacently, it is important to note that schools have been given a pseudonym so as to maintain anonymity. As such, quotations are referenced in brackets and feature a participant number and role identifier, since participant role was deemed highly relevant. For example, participant 2 is labelled as (P02, SET/DP) where SET/DP represents their dual role of *Special Education Teacher* and *Deputy Principal*. Table 16 outlines the role identifiers used in the chapter.

Table 16. Role and identifier

Role	Identifier
Principal	P
Deputy Principal	DP
Administrative Deputy Principal	ADP
Class Teacher	CT
Special Education Teacher	SET
Home School Community Liaison	HSCL
Assistant Principal 1	AP1
Assistant Principal 2	AP2

4.2. Site One - Scoil na nÓg

Table 17. School profile

Category	Mainstream Junior school (JI to 2nd)
Pupils	371
Teachers	14
SETs	4
ISM	(4) Admin. Principal, Deputy, AP1, AP2

4.2.1. SSE in Practice

Five separate SSE processes had been documented and completed with two significant periods of disengagement evident and reflected in table 18. Staff confidently referred to experiences from these processes and reflected strong awareness of SSE in the school. The process was led to a

significant degree by the principal, but collaboration was also evident. For example, targets and actions for improvement were informed via input from staff who would *'...come up with most of the ideas'* (P03, CT/AP1).

Table 18. SSE timeline

Period	2012 – 2014	2014 – 2015	2015 – 2016	2015 - 2016	2017 – 2018	2018 – 2020	2020 – 2022
Focus	Literacy	Numeracy	Aistear	Disengaged	Physical Literacy	Digital Learning	Disengaged
Completed	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No

During SSE, although the six-step model provided structure, not all steps were undertaken or viewed as important. The principal asserted for instance, *'Some were just box ticking...We had to do a survey of children'* (P01, P) while evaluation had not occurred. The steps undertaken in the most recent process are depicted in table 19 below. The principal confirmed that actions outlined in the most recent SIP were undertaken and targets achieved, a sample of which are outlined in table 20. Completed steps are in green, with steps not taken presented in red.

Table 19. Overview of most recent process (Digital learning)

Focus identification	Gathering evidence	Analysis and making of judgements	Creation of SIP	Sharing of report	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation

Impacts associated with SSE were evident in teaching and learning where staff were motivated to engage in CPD and changed some classroom practices as a result. As one teacher determined,

SSE motivated him *'...to up my game...I did two summer courses on it. Just to get myself on track. Because I felt a little bit inadequate'* (P03, CT/AP1). New knowledge and practice were disseminated throughout the school as a result of collaborative school improvement planning while the introduction of Aistear emerged as one of the most deeply influential changes. Not all staff reported experiencing change however.

Table 20. Digital literacy SIP sample targets and actions

	Digital literacy	
Target	Pupils will create and share curricular based digital content once per term	Teachers will engage in CPD, feedback at monthly meetings, and provide support to other staff members
Action	Pupils will create digital content at least once per term	Teachers will engage in CPD in digital technology

4.2.2. The Shaping Influence of Context

Table 21 provides an overview of the features of context that shaped enactment in this site.

Table 21. Features of context that shaped enactment

External Context	Professional Culture
Health Context	Attitudes
National Educational Policy	Leadership
The Inspectorate	
Industrial Relations	

Material Context	Situated Context
Staffing	School Type
Time	
Training and Support	
ICT	
Financial Resources	

4.2.2.1. External Context

National educational policy emerged as important. This was evident in SSE policy specifically where, although school improvement endeavours would have occurred in any case, SSE policy shaped how participants enacted school improvement. The principal stated that without SSE, *'It wouldn't be such a formal process. It wouldn't have all the maybe gathering of data and analysing the data'* (P01, P). This had resulted in the enactment of new governance practices in the school which were positively received by the principal, who stated, *'Certainly, the consultation with parents and trying to do the consultation with pupils is interesting, and probably wouldn't have been something that I would have, I would have done perhaps'* (P01, P).

Interestingly, some features of SSE were interpreted as unimportant from the perspective of the participants but were still translated into practice. This was most evident regarding paperwork where the principal stated that *'I don't know whether that adds to it or not'* (P01, P). Strikingly, the principal was becoming less willing to go along with these expectations as time progressed and further policy expectations grew. She asserted:

> *...we felt we had to do it. Now, I don't think we did. You know, I mean, a professional conversation amongst ourselves might be enough. And I think we have the competence now just to say, well, you know, for us that's enough.*

(P01, P)

Complexities associated with other elements of educational policy were seen to shape enactment. The principal, in relation to the new language curriculum, said it *'...is huge, and we're still grappling with it'* (P01, P). This was significant as time, energy, and motivation were not in infinite supply. As such, the principal was intent on responding in future SSE processes outlining her wish *'...to try to use school self-evaluation, and one of those new initiatives that's going...For teachers, like really'* (P01, P).

This was not seen to be ideal, as it was at dissonance with her true interpretation of meaningful SSE where, *'...if it's more bespoke to your context, I think I feel it would be more beneficial'* (P01, P). In extension of this, an industrial relations conflict that had arisen in 2016 had resulted in disengagement. The principal argued that the complexity of SSE meant that this was well received stating, *'Oh, we were delighted to stop (Laughs). Because at that stage you had three on the go...'* (P01, P).

4.2.2.2. Professional Culture

A professional culture conducive to SSE was evident in the school. Staff communicated positive attitudes and this shaped the enactment of SSE policy. School improvement was held as a reasonable and worthwhile facet of the school's professional practice and, as such, was

embraced. According to one teacher, *'I think as educators you always…You have to learn'* (P03, CT/AP1) while another stated, *'If you better the school, you better the children…Yeah, you always want to improve your teaching skills and learning'* (P04, SET/AP2).

Interestingly, this was grounded in an epistemological position tied to school type where the child was positioned as *'…the agent of their own learning…we're constantly trying to, you know, make, make their experience and their outcomes as good as they can be'* (P01, P). This extended to specific features of SSE policy. For instance, collaboration was interpreted positively and, as such, translated in that *'…it wouldn't all be put on one person who did up a document…we were all involved'* (P04, SET/AP2). Conversely, features that were interpreted as less impactful were not translated by staff with as much commitment. This was evident in respect of the incorporation of stakeholder voice where the principal argued, *'Some of it seems a bit artificial'* (P01, P) while a teacher rejected the utility of evidence stating, *'we don't need the results now, to see where we're, where we need to improve on'* (P04, SET/AP2).

This was reflected in a weak translation of some of these features, where an underpinning motivation of compliance existed. This extended to the avoidance of certain features too. Regarding sharing a report, the principal admitted that *'No, we didn't. And that's something I know I've fallen down on'* (P01, P) and reflected dissonance between the staff's views of stakeholder participation and those espoused in SSE policy.

Leadership had a significant role in shaping both the professional culture and the enactment of SSE. The principal had a very significant role in interpreting SSE policy, communicating to staff its meaning in context, and guiding the translation of policy into practical application. She motivated enactment with participants outlining that she was *'a driving force in it…she just takes everybody with her…'* (P04, SET/AP2). This was seen in her communication of the policy, guidance, and organisation. According to one staff member, *'I suppose we would have been*

informed of it and (principal) would have you know, decided…Met us as a staff and discussed, you know, which subjects to use' (P02, SET/DP).

The principal confirmed that *'…it's usually myself and one other generally that do the bulk of it and you're just hoping to bring everybody along with us. Making things as easy as possible for them…'* (P01, P). This was necessary as *'…the demands of the job have increased hugely'* for teachers (P01, P) and without participation *'…you're just going to be doing it on your own'* (P01, P). This put the principal in a powerful position in some respects. In explaining the choice of one SSE focus, she stated it *'…was always something that I was very interested in'* (P01, P). This contrasted with participants in other positions, such as the SET, who determined, *'I haven't had to really do that, as much with it'* (P04, SET/AP2).

4.2.2.3. Material Context

The material context shaped enactment further. The staff available to enact the process enabled and constrained enactment. While staff facilitated enactment during certain periods, turnover was a prevalent occurrence, which meant that continuity was inhibited, thus influencing translation efforts. The principal declared, *'…there's teachers that've only been here a year or two. They wouldn't have been here for any of this…'* (P03, CT/AP1). This was significant as *'…it can be quite hard to backtrack on a school's history when you want to go forward'* (P03, CT/AP1). This was exacerbated by the lack of substitute cover and the Covid-19 Pandemic which ultimately put a stop to SSE in the school. For the principal, SSE became much less relevant as she felt an emphasis was required on managing the staffing challenge. She stated, *'it was just a matter of surviving the last few years and…Just literally trying to keep school open'* (P01, P).

Time was a further influential feature of the material context. Time was described as extremely inhibitive of the successful enactment of SSE policy. The principal summarised its influence on staff interpretation and subsequent translations, in combination with an increase in parallel reforms: *'No, there just isn't enough time in the day…or non-contact time. It could be worthwhile*

(SSE)…I think you just have to be a little bit more realistic and give us time to embed changes…' (P01, P).

These circumstances shaped how SSE was ultimately enacted as an emphasis on compliance influenced translations. The principal determined, *'I just feel we've so much to cope with that we're just sort of squeezing in the self-evaluation because we have to'* (P01, P). However, time for SSE work to be undertaken was identified during Croke Park hours. This was important regarding teacher attitudes as *'…you don't feel like you're giving up your own time'* (P02, SET/DP). The principal saw a reliance on Croke Park hours as problematic, stating *'I think everybody resents the Croke Park time. (Laughs)'* (P01, P). When asked for a possible solution to the challenge of time, the principal argued, *'Not one that would be acceptable to teachers. I mean, you can't really shorten the children's day and you can't lengthen the teacher's day. So where do you go?'* (P01, P).

Further features of the material context shaped enactment. ICT had progressed to a point where it made working with data easier, while training for the process was viewed pessimistically, was described as overshadowed by dissatisfaction, and was seen as unidirectional. The principal stated, *'Emotions were running very high at them in the beginning. And then of course we all just settle into it and do what we're told'* (P01, P).

Interestingly, supporting documents and websites were of little practical relevance. Consistency in messaging was criticised as a threat to enactment as '*it's constantly changing'* (P01, P) and a lack of clarity confused staff as they tried to make sense of the policy on the ground. Comparatively, CPD was a key feature in shaping both interpretation, in that understandings of SSE were enhanced, but also in translations in that *'…they're sharing that (CPD knowledge) with, with staff at staff meetings and that and it just spikes an interest'* (P01, P).

Financial resources were somewhat important. Here, DE grants provided for digital learning influenced the decision to focus on this area. While this was described as generous, parental

fundraising was also identified as important and that '*that's one of the advantages of teaching here*' (P02, SET/DP). Although the Inspectorate was described as having provided an advisory visit, they were not seen as a supporting the process. This was interesting as one teacher described a need for support in directing SSE and saw opportunity for development '*...if someone was available to go to your school. Sit down with your staff*' (P03, CT/AP1).

4.2.2.4. Situated Context

The situated context shaped how the policy was interpreted and translated. The school was a junior school with an ethos focused on child-centred learning with the principal describing, '*...we all feel very passionate about the early intervention...*' (P01, P). For the SSE process to hold meaning for the school, the policy was interpreted through the lens of this situated contextual reality, and the process was utilised to enact a play-based framework called Aistear.

The principal rationalised, '*...we needed to make that transition to more playful pedagogy that just is central to the whole of the infant school*' (P01, P). Staff agreed and bought into this philosophy, with one teacher outlining a willingness to translate the policy vision in that '*...we learned very quickly that we can do a lot of our teaching through that Aistear process*' (P03, CT/AP1). Therefore, enmeshing SSE and Aistear as a policy ensemble '*made sense*' (P03, CT/AP1). Conversely, the situated context constrained translation. This was the case regarding pupil participation, with the principal arguing, '*I do find it hard to hear the voice of the children because they're so young*' (P01, P).

4.3. Site Two - Churchtown Primary School

Table 22. School profile

Category	Mainstream
Pupils	27
Teachers	2
SETs	0.5
ISM	(2) Principal, Deputy

4.3.1. SSE in Practice

SSE was not a prominent feature of practice, but it had been undertaken twice. There was no evidence available to indicate that SSE had occurred in any meaningful way before this. SSE had been structured by the six-step model, but important elements were missing (see table 24). Most SSE work had been undertaken by the principal who described that *'...I'm still doing the basis of it, you know? (Laughs)'* (P05, CT/P). This was reflected in SIP targets and actions which mostly pertained to changes that the principal could achieve alone (see table 25). Staff showed little awareness of SSE and had little knowledge of the content of the SIP. The deputy principal and class teacher summed up his understanding by describing, *'Yeah. We've been kind of discussing it a bit. But…Yeah, we do. We kind of dip in and out of it'* (P06, CT/DP). Despite limited involvement from the wider staff, the principal confirmed that all actions had been completed and targets achieved.

Table 23. SSE timeline

Period	2012 – 2016	2016 – 2018	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2022
Focus	Unknown	Digital Learning	Wellbeing	Disengaged
Completed	No	Yes	Yes	No

Table 24. Overview of most recent process (Wellbeing)

Focus identification	Gathering evidence	Analysis and making of judgements	Creation of SIP	Sharing of report	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation

Impacts associated with the process were identified in the purchase of ICT resources and equipment for physical activity in the school yard. Additionally, although not an explicit target, the surface of the yard had been redeveloped because of the SSE focus regarding wellbeing. Teachers engaged in CPD as a result of the process and an enhanced awareness around the focus area meant that staff were trying some new approaches in teaching. The deputy described *'...bringing in a few strategies...'* (P06, CT/DP) and pupil learning were also referred to as having been improved with the principal determining that *'...you can see the children learning the skills and you can see them you know, just finding different ways of learning...'* (P05, CT/P).

This was portrayed as enhancing inclusion as *'...for children who do have maybe, like dyslexia or something like that, you know, that they're using the digital devices as a way of learning'* (P05, CT/P). The SET outlined that the process had little impact on her practice nor had she much involvement.

Table 25. Wellbeing SIP targets and sample actions

Wellbeing		
Target	Improve the layout and design of the yard to encourage activity	Foster children's participation in a range of activities
Action	Purchase yard equipment	Purchase musical instruments

4.3.2. Shaping Influence of Context

Table 26 provides an overview of the features of context that shaped enactment here.

Table 26. Features of context that shaped enactment

External Context	Professional Culture
National Educational Policy	Attitudes, Beliefs, Motivations
Industrial Relations	Staff Knowledge and Skills
Social and Economic Context	Leadership
Health context	
Material Context	**Situated Context**
Staffing	Size
Training and Support	
Financial Resources	
Time	
Building	

4.3.2.1. External Context

The broader external context shaped how participants enacted SSE. This was evident in the social and economic context which augmented staff turnover and impeded continuity. The deputy, who was planning on leaving the school at the end of the year, outlined his rationale as *'Wages and the cost of living. It comes down to that like'* (P06, CT/DP). He continued, *'...in terms of buying houses and putting yourself in that position. Personally, and realistically, you just can't see it here'* (P06, CT/DP).

The Covid-19 Pandemic presented similar challenges and shaped interpretations regarding the value of SSE policy under these conditions. This was presented as the reason with which SSE had not been enacted in recent years. The principal identified that a focus on the immediate needs of the classroom were necessary, reporting *'let's just get through what we can when we're in the*

classroom…' (P05, CT/P). Interestingly, this had drawn literacy and numeracy back into focus which was detrimental to how the principal interpreted the significance of their wellbeing SSE. She asserted, *'Like the school self-evaluation is such a good process to go through. But if you have other areas that are really giant as well, it is very difficult to equally give your time'* (P05, CT/P). Covid had also meant that collaboration had not been possible, thus inhibiting enactment further.

SSE policy specifically shaped enactment in that it introduced a new structure for school improvement. The principal determined, *'I think we would do it, but I think it would be much lesser…Less formal, maybe, maybe just yeah, maybe not as much time dedicated to it…focus on a couple of topics rather than just the one'* (P05, CT/P). The influence of wider educational policy was visible, in addition to several national policy reforms being combined with SSE. When asked if there was a causal relationship between these and the foci chosen, the principal conceded that *'they were influencing why we were picking those topics…And I suppose that, you know, expected of us to have done* (P06, CT/P). Disengagement was ascribed to the 2016 industrial dispute, with Croke Park hours identified as the main time in which staff collaborated around SSE.

4.3.2.2. Professional Culture

The professional culture in the school was both enabling and somewhat constraining of enactment of SSE policy. Contention was evident in staff attitudes. While staff values aligned with those of SSE policy, they still perceived the process as a struggle. The principal, for instance, determined, *'it's another pressure. It's another requirement that takes a lot of time, that sometimes I just feel like I'd be far better off, putting into figuring out you know exactly what this child's difficulties are…'* (P05, CT/P). Furthermore, staff attitudes towards specific features emerged as influential. Parental voice had been viewed as appropriate to incorporate into the wellbeing SSE, but this came with a caveat. Here, the principal explained, *'I think if it's something*

that's very academically based…Parents opinions might not be as influential because, you know, they might not have the insight that a teacher would have…' (P05, CT/P).

Leadership, in the shape of the principal, was central to the professional culture and also to the explicit enactment of SSE policy. The principal led and undertook nearly all aspects of the SSE process, with distributed leadership structures in the school virtually non-existent due to contextual circumstances. She described her inability to translate the collaborative vision held in SSE policy, saying *'…I haven't wanted to put extra pressure on staff either, you know'* (P05, CT/P). In effect, when the principal did not have capacity to enact SSE, it was not enacted.

4.3.2.3. Material Context

The most influential material features were observed in staffing and time. There were two full time staff and one half time SET in the school. This was presented as a feature of tremendous consequence when it came to enacting SSE, with the principal arguing that '*I think for a school such as this. I think all of the vast majority of the responsibility for the entire process could land on somebody like myself'* (P05, CT/P). This was particularly so because turnover had been a challenge in the school. The principal outlined the impact, saying, *'…it can be difficult to, I think hit the targets maybe with the staff turnover'* (P05, CT/P).

This had implications for the continuity of enactment: '*I try to explain the process and you're starting from scratch…Even though you're like a year and a half into it'* (P05, CT/P). She argued that, as such, SSE was interpreted as being less relevant: *'You haven't been there for the process of like discussing why are these important'* or that meeting *'those targets is difficult because it doesn't have as much meaning to you'* (P05, CT/P). Furthermore, due to the school's small staff size it was particularly vulnerable to challenges. She portrayed, *'I also had like a changeover of secretary last year and there's just been a huge amount of everything to do with the running of the school put on me* (P05, CT/P), further reducing her capacity to enact SSE policy.

Time, in combination with other significant priorities, shaped enactment significantly. The deputy argued, *'There isn't enough hours in the day like, realistically. And then like when you have that focus then with the kids like, there's so many initiatives sometimes too as well'* (P06, CT/DP). As such, SSE was not interpreted as an important feature of work. The principal outlined the consequences of this, arguing that SSE came at a cost *'When you could be giving your time maybe to something else'* (P05, CT/P) and also translated the policy with respect of the challenges that other staff faced. This was seen in her avoidance of placing expectations for other staff to become involved. In response, the pace with which it was expected to be undertaken was criticised, with the principal asserting, *'...a good outline has been provided as to how the process should work'*. However, she complained, *'It's quite a complicated process...it's very long, you know, it's very drawn out. It's not all to happen in a month...'* (P05, CT/P).

Training had a small influence on enactment, with the principal outlining that Misneach principal training introduced her to the concept and the official supporting documents. While these were described as helpful, PDST support was described as a necessary extension, particularly in relation to the content of SSE processes. Further training was requested also.

Finances emerged as somewhat influential, in that they shaped some of the targets for SIPs while the building and space within which the school was located was very small and SSE had been utilised to respond to this challenge.

4.3.2.4. Situated Context

One of the most significant contextual aspects contributing to the struggles the school faced in enacting SSE was the size and associated multigrade nature of the school. The deputy described, *'Especially with the four classes. Sometimes, you're like hopping a lot'* (P06, CT/DP), while the principal declared, '*It's such a different context. And there's so much happening...there's a huge amount of paperwork involved in just teaching for multigrade as it is, and then to have everything that's involved with being a principal as well'* (P05, CT/P). Further to this, in times of challenge,

it was felt that the school had less capacity to respond as they attempted to enact SSE. The deputy rationalised this experience, observing that in a previous school '*everything was just kind of split a lot more*' (P06, CT/DP). This meant that SSE related changes were not priority. He concluded, '*But really, focus is getting done what needs to be done in the classroom...*' (P06, CT/DP).

4.4. Site Three - Longfield Primary School

Table 27. School profile

Category	Mainstream
Pupils	225
Teachers	9
SETs	4
ISM	(4) Principal, Deputy, two AP 2s

4.4.1. SSE in Practice

SSE had become an important and consistent feature of practice since 2018. Prior to this, SSE had not been enacted (see table 28). The process was led by the principal, but a strong supporting structure had been established where a committee distributed leadership. Collaboration was an important feature in addition, with staff at all levels speaking of their involvement. The most recent process showed alignment with the six-step model and recommended features (see table 29). This was with the exception of the sharing of a report with the community. Strong levels of action were reported in conversations with all staff and the principal confirmed that SSE targets had been achieved.

Table 28. SSE timeline

Period	2012 – 2016	2016 – 2018	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2022 – Point of research
Focus	Unknown	Disengaged	Gaeilge	Science	Literacy	PE
Completed	NA	NA	Yes	No	Yes	No

Table 29. Overview of most recently completed SSE process (Literacy)

Focus identification	Gathering evidence	Analysis and making of judgements	Creation of SIP	Sharing of report	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation

Table 30. SIP targets and sample actions (Literacy)

Literacy		
Target	By June 2021, all pupils in 2nd class onwards will have engaged in free writing and the seven genres of writing. Teachers will report that these are explicitly taught.	By June 2021, pupils from 2nd class onwards will report having engaged in reflection and self-assessment of their own writing and teachers at all levels will report using 'before' and 'after' samples to assess pupils progress with writing.
Action	Implement a two-year writing plan devised in collaboration with staff and PDST.	Pupils will be explicitly taught to re-read their work and improve on spelling, grammar, vocabulary etc. (revise and edit).

Impacts associated with the process were evident in the development of school wide policy and in the creation of structures for the distribution of leadership for school improvement. The principal described benefits here, noting, *'with the whole school approach, you know, it brings consistency that you need'* (P08, P). This had important repercussions, according to a teacher, who stated, *'...you know a bit more about what's going on in the school like policy wise and you know, what kind of management to be looking for you to be doing...'* (P12, CT). Teachers also spoke of embracing new practices, describing the incorporation of stakeholder voice which *'...might make you take a slightly different angle on what you're doing'* (P11, CT/AP2) while SSE capacity was seen to grow. The deputy described:

> *When we first started out. We were great as a school for compiling all the data and evidence but not actually going forward with our targets...we've gotten much better at doing that. And, yeah, putting the targets in and then there's much more follow up as of recently, and much more clear for a whole staff of what our targets are.*

> (P09, SET/DP)

In respect of teaching and learning, teachers described enhanced awareness: *'I think it makes you aware of, like, reflecting on your own teaching...'*. She continued, *'...subconsciously, you're kind of thinking how can I change things as well?'* (P12, CT). Participants reported that improvements in planning had impacted their classroom practice and that *'we've made sure that staff get opportunities to go and CPD in relation to our SSE as well'* (P11, CT/AP2) but also reported being in a position of having to prioritise actions they enact. The SET determined that the process did not influence her role.

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Table 31. Features of context that shaped enactment

Professional Culture	Situated Context
Attitudes, Beliefs, and Motivations Leadership	Size
Material Context	**External Context**
Training and Support Time Staffing ICT	Health context National Educational Policy Inspectorate Industrial Relations

4.4.2.1. External Context

The external context constrained and enabled enactment of SSE policy. The health context during the Covid-19 Pandemic disrupted enactment as schools closed. This prevented translation of actions, as the formulated Science SSE was abandoned. Interestingly, SSE was utilised to respond to the challenges arising during the Pandemic. The deputy described addressing PE challenges through SSE, stating *'PE came up because suddenly we had no hall. And we were because COVID, it was in a classroom.* (P10, SET/DP). In response, the a whole school plan approach to PE in the classroom was devised.

SSE policy shaped enactment in that it provided a structure and a direction. The principal described using the six-step model *'When I'm putting together those formal school improvement plans'* (P08, P). This contrasted with previous improvement efforts, which *'wouldn't have been the formal process and we wouldn't have been doing all the paperwork involved'* (P08, P). The mandated nature of SSE appeared to ensure these practices were enacted. This was underscored by the existence of informal approaches to school improvement that went on in parallel and were

absent of features enacted in line with SSE policy. Here, the principal outlined, *'...I wouldn't be documenting everything...I wouldn't necessarily be doing all the same amount of surveys and using focus groups as much. It'd be more maybe staff based'* (P08, P).

The many adjacent reform policies that were introduced to schools were also important. For example, the literacy SSE was the result of an expectation to introduce the new primary language curriculum along with the mandate to engage in SSE. Interestingly, staff interpreted this policy ensemble enthusiastically, with one member alluding that *'...this is something that we're currently having to think about. So, let's do our development planning in that...Let's use that as a chance to actually really go into this'* (P11, CT/AP2). While the school adhered to external expectations, the principal felt this did not align with her personal interpretation of SSE. She argued in relation to wellbeing, *'I don't think it's actually a priority. But yet, it's one we're gonna have to just do for the sake of it because it's been identified as priority by the Inspectorate'* (P08, P).

This brings into focus the shaping influence of the Inspectorate, which was most clear in the influence imparted as a consequence of a 2017 WSE report. This recommended focusing on Gaeilge and introducing specific improvement actions. The principal explained, *'...that jumps out from the page at you. Somebody's told you, you need to improve your level of Gaeilge. You're thinking - Okay, well, there's a perfect opportunity now we can work on that next...'* (P08, P), while another staff member determined, *'Yeah, I don't think we would have organically chosen Irish...I think that was probably a good start, because we were forced into it'* (P11, CT/AP2). Conversely, external pressures for reform of practice and evaluation were negatively influential too. One teacher stated, weighing up the pros and cons to engaging in SSE, *'...I don't have to be worried if somebody does come knock on my door. But there's also that little part of you said, but I missed coffee with my friends'* (P12, CT/AP2). External influence from industrial relations was also evident, with disengagement impacting enactment from 2016 to 2018.

4.4.2.2. Professional Culture

A professional culture that was highly conducive to the enactment of SSE was evident. Staff displayed very positive attitudes towards the policy. Utility and impact were seen as important in shaping this interpretation. For instance, the deputy described *'…like in our PE one now at the moment, we now have a full year scheme of work'* (P09, SET/DP). This motivated a willingness to translate SIP actions in classrooms, as buy-in was strong, especially when focus areas arose from within the school. One teacher pointed out, *'You definitely have more motivation when it comes from, organically. Because you're more invested in it'* (P11, CT/AP2). Collaboration was another feature enacted meaningfully, with one teacher stating, *'We're a brilliant team and we all acknowledge that we are amongst the whole staff. You know, so no one's ever left out of a discussion'* (P10, CT/AP2). This carried into classroom practice, *'…you don't feel like oh, I don't know what that's about. I better have a read because you know, because you did it'* (P10, CT/AP2).

Attitudes also constrained enactment with respect to certain features. This was evident in the incorporation of voice. The principal rationalised, *'So, like there's some decisions I don't think the whole community needs to be involved in'* (P08, P) while evidence use was interpreted in a similar way in that *'…I don't think we've ever been surprised by our data'* (P10, CT/AP2). However, one teacher had been challenged by evidence. In a recent survey, *'one of the questions was, I feel safe at school. And we were shocked…Like, shocked by the percentage that came back with sometimes a no and like, upset by it nearly'* (P10, CT/AP2).

The principal's leadership was a significant influence on enactment. One teacher presented, *'She's totally facilitating. Does lead it as well, but she totally facilitates our input'* (P10, CT/AP2). The principal outlined that this was not just coincidence, outlining, *'I would make it a priority'* normalising translations of the SIP into practice as teachers *'…know it's a requirement…it's part, part of the school nowadays'* (P08, P). This contrasted with the previous principal who had a less impactful approach and was described as:

...not an administrator. And so, you were maybe went on course and you were told you have to do SSE. It was come back all guns blazing. Let's collect all this data, and it'll sit in the box, and nothing will happen with it. And there was no delegation...Our current principal, complete opposite. You go you get the data, and within a week the policy is drawn off the SIP plan is made. It's proposed to you and was also discussed. So, like it was brought to a staff meeting.

(P10, CT/AP2)

The ISM was significant in relation to translations and described as having *'...a huge part in how that then...disseminates to the staff...'* (P11, CT/AP2).

4.4.2.3. Material Context

The material influence was dominated by time and staffing. Time shaped enactment in different ways depending on position. ISM found that the process steps were inhibited by time. This challenge was amplified by a lack of release time due to the *'...whole sub crisis. So yeah, it's been very hard to release the teachers'* (P08, P). The deputy added her perspective to this, explaining, *'I have 10 deputy release days in a year to take. I've taken two'*. This had repercussions for the translation of SSE policy which *'...didn't even come into our minds because you're so busy, lack of subs'* (P09, SET/DP).

Comparatively, non-ISM teachers focused on the translation of actions in the classroom which was challenging *'because you've got so many other things going on'* (P13, CT). The principal described having to adjust the shape of SSE as a result, with pace being emphasised and adjusted. Alongside the challenges of attaining substitutes, turnover of staff was consequential. SSE was assessed as less relevant and hugely challenging to incoming teachers as 'Every school is so *different. All these policies, and SSE plans and all these kinds of stuff'* (P11, CT/AP2). ISM staff displayed awareness here and had responded to this challenge: *'Yeah, we do a lot of mentoring'* (P10, CT/AP2).

Improved ICT infrastructure was said to have *'made it more doable and more accessible'* (P08, P) while training and support shaped how participants interpreted SSE policy and shaped

resultant translations. The principal had engaged in process training and reported that *'We were given a template, that's the template I've used'* (P08, P). While staff did not have training, they were said to have *'...still improved on it by ourselves'* (P09, SET/DP). External expertise from the PDST had an influence in communicating SSE policy. The principal stated, *'...they'd always refer to school improvement SSE process'* (P08, P). This shaped enactment as, *'that sort of motivated us to look at science as a subject and so each time there's been a reason...'* (P08, P) and encouraged the use of the LAOS document.

4.4.2.4. Situated Context

The situated context had some influence. As a result of the number of pupils enrolled, the school had an administrative principal and had several formal ISM members appointed. This facilitated leadership and the availability of time for SSE. The principal rationalised the effect this had on translation: *'I would say that an administrative principal definitely would have more time to guide that process...'* (P08, P). Correspondingly, she argued that in a bigger school, she would have greater propensity to delegate. She declared , *'Sometimes I feel it'd be great if somebody else took it on. But that's hard to expect of people. If you can get a team working with you, it's probably a better option. In a school my size'* (P08, P).

4.5. Site Four - Brisk National School

Table 32. School profile

Category	Mainstream
Pupils	735
Teachers	30
SETs	12 SET/1 English as an Additional Language (EAL) teacher
ISM	(13) Admin. Principal, Admin. Deputy, four AP1s, seven AP2s

4.5.1. SSE in Practice

SSE was enacted regularly in the school but was fragmented (see table 33). The process had been a feature of practice since 2011 but had been disengaged with in 2016 until 2018. While the process was said to have been reengaged with since, in reality the previously undertaken process was extended by two years. Overall, the process was undertaken predominantly by the ISM and featured a strong hierarchical structure. The principal oversaw but delegated responsibility to the deputy who, in turn, oversaw a committee. The principal outlined this as, *'There's eight members on that. One for junior, one for senior and so on. That's led by the postholder and then overseen by the deputy principal. And then they disseminate the information to their class level post meeting'* (P14, P).

Table 33. SSE timeline

Period	2011 - 2012	2012 - 2013	2013 - 2016	2016 – 2018	2018 - 2020	2020 - 2022
Focus	Literacy	Numeracy	Science	Disengaged	Primary Language Curriculum & Digital Strategy	Extended engagement with previous plan
Completed	Yes	Yes	Yes	NA	No	Yes

Table 34. Overview of most recently completed SSE process (PLC and Digital Learning)

Focus identification	Gathering evidence	Analysis and making of judgements	Creation of SIP	Sharing of report	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation

While the six-step model provided structure, the principal determined, *'I'm sure maybe we were doing four of the six steps and doing some of them correctly and some of them half'* (P14, P). All targets in the school's most recent improvement plan were reported as achieved and actions enacted. This was except for new practices in cursive handwriting. In addition, the aims identified in the previous three SSE processes were confirmed as having been achieved.

Table 35. Sample SIP targets and sample actions (PLC and Digital Learning)

	Primary Language Curriculum and Digital Learning	
Target	Primary language: School wide grid outlining skills to develop oral language, reading, and writing in Irish.	Digital learning: Emphasise the integration of digital technologies across the curriculum.
Action	A school wide vision for Gaeilge discussed at a staff meeting.	A digital strategy committee was formed and drew up a plan of action.

Impacts associated with the SSE process were evident in the development of school policies, in the creation of management structures, and in the purchase of teaching and learning resources. How school improvement was undertaken changed with the deputy presenting that *'I always kind of feel with these frameworks, they force your thinking, and they make you do it like'* (P15, ADP). Teachers described that *'It definitely has an impact on your day to day teaching. When you know, that's an area of focus in the school'* (P17, CT/AP2).

Previous SSE SIP actions were said to be embedded in practice and SSE was seen to bring other aspects of modern educational governance into perspective. This included stakeholder involvement. A teacher outlined that it *'…focuses your attention on or it reminds you that you know, to get the parents involved and to kind of incorporate the pupil voice'* (P17, CT/AP2). Learning attainment was said to have been enhanced in that *'…we've seen a huge improvement in our scores in the Drumcondras (Standardised test for literacy). Our PM readers was one of our literacy targets…and straightaway it was instant, you know, suddenly we had Junior Infants reading…'* (P14, P).

4.5.2. Shaping Influence of Context

Table 36. Features of context that shaped enactment

External Context	Professional Cultures
National Educational Policy	Attitudes, Beliefs, and Motivations
Health Context	Collaboration
Socio-Economic Context	Skills and Knowledge
Industrial Relations	The Inspectorate
Other Schools	Leadership
External Expertise	Positionality
Material Context	**Situated Context**
Staffing	Location
ICT	School Type
Financial Resources	
Time	
Training and Support	

4.5.2.1. External Context

The external context shaped deeply how SSE was enacted. Covid-19 had disrupted the most recent process and had resulted in the school extending the timeframe for enactment by two years while industrial relations had resulted in disengagement with any new SSE targets and actions during 2016 to 2018. These disruptions provided interesting insights into how SSE was interpreted by staff. Ultimately, staff described feeling *'conflicted with the fact that obviously there's an impact on the children'* (P14, P). However, translating the policy had been problematic and rejection was agreed. The principal justified '*we were reviewing the whole process anyway, because we felt that there was too many balls in the air…*'. Interestingly, a middle ground was

reached in the dissonance where *'We didn't take on any, we didn't go any deeper with the targets. But we did maintain them'* (P14, P).

The socio-economic context also shaped the translation of SSE policy. This was most visible in the pressures it imparted on staff turnover and consistency in enactment. The principal argued, '*So house prices leading to staff turnover is our biggest challenge…we're struggling to maintain staff….but house prices is a huge factor, rental prices'* (P14, P). This explicitly constrained enactment, in that *'…you're implementing change in a school, educating the staff. Upskilling. And then they're leaving. A new cohort come in…'* (P14, P). He went on, '*…it is quite difficult maintaining consistency in a school where we would have nearly a third of staff on leave at any one time. And then of that third, half wouldn't return to us at all'* (P14, P).

SSE policy was also important, as it had added a formal structure to school improvement. This had brought about new practices and had turned the lens inward in respect of evaluation of practices in the school. One teacher described an increased awareness in that SSE brings to light new practices such as pupil and parent participation. Another stated that SSE, *'…had to be informed by factual material'*, and that the incorporation of evidence use was important as *'…people can be quite subjective in terms of what they feel the school might need to improve on'* (P17, SET/AP1). The deputy appreciated that this made the school confront assumptions: *'We are doing it. But are we doing it? And who is doing it? And why are we doing it? So, it forces you to answer those questions. So, I find that welcome'* (P15, ADP).

Other schools were seen to be influential. This was evident in the SIP where the school identified and visited schools who were perceived as being more advanced. External experts were also brought into the school for SSE. The principal explained, *'it's a new voice'* (P14, P). This was useful from the principal's perspective, who highlighted that this brought a competitive motivation:

It shows the staff that this is ongoing in multiple schools and as good a school as we like to think we are, there's also other schools who are also driving in the correct direction, and we're running parallel to them.

(P14, P)

4.5.2.2. Professional Culture

The professional culture in the school shaped the enactment of SSE policy. Positive attitudes towards SSE were evident. This was put in concrete terms by the principal who portrayed staff embracing SSE, *'...for the good of the school, for their own professional development, for to show leadership capacity for future work in the school'*. He saw this as *'...something that we would promote and encourage without making it a competition between members'* (P14, P). ISM members reflected a similar position, with one teacher reflecting, *'I think it's worthwhile. From the pupil's perspective and from the staff's perspective. Nobody likes to stay stagnant in whatever professional dimension they're doing'* (P17, SET/AP1).

However, some resistance was visible. The deputy felt that SSE relied on an unreasonable level of goodwill and determined, *'I think the department, kind of, I don't know how respectful it is to their employees in terms...of what is expected of them…'* (P15, ADP). This perspective was contextualised in respect of the initial reception, where she described *'...it received welcome, and it received ah here we go again…something else, we're doing this already. Which we are…'* (P15, ADP). This dissonance was elucidated by the principal who asserted that *'there is an extra workload in it…I think actually it's a bonus now. It gives a better shape to it. A better structure and a better timeline…'* (P14, P). He alluded to a need for care around time expectations saying *'The dreaded Croke Park hours. We try and use them productively and maximise them. I try not to ask teachers to do a lot on their own time, but that it does overflow into their own time on occasion'* (P14, P).

In enactment, some features were interpreted as more or less reasonable than others. While the inclusion of student voice was an agreed upon feature, the value of parental voice was debated.

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The principal stated, *'they mightn't have had the expertise at the evaluation stage, but they were very keen to be involved in the actual targets for the improvement plan'* (P14, P). Teachers, however, felt less convinced by parental involvement, stating *'I think they could be more influential'* (P16, CT/AP2) while another felt that *'...if they wanted something said or implemented, you know, like it's, it's very much open communication'* (P17, SET/AP1).

In respect of collaboration, this was a feature but reflected a strong hierarchical structure. According to the principal, *'We govern by common consensus here, and every decision I make, I run through my ISM and then we run through the staff'* (P14, P). Interestingly, the involvement of the Inspectorate was seen as inappropriate. The principal outlined, *'We didn't take up the offer. And the rationale behind that was we have such a big staff here with such great expertise. And I felt that it wouldn't be of any benefit to us'* (P14, P).

This drew into perspective the significant role of leadership. The ISM had a key role in overall enactment but teachers were less aware or involved. The deputy described, '*It's definitely living. But in terms of do we refer to this as part of our school self-evaluation? I'm not too sure. I think it's kind of interwoven and maybe the words of school self-evaluation or SIP plans and such, kind of nearly stay with maybe the ISM team per se'* (P15, ADP). A teacher confirmed, *'Not everybody might be aware that that is part of the school improvement plan, but everyone's aware that that's something that needs to be done'* (P17, SET/AP1). Notably, a recent graduate stated, *'I suppose my role would be to make sure that I'm informed of the school self-evaluation and that I'm on the same page as everybody else coming into the school and implementing that into my day to day teaching'* (P18, CT).

While the principal had a defining role, he positioned himself outside of direct translation, delegating instead to the deputy. This was due to competing priorities in *'...behaviour management, HR in a school, we have 65 staff am currently...Then obviously dealing with parental issues, dealing with staff issues, the building'* (P14, P).

The deputy's role was described as significant for teachers as they enacted the process as *'...it was made very easy for us. The books were sourced, they were categorised. They were kind of linked to whatever strategies we were trying to teach'*. He continued, *'So, we knew what the focus was, but it was also made very easy to implement'* (P17, SET/AP1). The principal still felt that he needed to be involved and as such described initiating formal structures of accountability. He described:

> *you have to monitor it because ultimately, if the rubber hits the road, the complaint or the issue will end up on my desk. So, we do have two review meetings a year and an end of year report to the Board of Management. I report to each board meeting then monthly. How the postholder is getting on. So, I let the staff run their, their section. Absolutely. And I support them and oversee it...they have sole responsibility with me overseeing and supporting them for that area. So, it's the whole discuss, decide, and delegate, and slightly disappear attitude.*

(P14, P)

4.5.2.3. Material Context

The large staff size provided a material context that was supportive to the enactment of SSE policy. In this, it enabled delegation of management responsibility for SSE and facilitated adaption to arising challenges. The principal stated, *'So we're very fortunate here. We have an administrative deputy principal and administrative principal. We have four AP ones...and we have eight AP twos, we're able to share the responsibilities'* (P14, P). Promotion opportunities were interpreted as an important feature as potential formal leadership roles *'give people the opportunity to lead and show leadership capacity'* (P14, P). Staffing also constrained enactment, in that the continuity in translation of actions into practice was constrained by staff turnover.

Time emerged as a significant shaping influence on the enactment of SSE. Croke park hours were identified as a time in which collaboration around SSE was facilitated. However, this was portrayed as imperfect. The deputy described the resultant struggles of enacting SSE as *'...there's not enough of them or there's too little of them or people don't have the headspace after school to do it'* (P15, ADP). Overall, the principal felt he did not have enough time, declaring, *'...have*

I got time to get around to school self-evaluation, school improvement planning, the official side of it once a week. I don't' (P14, P). Teachers reflected this sentiment, with an SET confirming that time and expectations did not align and resultant translations of policy into practice were constrained. She argued, *'...there's always something else coming from the Department. So how, how do you kind of stay abreast of all that and still do what your, your school improvement plan is with, with quality? It's very hard...It's just about time...'* (P17, SET/AP1).

The ISM had responded creatively to solve this problem and support enactment, with a teacher stating, *'I think we're lucky in terms that we have the infrastructure in place to assist effective communication and collaboration'*. This, he stated, was on account of *'...creative timetabling from (Deputy) and (Principal), I think time has been carved out to allow us and to enable us to collaborate'* (P17, SET/AP1). With this, the principal described a recontextualised process: *'We would actually put a huge push on for a week. More so from the evaluating, gathering information, the analysis, the drafting of the plan'* (P14, P), to address time related impediments.

Training and supports were somewhat important to enactment. SSE was communicated via CPD and developments in ICT had made the process easier while supporting documents, especially in the shape of the LAOS document. This was described as useful by the principal in that *'...it gives you barometers, I suppose, measures'* (P14, P). He went on, *'you can say right, under leadership and management of this post, this curricular area, or this organisational area, is it highly effective, is it effective? And how are we measuring that?*' (P14, P). With this, he was supported in instilling a management structure and performative responsibilities. He could *'...say right, on this domain, this is your role and responsibility. And a lot of those would apply to school self-evaluation and school improvement plans'* (P14, P).

Comparatively, the deputy felt supporting documentation fell short and questioned its practicality. She argued that adequate information supporting translation of the policy was available and queried, *'Like how and when do they expect us to do it because that never comes*

with the documents' (P15, ADP). She presented a lack of contextual understanding in the documents which was at odds with the realities of practice, portraying, *'Like teachers are busy, you know. They have a curriculum to participate in. There's, there's an overloaded curriculum where we have multiple subjects'* (P15, ADP).

Financial resources were described as an enabling feature. Staff portrayed the school as being in a privileged position in terms of financial resources and this facilitated enactment. Here, the principal declared, *'We have the financial support, especially with resources'* (P14, P). This was beneficial in supporting enactment in the face of other constraining variables, as *'We would hire in BA graduates…Free teachers up, and a lot of the SSE work would be undertaken then'* (P14, P). When asked if he felt this reasonable in a modern education system, he responded, *'No, I don't. But obviously, we're not in an ideal world. And every school demographic and history and background is different'* (P14, P).

4.5.2.4. Situated Context

The location in which the school was situated exacerbated challenges of staffing and subsequently, the challenges of continuity in enactment. The principal described *'…a big, big challenge (is) where we are located'* and that *'The cheaper cost of living, lower house prices'* (P14, P) elsewhere was problematic. This also meant that time for school improvement was reduced, as *'principals and management are being asked to maybe go to extra lengths to staff their schools'* (P14, P). In parallel, a large student enrolment meant that both an administrative principal and administrative deputy were employed along with a very large ISM team. The principal defined this as advantageous, as *'…there are teachers there with postgraduate, doctorate in various areas. So, there's always someone with an expertise within our own four walls'* (P14, P). The large number of pupils also had positive financial implications for the school, with the result being, *'we do have, I suppose, the funds there, and the manpower to free up people'* (P14, P).

4.6. Site Five - St. Cormac's National School

Table 37. School profile

Category	DEIS 1 Urban
Pupils	290
Teachers	16
SETs	7 SET/1 HSCL
ISM	(6) Admin. Principal, Deputy, AP1, three AP2s

4.6.1. SSE in Practice

SSE was enacted as part of the school's DEIS planning since 2012. The ISM assumed the task of leading SSE with committees being a significant feature. Compliance was referenced as the goal of earlier iterations but in the most recently completed process, SSE had grown into something more meaningful. Since Covid-19 closures, the process was not being enacted formally, even though DEIS planning continued (see table 38). The school applied the six-step process model to the DEIS pillars of literacy and numeracy in the most recently enacted process (see table 39).

Table 38. SSE timeline

Period	2012 – 2015	2015 – 2018	2018 – 2019	2019 - 2022
Focus	Literacy & Numeracy	Literacy & Numeracy	Literacy & Numeracy	Literacy & Numeracy
Completed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 39. Overview of most recent process (DEIS planning literacy and numeracy)

Focus identification	Gathering evidence	Analysis and making of judgements	Creation of SIP	Sharing of report	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation

Impacts associated with the process were observed in relation to teaching and learning. The school principal felt that the school had grown more confident in the DEIS specific numeracy and literacy initiatives because of the SSE process, with staff reporting positive changes in pedagogy here. Children's attainment was described as having improved in the form of standardised test results, and enjoyment of maths and literacy was perceived as having increased along with the school's resources for these areas.

SSE had also brought to the fore new practices including enhanced parental involvement and the distribution of leadership and standardisation of practice. The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) described this as *'...progressive. It's not everyone doing their own things. So, there's a sequence'* (P21, HSCL) while the principal relayed,

> *We have staff that are more confident now in numeracy and literacy initiatives…The parental engagement that we have in the children's learning has, is enhanced. Our standardised test scores are moving in the right direction and whether it's PC or not to say that, that's a really important metric for us…*

(P19, P)

Table 40. Sample targets and actions from literacy SIP

	Literacy	
Target	Maintain a whole-school three-year average standard score of greater than 100 in standardised tests (2020 - 2022).	Establish and incrementally grow a 'PM Reader' library in the school and implement the principles of 'Guided Reading' programme at each class level.
Action	No actions.	Ring fence a portion of DEIS funding to strategically add to the stock in the guided reading library in each of the three years 2019 – 2022. Identify particular gaps in our book stock and arrange purchases accordingly.

4.6.2. Shaping Influence of Context

Table 41. Features of context that shaped enactment

Professional Culture	Situated Context
Attitudes, Beliefs, and Motivations Collaboration Skills Leadership Positionality	School Type
Material Context	**External Context**
ICT Resources Staff Substitutes Time Training and Support	National Educational Policy Inspectorate

4.6.2.1. External Context

The policy context shaped enactment. The fact that SSE was a mandated policy motivated engagement and shaped the quality of school improvement in the school. Even though the school would undertake school improvement, the principal asserted, *'Probably not to the rigorous extent that we're doing, that's demanded of us'* (P19, P). Furthermore, the impacts of broader reform policies were seen to pressure the enactment of SSE. The principal positioned SSE against a large increase in expectations for management alongside a decrease in posts of responsibility. He argued, *'...there's five people doing the work of possibly 10 people, from a decade ago'* (P19, P).

The deputy stated that this scenario negatively influenced school leadership's ability to meaningfully enact SSE and highlighted that the expectations that were placed on schools in relation to reform created a challenging scenario on the ground. She said, *'I think people are overwhelmed at the moment with the volume of new initiatives and everything that's coming in. I don't think that the Department have got a holistic view of what their expectations of this, of schools'*. She continued, *'And I just think it's very important that the Department backs off...'* (P20, SET/DP).

This was consistent across time. In the earlier stages of the process, the principal felt in a vulnerable position between external desires and internal needs. He asserted, *'I felt Ronan that I was having to implement something from on high that the Department had asked me just to implement…And all the resources in the online kit. That really, really didn't help'* (P19, P). Similar was described by the deputy who felt that the external expectation for reform was misguided. In response to whether she felt that the reality of working in schools was appreciated by the DE, she was critical:

> *I don't think so. No. And a case in point there where you know, the media are saying about you know, ah, special class provision for children with special needs. There's nobody who wouldn't agree that these children have an absolute right to the most appropriate education. But there isn't an absolute clue in political circles or in the, in the Department of the reality of actually, you know, putting that in place. There is no real commitment to quality inclusion…There's a huge focus on wellbeing now but it's not just the documents and reading you know heavy circulars about it…they tell us to look after our wellbeing and then you have circular after circular coming out at us and I can feel my blood pressure rising. You know, that's all the happy clappy posters in the world isn't going to do anything.*

> (P20, SET/DP)

This left the deputy feeling untrusted as a professional. She declared, '*…trust me, I'm in the game a long time. I wouldn't still be here if I wasn't committed and if I didn't know what I was doing'*. She continued, *'But I will go the minute it has an impact on my wellbeing and it's not that you're not sending me enough you know, nice little sayings. It's that you're just being very silly in your unrealistic expectations. Trust us'* (P20, SET/DP).

Ultimately, policy expectations were seen to be contrasting. Competing priorities, for instance, impacted on staff ability to improve teaching and learning, and this was said to be demoralising. The deputy summarised:

> *Everything else gets in the way, Ronan. Attendance. Crisis management in the morning. Parents wanting this, that, and the other. And putting out fires. Paperwork. Paperwork from the Department, you know, in triplicate and duplicate stuff that they have already sent…*

<p align="right">(P19, SET/DP)</p>

This reality highlighted links between an overburdened day to day workload and an incomplete process. The deputy summed it up when asked about evaluating the process:

> *I haven't got the headspace or the energy to do it…I think, it'd be interesting too, when I get literally, to catch breath after the year to look at it during the summer and say - How appropriate was this?*

<p align="right">(P19, SET/DP)</p>

The inspectorate also shaped enactment of the process. For instance, the principal described, *'…the feedback from the inspector was they wanted smart targets, you know? And that was the failing of our first school self-evaluation cycle…'*. He went on, *'Whereas they wanted as you know, facts and figures…it was very clear and was communicated to me very clearly that's the way we had to go. And that's the way I brought it'* (P19, P). However, the principal was not convinced by the value this offered. He stated, *'some of them (targets) are quite arbitrary'* and he had to balance these changes with the desires of staff *'Because it would have been too much of a culture change. And I think a disheartening culture change in our setting'* (P19, P).

The principal had however seen an opportunity to address the precariousness of his position between external and internal expectations by drawing upon Inspectorate input. He described, *'we got input from the inspectors. Voluntary input at the very beginning. But that was somewhat Machiavellian by me, just to make sure that everyone understood that this was not just me. It was beyond me…'* (P19, P). He described this as *'…brilliant Ronan, because she used all the*

buzzwords and said shared responsibility. You know, in school management team. Role for the teachers. Role for the parents'. He continued, *'And people left, okay maybe they weren't happy that they had more work to do. But everyone was clear. It's not just (Principal's) baby'* (P19, P).

4.6.2.2. Professional Culture

The professional culture constrained and enabled the enactment of SSE in the school and the quality of this varied over time. Attitudes towards SSE had a significant influence on enactment. In the early iterations of SSE, the principal described that *'I was still pretty sceptical about it'* (P19, P) and outlined, *'…we did look at data in the school. But in a very superficial way. We did sample parents, but hand-picked parents'.* He continued, *'Like we didn't get a dissident voice, because quite honestly, I didn't want a dissident voice…'.* This shaped translation as *'…therefore the first school improvement plan we produced was very generic…it didn't really impact upon us…'* (P19, P).

More recently, a more positive attitude indicted that staff now interpreted SSE as an important feature of practice. The principal described a change since 2019 where *'There was a lot more pressure…a changed landscape from a school self-evaluation point of view'* (P19, P). He attributed this to *'the fact that it was published on the website, the fact there was an annual review, and then a three year roll over. The fact that our inspector had been looking for it and had gone through it closely'* (P19, P). Now, participants interpreted SSE as valuable work, if it was for the students. The deputy outlined, *'it's given us a boost…we will facilitate things as long as they are for the attainment of the children'* (P20, SET/DP).

Collaboration around SSE was associated with strong attitudes with the HSCL pointing out *'…there was immediate buy-in from the staff because we were involved, myself and the team on the ground'* (P21, HSCL). The principal, by comparison, saw value, in that *'…it's allowed me to maintain the dual goals of numeracy and literacy retention. You know, and maintenance of standards and then elevation standards'* (P19, P). Interestingly, he reported having to be strategic

with how collaboration and participation were introduced. He asserted, *'I wouldn't involve the full staff in the review of it to be honest…some staff won't contribute because they might be shy'*, or *'Sometimes it's overly dominated by vested interests, Ronan. Who you know, have a particular issue that they want to push and just push that issue'* (P19, P).

This shaped enactment significantly, as SSE was seen as part of the work of the ISM and the specific committee in charge, highlighting the significant role of leadership. The deputy presented, *'…you have to have somebody there to drive the process…somebody who has, who can maybe just kind of reassure people, this is doable'* (P20, SET/DP). The principal confirmed this perspective by stating, *'I don't think any teacher is going to come to me and say, (Principal name), we really need to get moving on the school self-evaluation…for a lot of teachers, it's as important as the principal prioritises and makes it'* (P19, P). He outlined, *'And one of the ways that I made it more palatable, school self-evaluation planning for the staff, was that I presented it as an extension of DEIS planning'* (P19, P).

Delegation was also evident, and leadership appeared elsewhere. For instance, the HSCL described, *'…we've tried to bring in a culture of planning and evaluation, you know, reflecting, forward climbing again'* (P21, HSCL) while the principal declared, *'…I'm expecting the committee members…they're the ones that are driving it…'* and ensure the *'…work gets implemented in the fortnightly plan or the monthly plan'* (P19, P). Furthermore, leadership facilitated translation by creating the conditions in which staff could undertake SSE work. This required the sourcing of private funding for CPD and the release of teachers for training in the SSE focus area. Of late, SSE had become less of a formal feature however, especially for staff outside of the formal leadership team. The deputy maintained that it was still being enacted, but less explicitly. She described:

And like we are doing it. I've, whether people are aware they're doing it or not…I don't think people are aware. Oh, now we're at this stage. Now we'll issue a report. And as we're going along, it is happening. It's part of, I suppose, it's part of the way we do things around here now. Which is the culture of the school.

<div align="right">(P20, SET/DP)</div>

4.6.2.3. Material Context

Overall, time was seen as an inhibitive feature in the enactment of SSE policy and *'If Croke Park weren't there, that'd be a different ballgame altogether then in terms of when it would be done'* (P19, P). The deputy requested, *'Time and more physical resources to take the, you know, to take administrative work off of school leaders…Schools are extremely busy'* (P20, SET/DP). Of late, this had become severe enough for the school to dilute the practices of SSE that had been previously embedded. The deputy described, *'…we're not issuing a report every, after every time. We're not gathering the data and sitting down or whatever. It's, we're doing it as we go along. It's you know, schools are busy and it's all happening'* (P20, SET/DP).

The principal highlighted that one of the main strengths of the school was the experience that staff held in conjunction with their determination to improve through CPD. This was very useful in relation to SSE. He detailed *'…one advantage would be that we would have a lot of teachers who were very familiar with specialised programmes…'* (P19, P). He went on to describe that, despite the enthusiasm and fresh ideas new staff brought, he was concerned about knowledge lost and its impact on previously attained progress.

Staff turnover caused problems for the school, with the principal describing it as *'…a big, big issue for us, and in all schools. But we found it particularly challenging…'* (P19, P). The turnover of staff resulted in a drain on skills and knowledge that had been developed previously. The principal gave a specific example of how this unravelled in relation an SSE intervention. He described, *'So eight of 17 were still with us. In other words, nine, got that input (reading recovery), and hopefully took it somewhere else and it benefitted their school. We didn't have*

that expertise anymore' (P19, P). The availability of substitutes furthered intensified the challenge where *'...it is more difficult Ronan to attract substitutes to schools, DEIS schools, on the fringes of the suburbs of Dublin'* (P19, P).

Material supports arose as influential additionally. Improvements in ICT resources made technical aspects of the process more achievable, especially in relation to data handling. An awareness of SSE guidelines and LAOS document were reported with the deputy stating, *'I suppose we'd refer to them. We'd be aware of them at all times'* (P20, SET/DP). How the principal viewed expertise on staff shaped the involvement of the PDST. He believed that the school held enough internal expertise to progress while he was also cognisant that, *'I actually couldn't afford to give up the staff and release them Ronan, because we were under massive pressure staff wise at that time'* (P19, P).

Interestingly, to address the contextual challenges they faced, the school accessed funding from a private trust that was affiliated with the school's Patron body, enabling enactment of SSE policy. The principal explained, *'So we got a lot of money from that trust, and we were able to bring in people to give training to the staff and I was able to get substitutes...'* (P19, P). The principal outlined that this was problematic. He argued, *'But really in a professional educational setting. To do it properly, to do it right, we needed that money'* (P19, P). Strikingly, the principal felt that the school was well funded by the DE and this was reflected in SSE, *'...in our literacy area, we invested heavily in a guided reading/shared reading library. Like to, to the tune of 10/12,000 euros. Which is a lot of money. DEIS funding across three or four years made that possible'* (P19, P).

4.6.2.4. Situated Context

The school's DEIS status was an important feature of its situated context. In DEIS, a focus on literacy and numeracy is anticipated and with that, these areas took precedence. The principal described this as appropriate in that, *'We haven't evolved so far yet Ronan to look to other areas.*

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You know, because of the challenges that we have. Like we are behind the national norms in numeracy and literacy. It's a fact' (P19, P), concluding that *'I think we're at capacity…'* (P19, P). In extension, DEIS schools must address areas that traditional schools may not have to formally consider. This is represented in the seven pillars of DEIS and described by the principal who determined,

> *…if the kids aren't coming to school, our school self-evaluation and planning work are jot…therefore, I probably would spend as much time on and probably even more during the year on the retention, the attendance, links with parents or links with outside agencies, than I would at the teaching and learning and I'm very comfortable with saying that as the principal of a DEIS school.*

(P19, P)

This scenario had an explicit effect on the enactment of SSE policy. For instance, the principal described how it was difficult to gather data due to attendance challenges. This was seen to be appreciated by the DE Social Inclusion unit who determined that DEIS planning was to take priority over SSE. The principal described their influence:

> *Yeah, they kind of much as said to us, in the social inclusion unit in the department - Ah, you're okay. You don't need to worry about school self-evaluation. Or I think they worded it more positively. They said - what you're doing already is absolutely brilliant…Keep doing it but maybe do a little bit more. And we actually, that was the message that the staff took, that I took from it.*

(P19, P)

4.7. Site Six - Riverview Together National School

Table 42. School profile

Category	Mainstream
Pupils	381
Teachers	15
SETs	3.2
ISM	(5) Principal, Deputy, AP1, two AP2s

4.7.1. SSE in Practice

SSE was first enacted in 2013, the year the school opened, and has been enacted on three occasions with two significant periods of disengagement (see table 43). The most recently undertaken SSE process was in maths from September 2018 to May 2020 and the school had drawn on some of the significant features of SSE policy. This process was led to a very strong degree by an AP1 postholder, who was now deputy principal, with some evidence of collaboration at points. The process was aligned with the six-step model, though monitoring and evaluation were not visible features (see table 44).

Table 43. SSE timeline

Period	2013 - 2014	2014 - 2015	2016 - 2018	2018 - 2020	2020 – 2022
Focus	Art	Literacy	Disengaged	Maths	Disengaged
Completed	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	NA

Table 44. Overview of most recent process (Maths)

Focus identification	Gathering evidence	Analysis and making of judgements	Creation of SIP	Sharing of report	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation

Table 45. Maths SIP sample targets and actions

Maths		
Target	Increase teaching strategies for problem solving.	Increase use of concrete materials in 2nd to 6th.
Action	Compile problem solving strategies and share them.	Resources researched, bought and distributed or centrally stored.

Regarding action implementation, three of six actions had been enacted. Impacts associated with SSE were small. Some impact was evident in relation to management. For instance, SIPs were created, and a Google Drive was set up for shared planning documents and maths materials purchased. Enhanced systems of communication with parents were referenced also. Regarding teaching, teachers' awareness was said to be enhanced in the focus area with one teacher asserting *'I think it's definitely had an impact on what I know I should be doing…'* (P24, CT).

4.7.2. Shaping Influence of Context

Table 46. Significant features of context in SSE

External Context	Professional Culture
Health Context	Attitudes, Beliefs, and Motivations
National Educational Policy	Skills and Knowledge
Industrial Relations	Collaboration
The Inspectorate	Positionality and Experience
Material Context	**Situated Context**
Time	School type
Staffing	
Training and Support	
ICT	

4.7.2.1. External Context

National educational policy shaped the enactment of the process. The broader policy context placed great challenge on enactment of SSE policy. Even though WSE reports determined that the school was doing well, the principal assessed the school's SSE as a struggle in that it *'kind of crawled along. It was kind of crippled and we kind of, we kind of didn't do a good job on it at all'* (P22, P). The deputy identified that SSE was just one aspect of a long list of formalities required in the school including special education and child protection for example. The increasing challenge was explicit in Croke Park meetings where *'That agenda is getting longer and longer'* (P23, SET/DP).

The fact that SSE had been mandated encouraged enactment. However, this did not ensure that the process was aligned with the formal policy vision. For instance, at one point, the school

choose to focus on art, an area that would be straightforward in that it was not time or energy consuming. More recently, SSE was reflected upon as being taken more seriously and staff were very willing to partake according to the principal. This contrasted with the deputy's perspective, however. In her opinion, SSE relied on goodwill, but she did report that the six-step process model had been aligned with, except for the formal monitoring and evaluation anticipated.

What emerged was that the staff were constantly engaged with work that could be aligned with the six-step model but was not part of the formal SSE process. A teacher interviewed expressed this well in describing, *'we were really working on English, and it wasn't an official self-evaluation, but like they did all the same things like they surveyed us, parents, pupils, and like set up an action plan on that'* (P24, CT).

The health context had a tremendous shaping influence on the enactment of SSE. Since Covid-19 school closures, SSE had not been enacted. When the school reopened, organisation and daily functioning were very different. The principal outlined the situation and the implications in that, *'we just stood away from it'.* He continued to describe the negative influence this had on continuity, presenting '*And it was like where's the report? Jaysis, and by that stage the person who was looking after it was with someone else, and then…I can't try and make sense of this'* (P22, P). Ultimately, more pressing priorities existed, and the deputy felt that improvement orientated work was impossible, arguing, *'…you run out of headspace, energy, time, and motivation under those kind of conditions'* (P23, SET/DP).

This directly inhibited translation of SIP actions. The deputy explained, *'…all the equipment has been bought. But I think it was stored because we couldn't use the equipment during COVID'* (P23, SET/DP) while a teacher added, *'I feel like COVID kind of really impacted on things progressing…I think the problem-solving side of things, I don't know if anything really kicked off with that'* (P24, CT). In addition, staffing became an issue and special education staff needed to be redeployed to cover classes in conjunction with a substitute crisis. The principal described,

'Which, which left us with no staff in the support team…kind of inconsistencies in classrooms'
(P22, P). Furthermore, an exodus of teaching talent was observed by the principal during this
period which meant a loss in knowledge, skills, and experience.

The Inspectorate was seen to be influential in the delivery of information and expectations
concerning the SSE process. The principal had welcomed the inspector for several advisory visits
for SSE and had attributed his knowledge around the process to these. The principal felt it was
not as easy to make these ideas happen on the ground, depicting that *'if you jump out of that
meeting immediately and started, you'd be grand. But you know, it could be a week or three later
on, you're going well, what was that? It's very easy when someone's explaining it to you* (P22,
P).

4.7.2.2. Professional Culture

At the point of research, staff held positive attitudes towards the potential value that the process
offered. The principal determined, *'I did see the value in it. If we're not going to stop and reflect
and see what we're doing well, and what we're not like, what's the point?'* (P22, P) while another
teacher viewed SSE as an aspect of professionalism, saying *'...you should be like responsible for
reflecting on what's going well, both within your own like practice and then the like, wider
school'* (P24, CT). However, enactment of the process generally, and certain process features
specifically, were still seen to be limited. For example, the incorporation of stakeholder voice
was viewed as a positive feature of SSE, and was even a target in the SIP. However, it was not
translated into practice in a strong way and the associated target was not achieved.

Once the rationale for this was queried, the principal presented that parental involvement might
not be as significant an area of focus as espoused in policy. He contemplated, *'We have our
formal communication. Are they sitting and reflecting and becoming involved in school self-
evaluation? I fear not'* (P22, P). Collaboration was also a problematic feature of enactment and
much of the translation of policy was done by the AP1 postholder alone. She believed that the

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availability of time was a deterministic element of this reality, alongside the teaching profession's lack of willingness to engage in self-criticism. She described that the culture in education was to be effective at everything and that trust needed to be built to be able to share challenges openly. This, she felt, was expressed in teachers feeling threatened by SSE and, by consequence, a reluctance to engage existed.

Furthermore, the principal's beliefs were seen to influence his vision of enacting SSE in the future. This was evident in relation to an upcoming ethos SSE which he felt was inadequate: *'I don't feel is curricular'* (P22, P). As a result, he was planning on enacting in parallel an academically focused process, which did not deal with ethos.

Examples such as this brought into perspective the significant shaping influence that leadership had on the enactment of SSE policy. Explicitly, the ISM was referenced as having directed the choice of focus. Less explicitly, leadership was seen to influence consistency and continuity in the process and in many regards, this was negatively influential. SSE was delegated by the principal who felt that he was overburdened by other commitments. He outlined, *'I don't get involved with it. It's really bad but I just don't have the flippin' time'* (P22, P). He saw this as limiting enactment and stated, *'...next time we're doing it, I'll have more involvement in it...I will remind them more at staff meeting'*. He underscored the contextual challenges of achieving this however in stating, *'But the last couple of years, it's just been easy to become disengaged'* (P22, P).

Positionality was important also. For example, school leaders argued SSE required a huge effort, whereas the class teacher felt it wasn't a big undertaking. Furthermore, it was felt that if you were not directly involved in the process, you may not know much about it. This was alluded to by the deputy, *'if you're on the periphery of that you may not actually know what's going on, or what was trying to be achieved'* (P23, SET/DP). Furthermore, the class teacher felt the maths action plan was very relevant, yet the special education teacher felt that SSE targets and actions were

not very relevant to her role: *'Am so I'm not in a classroom. So, I suppose, am no, not hugely'* (P23, SET/DP).

Another teacher felt that SSE wasn't as relevant when she was an NQT as she did not have the experience or skills to add value to the process. The school principal reiterated this view but felt that the staff were maturing to a better point now as *'...it's settled down now. So, people have the knowledge and the way. People have the experience of our school, and they know how it rolls. So, they can contribute to it'* (P22, P).

4.7.2.3. Material Context

The school was presented as an extremely busy place and time was described as *'...the greatest pressure for all of this'* (P23, SET/DP). The deputy described, *'You start in September, very enthusiastic about the idea of - Oh, yes, we're introducing - but there are already so many other initiatives that are already ongoing, and you're just constantly dividing, carving up the time that's available...'* (P23, SET/DP). The principal underscored the challenge in stating, *'I'd love to have a school where that would be the big thing for the year. But it's not like that here...There's not much time given really'* (P22, P) with significant challenges evident in *'...getting the school sorted. Building wise, class wise, community wise, and resource wise'* (P22, P). The deputy, who was the SSE lead, described her role as SET for five classes as being inconducive to enacting SSE policy.

Recently, leadership had begun to see that choices should be made in relation to what should be prioritised. The principal identified, *'...so we're letting the green flag go. We're letting Maths and Science Awards go...I think it's killing all that stuff. And making space for it is the way to go...I think SSE should be over them for sure'* (P22, P). He concluded, *'...they take up too much time. And that's something that we could cull just for the likes of this. So it is, it's initiative overload...'* (P22, P).

He was uncertain about who was to blame, however. He questioned, *'But maybe it should go back to the Department that we are really busy. But we just need to prioritise a bit more and kill the, kill the rubbish like the green flags and the active skills and the this and the that I don't think they're worth it'* (P22, P). Contrastingly, a class teacher felt that SSE did not take much time. She described that *'...the post holder who had like maths would do most of that. It wasn't like, we could give a hand here and there but yeah, not a whole lot of extra time...'* (P24, CT). She felt it deserved more time to facilitate translation:

> *Like possibly having time, am like in order to action things. And for it to kind of, say like for the maths. For the fourth class teachers to sit down for example, and say like - Okay, how are we actually bringing this into our planning and our teaching? Like, even just to get time out of the school day where you've cover for your class. And to, to plan for that. Because like, there is such a workload and paperwork and everything that gets done outside of school hours.*
>
> (P24, CT)

Staff growth and turnover influenced the continuity and quality of SSE. The principal described, *'And given that our turnover of staff in the last eight years, everything is new to everybody, every September. Most people it's new to...you've a whole new set of teachers every year... It really did affect the buy in...'* (P22, P).

Training had not been engaged with formally by participants in the research. This had left the principal feeling unconfident in his interpretation of the SSE process. The class teacher was unaware of the six-step process and supporting documents, while the deputy mentioned that some training regarding SSE had occurred as a once-off. She saw this as problematic as staff turnover had meant that most staff would not have been exposed to this. She reflected, *'I don't know that it's good enough that the Department say - here, this is really brilliant. I want you now, we need you to do this. Like they have to support it and mind it'* (P23, SET/DP). Improvements in ICT supports had also been helpful.

4.7.2.4. Situated Context

The situated context presented significant constraints for the enactment of SSE. The developing nature of the school meant that SSE was not interpreted as strongly relevant. Rather, the school had multiple areas requiring development and the SSE process was not seen to be an effective approach to improving the school. The principal outlined,

> *I doubled my staff, and I doubled my children…We asked the staff, we asked the parent body. How do you know? And sure, we don't know anything. We hardly know the staff you know. So, when school self-evaluation hit for us, it was, we were a start-up school. I always thought we should have been exempt from it.*

> (P22, P)

Resultantly, the process was enacted with an emphasis on compliance. In practice, this resulted in the choice of art as SSE focus just to tick a box, for instance. Over time, progress was observed in how staff interpreted the utility of the process, with translations seen to be concomitantly strengthened. For instance, SSE was interpreted as a mechanism by which the challenges of the developing school could be addressed. This was observed in relation to the SSE in maths. The principal described the motivation here, where the specific targets were to enhance provision in the senior classes, which were a new feature of the school:

> *So, if you imagine the eight years of our school. All of our experience is down the bottom end, and we're only grown into the older end. So, we felt like we weren't, we weren't all over maths throughout the school...*

> (P22, P)

4.8. Site Seven - St. Paul's Primary School

Table 47. School profile

Category	Mainstream
Pupils	76
Class teachers	3
SETs	2
ISM	(3) Teaching Principal, Deputy, AP2

4.8.1. SSE in Practice

A diverse picture of enactment was evident in the school. SSE had not been enacted prior to the 2018 school year. A WSE in 2017 highlighted that although improvement plans had been created for literacy and numeracy, these were not implemented, and staff indicated that the process had not aligned with the SSE process. The deputy described, *'...we didn't really have a clue what we were doing. We kind of just - blind leading the blind'* (P26, CT/DP). A significant change had occurred in 2018 with a new principal being appointed in the school, resulting in SSE becoming an integral part of the school's work. This would only last for one cycle however, with SSE not having been enacted since Covid-19 closures (see table 48).

Table 48. SSE timeline

Period	2012 – 2013	2013 – 2014	2014 – 2015	2016 – 2018	2018 - 2020	2020 - 2022
Focus	None	None	Numeracy & Literacy	Disengaged	Literacy	Disengaged
Completed	NA	NA	No	NA	Yes	NA

The most recently completed SSE focused on developing literacy, with particular emphasis on spelling and vocabulary. This was organised by the principal and the six-step model was applied. The process actions were said to be monitored informally and formal evaluation had not occurred (see table 49).

Table 49. Overview of most recently completed process (Literacy)

Focus identification	Gathering evidence	Analysis and making of judgements	Creation of SIP	Sharing of report	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation

The principal confirmed that all targets were achieved, and actions enacted, except for two of the Gaeilge related targets. The deputy also referred to many of the actions as features of practice and portrayed the changes as strongly embedded. Triangulation around the evidence presented by staff was available in a WSE follow through report from 2020 which concluded that very good progress had been made in the SSE process.

Table 50. SIP sample target and actions (Literacy)

	Literacy
Target	Teachers' planning and preparation document features clear and differentiated learning outcomes, which are based on the analysis of assessment data, explicit teaching of WOW words and phonics.
	Learning objectives reflect developmental and incremental approach to progressing pupils learning in relation to phonics, spelling and vocabulary.
Action	Teachers follow English reading policy to ensure incremental progression in teaching and learning of phonics.
	Provision of differentiated spellings for children each week.

The impacts associated with SSE included the formation of a new subject plan for English and in the standardisation of practice with the introduction of new programmes and initiatives. The deputy stated, *'It's all the same approach…Whereas, before we'd never had that'* (P26, CT/DP). SSE produced whole school plans which in turn, shaped teachers' planning. The deputy described, *'…it has made my planning a whole lot easier…I think I can see effective teaching of what I'm doing as well through it'* (P26, CT/DP). Significant change was observed in learning in addition with pupils engaged in new learning experiences such as '*the seven-step process in terms of the PDST, for the genres*' (P25, CT/DP) and in pupil attainment where the principal concluded, *'I had a report from all the standardised tests…And everything had come up…And we definitely put it down to this, to the SSE'* (P25, SET/P).

4.8.2. Shaping Influence of Context

Table 51. Features of context that shaped enactment

External Context	Professional Culture
Health Context	Beliefs, Attitudes, and Motivations
The Inspectorate	Appreciation of Stakeholder Voice
Competing Priorities	Skills and knowledge
Other schools	Collaboration
National Educational Policy	Leadership
Material Context	**Situated Context**
Staffing	History
Time	School Type
ICT	
Training and Support	

4.8.2.1. External Context

The national policy context shaped enactment. SSE policy features had clearly shaped the process of school improvement and the mandated nature of SSE meant that the school did engage. However, when asked if the school would have enacted SSE if not mandated, the principal replied, *'...would we do the official document? Well, I suppose we haven't done one since. So, probably not'* (P25, SET/P).

Furthermore, broader reform policy was significant as evident in the choice to introduce the new primary language curriculum through SSE. This was due to the increased ease of translating both in combination, rather than as separate reforms. Interestingly, several other improvement

initiatives were undertaken in parallel with SSE and this was said to make translating SIP actions challenging.

The principal reflected on the challenges this created in that *'…all the other SSEs that you're probably doing on the side that you're not calling SSE. Like, all of the initiatives and all the programmes and things like that…it is definitely hard to, to keep on top of everything'* (P25, SET/P). Ultimately, the principal felt that because of the number of initiatives, the need to react to the day to day challenges, and the additional expectations that were at play, time and quality were problematic. She argued, *'It's a juggling act…Time is a massive factor. And probably if having so many constraints on the system, like you're just constantly firefighting'* (P25, SET/P).

The health context during the Covid-19 Pandemic had significant repercussions for the enactment of SSE. Firstly, the school had stopped engaging with the process once the 2018 – 2020 process was completed. Priority focus areas shifted in addition and effort and resources were directed away from literacy and numeracy. Instead, wellbeing came to the fore. Covid-19 was also utilised to explain SIP actions that were not completed with the principal asserting, *'…it fell away because of COVID'* (P25, SET/P). However, informal evaluation for school improvement continued according to the principal who argued, *'…that's not necessarily documented anywhere. It's not in a school self-evaluation plan. But it was, it was 100% a school evaluation'* (P25, SET/P).

The consequences of Covid-19 on teaching and learning continued to be an issue even when schools reopened. Staff were concerned with student attainment which was reportedly reduced, and this meant that catching pupils up was a priority. The deputy described, *'…I think the challenge was getting just from day to day…this year it was trying to catch them up'* (P26, CT/DP) while the principal identified that Croke Park was no longer as regular. The principal asserted, *'…there was no sign of this stuff…We were just evaluating how we were going to survive (laughs), day to day'* (P25, SET/P).

The Inspectorate were seen to influence enactment in addition. A WSE in 2017 made recommendations which were presented as significant by staff with the deputy identifying, *'...it hadn't gone particularly well...'* (P26, CT/DP) and *'...it pulled out a load of recommendations...'* (P25, P). Responses to these specific recommendations were evident in SIP targets and actions and, overall, it was described by the deputy as, *'...that was the main reason that we put so much focus on the SSE...we really stripped back literacy and we spent a lot of time on it'* (P26, CT/DP). She delineated the influence this had on translation stating, '*we looked through the WSE report in detail as a staff and kind of pinpointed all the weaknesses and recommendations that were made...we planned our SSE plan on the basis of that'* (P26, SET/DP).

Evidence indicated that Inspectorate recommendations were enacted. The deputy outlined how the Inspectorate had asked for teachers to record the changes being made in their paperwork and the SIP was clearly shaped by the specific recommendations made. The principal, when asked of the value of this, indicated that to some degree, changes were not adding value. She described, *'I think it's just in case somebody comes in and visits. And you have to show all this'*. She continued, *'I personally think there's too much paperwork involved. And not just SSE. I think teaching in general. I think there's too much. Rather than a focus on the actual learning'* (P25, SET/P).

Other schools also shaped the enactment of SSE, particularly regarding making sense of the policy in practice. The principal outlined, *'...Googling schools that you know are really well run. That the principals are totally on it and know what they're, they're about in terms of doing, following the structures that are, should be in place'* (P25, SET/P). The deputy confirmed a similar influence, describing that they *'...learn from other schools as well...looking at what their plan was, and kind of identifying the similarities and differences and where we're going wrong...'* (P26, CT/DP).

4.8.2.2. Professional Culture

Positive attitudes towards SSE were evident and staff found the process to be worthwhile. The principal described for example, *'...I think SSE here is just a really natural process. It's just embedded in everything that we do'*. She continued, *'I would say it happens every day. Like, I literally like - how can I make this place better every single day? What's next? What's next?'* (P25, SET/P).

Positive attitudes were also linked to tangible impacts achieved through SSE. The deputy, for instance, stated, *'So, I always think something is worthwhile if you learn something from it...we've found it worthwhile in terms of the two new things that we've introduced are working well'* (P26, CT/DP) while the principal appreciated the structure it brought to instigating change portraying, *'It's like the whole of back to forward. And you know where we can go next. So, it has been worthwhile. I think having it on paper is definitely worthwhile'* (P25, SET/P). Interestingly, the school had not been engaged in SSE since 2019 however, with informal school improvement interpreted as being sufficient.

Further to this, staff held positive attitudes towards specific features of the process, which shaped enactment. Regarding evidence, the principal detailed that it helped inform targets with perspectives gathered from parents as useful. She stated, '*a lot of schools are always worried - will it come back negative? Some of them are off the wall, but some of them are really good and particularly in policy change'* (P25, SET/P). This was further evident in collaboration which was a feature of the most recent process. The principal described, *'The documentation was huge, but we did it together...And we do the collaborative staff discussions all the time'* (P25, SET/P) while the deputy described her perspective on the collaborative effort and resulting benefits:

> *I was definitely a lot more involved as deputy principal as well. And I understood it a lot more. In terms of like the three-year target and what you should be focusing on your one, year two, and in the third. Like all that was kind of over my head the first time around...*

> (P26, CT/DP)

Leadership had a clear shaping influence on enactment. The principal had developed structures that facilitated SSE by collaborating closely with the deputy, by filling the special duties posts that were available, and by fostering a distribution of leadership among non-post holding staff. This fostered the translation of the policy. Another key role for the principal was moderating external expectations and internal needs. She outlined the implications this had for enactment:

> *I think like really trying to balance like being tied up with the expectations of the Department, and then recognising your staffs needs and where they are at and what they're actually able for and engaging, be able to gauge and engage in. Because it's not going to be meaningful. If they're just like, oh, here we go again. We have another initiative to do or more time to, you know, they're just gonna bang out a piece of paperwork just for the sake of it…*

(P25, SET/P)

The principal found this work challenging and described a perceived mismatch in expectations which brought feelings of guilt. She summarised the scenario as follows: *'…you just constantly have a level of guilt. Because you're just like, I'm not doing anything to where the levels or standard that you are at…'* (P25, SET/P). She concluded with the impact the work had personally, stating, *'…I think people's personal lives do have an impact because the principal job is never ending'* (P25, SET/P).

4.8.2.3. Material Context

Staff turnover was problematic for the enactment of SSE policy. SSE had begun with the school's founding principal who retired in 2016. This was followed by a tumultuous period where a new principal was appointed, and all staff bar the deputy left. During this period, SSE was not engaged with, and several challenges were pointed out in a 2017 WSE. The principal summarised, *'And there had been a huge changeover of staff within those two years. And the morale was really low…'* (P25, SET/P).

As staffing challenges settled, substitute cover had become the most significant problem. This was detrimental to the SSE process in that the principal could not avail of her allocated release

days, a time when SSE would be translated. She stressed, *'...I have so many principal release days I haven't taken this year. It's an absolute joke'* (P25, SET/P).

Time for SSE was seen as a constraining factor. The principal stated, *'I would say time isn't in place. That's the big thing. We just don't have time to get up to the level of expectations that there are...you're just constantly firefighting'* (P25, SET/P). Time for paperwork was described as particularly challenging. The principal stated *'...things move so fast paced in the school environment, so you don't always go back to the paperwork'* (P25, SET/P). She contrasted, *'but it is really rewarding when you, if you have put in the time to the paperwork that you go back to it and you go - Gosh, look what we've done as well'* (P25, SET/P). Time was availed of as a school closure provided for the new primary language curriculum. This gave staff an opportunity to undertake SSE work.

Staff felt they had the skills and knowledge to enact SSE policy. Participants spoke of having received some training in SSE and referred to the PDST as having provided curricular support for the SSE focused on literacy. The deputy found this support useful and when asked if anything could change to support schools, she determined that increased support from the PDST would be welcome. The principal portrayed an interesting position here, stating, *'There is training out there. But it's finding it, organising it, having time to do it, you know. Like it's not enough to make training available...They need like people, the, the...It needs to be supported. To go to the training and do the training'* (P25, SET/P).

Alongside SSE guidelines, improvements in ICT had helped with data gathering and analysis while the LAOS quality framework was described as motivational. The principal declared, *'It backs principals, principals up in terms of what they're trying to do. You know, it's not you just, it's not coming from you. It's coming from a document'* (P25, SET/P). Additionally, the document was helpful in *'...pushing yourself all the time to be the best...when you look at the document, you're like - Oh, but I can make that even better'* (P25, SET/P).

4.8.2.4. Situated Context

The most recent SSE process occurred during a period of intense change for the school. The school had just appointed a new principal following a large turnover of staff and a WSE that called for significant change. This brought with it both challenges and opportunities for the new principal in enacting the policy. The principal described the historical context as shaping enactment with staff being highly motivated. She posited, *'People really wanted to change'* due to fact that '…*the culture had been really negatively affected'* (P25, SET/P). While SSE was utilised as a tool to achieve some of this change, particularly in relation to literacy, competing priorities reduced the significance of the process at times. At the point of research, the school had just concluded a rebranding of the school. This had been prioritised at the expense of the SSE process.

The school's location in a rural setting was seen to be problematic also. This was reported in terms of recruitment of staff and substitutes which disrupted continuity in SSE while the school's small intake and consequent size and multigrade nature, meant that a significant amount of work was spread out among a small group of staff. The deputy presented, *'…I'm deputy principal, but I'm also the classroom teacher of junior, senior, and first…'* (P26, CT/DP).

This made SSE more challenging according to the principal, who declared '*There's a lot of extra pressure going on people that they already are trying to do the classroom work as well. So, I think in a small school definitely it is more difficult*' (P25, SET/P). This was particularly because the school had a very small formal leadership team which the principal felt inhibited enactment. She argued that more formal leadership positions would '…*give people more incentive, and principals, the ability to delegate more within their team*' (P25, SET/P).

The size of the school meant that the principal also had full time teaching duties. This had a significant impact on her feelings about the effectiveness of her work and made her call into question sustainability, *'when you're trying to do two jobs, your head can never be fully in one.*

Am so, and I also think like your stage in life as well. Like, I don't have kids that I'm running home to' (P25, SET/P).

4.9. Site Eight - Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí

Table 52. School profile

Category	Mainstream boys
Pupils	526
Class teachers	20
SETs	8
ISM	(6) Admin. Principal, Deputy, AP1, three AP2s

4.9.1. SSE in Practice

The school had enacted SSE since 2016 when the current principal was appointed. Since then, SSE was described as a significant feature of the school's practice with all staff speaking of their involvement (see table 53). The SSE lead summed this up stating, '*...it's part and parcel of what you do. It's part and parcel of your staff meetings, your board of management meetings...'* (P28, SET/AP1).

Table 53. SSE timeline

Period	2012 – 2016	2016 - 2017	2017 – 2018	2018 – 2020	2020 – 2021	2021 – 2022
Focus	Disengaged	Literacy	PE	Gaeilge	Digital Learning	Wellbeing
Completed	NA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

The most recently completed SSE process had aligned with the six-step process model and employed significant policy features except for the sharing of a report (see table 54). Emphasis was placed on the earlier stages of the process with the SSE lead detailing *'We do, you know, the identifying the focus, gathering the evidence, then analysing and making judgments…'* (P28, SET/AP1).

Overall, SSE was led to a strong degree by an AP1 who outlined that she *'Kind of lead it so like, you know, involved in picking what the topic was. Putting it out to staff. Putting options out to staff. Picking it and going from there onwards and to come up with the ideas'* (P28, SET/AP1) but support was received from the ISM and a committee of staff was formed. An interesting feature emerged in that the process featured iteration when monitoring indicated that it was not working. All actions pertaining to this SSE process were confirmed as enacted. Staff referred to the actions undertaken in their practice.

Table 54. Overview of most recent process (Digital Learning)

Focus identification	Gathering evidence	Analysis and making of judgements	Creation of SIP	Sharing of report	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation

Table 55. Digital learning SIP targets and sample actions

Digital learning		
Target	Teachers provide recorded lessons for pupils.	Create a return to school plan
Action	Discuss what worked well with home schooling last year. Get agreement from teachers about recording lessons. Make short videos explaining screen recording for teachers.	Update return to school plan. Update acceptable usage policy.

Impacts associated with the process included the collaborative creation of subject plans while teachers referred to the process in positive terms. They reported that it had made their planning easier and had helped standardise practice. The AP1 described, *'It's definitely made us more streamlined in that every, like that, that our whole school planning is more effective'* (P28, SET/AP1). She continued, *'That every class is doing the same genre the same month and there's more of a focus…It has helped hugely with planning'* (P28, SET/AP1). Another teacher outlined there was *'Variation and it lacked the consistency of approach…this helps a lot'* (P29, CT/AP2).

This had influence on classroom practice with a teacher describing that it ensured that time and attention was directed toward the chosen focus areas. Pupil learning experiences were described as enhanced along with reference to stronger attainment. In literacy, a new approach to teaching writing was embedded while in Gaeilge, the AP1 argued, *'I do think the standards are improving and the children are using their Irish an awful lot more and are more into it. They're definitely enjoying it more'* (P28, SET/AP1).

4.9.2. Shaping Influence of Context

Table 56. Features of context that shaped enactment

External Context	Professional Culture
National Educational Policy	Attitudes, Beliefs, and Motivations
Health Context	Collaboration
Industrial Relations	Positionality
The Inspectorate	Leadership

Material Context	Situated Context
Time	School type
ICT, Textbooks, and Programmes	
Training and Support	

4.9.2.1. External Context

SSE policy shaped enactment. When asked if the school would engage with the process should it not be mandatory, he said, *'It would, it would. Yeah. Probably not, maybe not as thorough, and not as you know, it's great to have those six processes, you know, to follow'* (P27, P) while the SSE lead stated SSE policy ensured *'...it was done well'* (P28, SET/AP1). Other policies were significant in shaping enactment. This was evident in relation to digital learning which was chosen as the DE *'...recommended digital learning...it made sense'* (P28, SET/AP1). The principal went on to describe a time-saving rationale here: *'we wanted that recognised and I suppose what better way to do it? But then to combine it with then, with our school self-evaluation, and get the credit for it'* (P27, P). Recently, staff had initiated a wellbeing SSE as they felt externally compelled to. Some teachers felt this was appropriate as children had *'...missed out on so much'* (P30, CT). However, the AP1 argued, *'...with wellbeing, we feel that it's not like we need massive changes'* (P28, SET/AP1).

SSE was not enacted as effectively during and after the post Covid-19 school closures. Planned for targets became unachievable and even previously completed and embedded SSE changes were interrupted. The principal clarified, *'...we haven't had Croke Park hours in two years with COVID...we were doing all the extra yard supervision and everything instead'* (P27, P).

The Inspectorate was seen to initially motivate engagement with the process and continued to have a shaping influence on translation by guiding the SSE process following a recent incidental inspection. The SSE lead stated, *'she's saying that you know, you need to be more specific with your target...I felt that it was like, well, this is what the Department wants you to do. So, this is what you need to do'* (P28, SET/AP1). When queried on the impact of this advice, the AP1 stated, *'Not massively. Sort of I suppose. I'll like reword target one because of what she said... It's not like the actions were changing or anything like that'* (P28, SET/AP1).

More recently, reduced expectations had been communicated by the Inspectorate. This had influenced how staff interpreted the policy. The principal expressed relief in that *'we were trying to juggle the three different areas'* (P27, P) while the SSE lead determined '*I think it's become more accessible recently...Like keep your goals and everything very simple and clear... So now that we're looking at it from that perspective, I think it is doable'* (P28, SET/AP1). This had an influence on enactment, where according to one teacher, *'...it's really more about the changes and then just document those changes in a concise kind of a way...I think they've learned that the hard way'* (P29, CT/AP2).

4.9.2.2. Professional Culture

Attitudes towards the process were influential. A teacher described that an attitude orientated towards compliance influenced translation of the policy as *'It was more a tick the box kind of an exercise...We were just doing this because it had to be done...'*. This had evolved *'as time has gone on, it's kind of really shaped like what we're prioritising as a school'* (P29, CT/AP2). The principal confirmed, '*I personally had a, quite a bit of a negative impression of it...And I felt it*

was something forced upon us by the Inspectorate. But I can definitely see now the advantages of it' (P27, P). This motivated enactment, according to the principal, who outlined *'I'm determined to keep it going…I have to say it's a fantastic tool'* (P27, P) while a teacher described the benefits:

> *So instead of just doing things kind of for the sake of it, it's all about doing something that you're going to get the benefit of and that the school is getting. And then you're saying to yourself - well, why wouldn't I do this? This is all done for me.*

(P29, CT/AP2)

An improvement orientated attitude was already said to have existed before the SSE mandate with the AP1 describing, *'…it would have happened whether we had decided to do school self-evaluation or not'* (P28, SET/AP1). She clarified that SSE emphasises what is most of value in that, *'…it's the focus on teaching. Because it improves the school'* and continued, *'And part of my post, I've had lots of opportunity to do that'* (P28, SET/AP1). Interestingly, even when staff interpreted aspects of SSE policy as being of value, this did not always translate as would be expected. While staff outlined that they valued stakeholder voice, the SSE lead stated, *'In a way it's been done for ticking a box. But I still think it's something you should do'* (P28, SET/AP1). Further to this, findings were never communicated with parents, even though the AP1 acknowledged, *'I know it's meant to be up on the website'* (P28, SET/AP1). The principal reflected, *'I suppose maybe one, one thing we could work on a bit more is maybe, maybe involving parents in the process that bit more…asking them what areas do they think we could improve on ourselves in the school'* (P27, P).

While collaboration was a feature at points, the process was very strongly led by the AP1. She justified, *'You have to do the responsibilities when you're getting the extra allowance for it…'* (P28, SET/AP1) but acknowledged *'…I'd have a committee all the time. I'd do it and present it and then they might come up with a suggestion…the actual coming up with the ideas, that's an everybody, that's at a meeting where we would discuss it'* (P28, SET/AP1). This was important

for translation as *'...it is definitely more effective when it's coming from, the more people you have involved in it'* (P28, SET/AP1). Interestingly, some staff wanted more involvement in the process. A class teacher, for instance, responded when asked if they would change anything about the process: *'We don't sit down as a group and see how it, how it is affecting everybody in work...did it work for us?...And then even you get more ideas'* (P30, CT).

The position held by staff influenced the perspectives they held, and SSE was interpreted as a feature of ISM work. A teacher, who did not have much clarity around what the current focus was, explained, *'I suppose the only way I'm involved is following what I'm told to do'* (P30, CT) while the AP1 outlined, *'Ah, you know, most people on staff don't know about it. Don't know exactly, don't know the process. Now, I have showed them the picture and all the rest...'* (P28, SET/AP1). This extended to the relevance that SSE actions had for staff at certain class levels, with a teacher detailing, *'I was teaching in the junior end, didn't hugely impact me'* (P29, CT/AP2).

The AP1 had an important leadership role and argued this was important to avoid SSE becoming *'...just another decision made by the principal...I think to get people on board, you need to have another member of staff who's not the principal'* (P28, SET/AP1). The principal appreciated being able to delegate as he felt his role was too busy. He stated, *'I think I would be lost without my post holder...I just don't think I would have been able...'* (P27, P). Although the principal delegated leadership, he still played a key role in keeping change in focus. A teacher asserted, *'...the principal, makes a big deal about that every month'* (P30, CT) while the principal outlined *'So on every staff meeting school self-evaluation is discussed in some way or other. In our Board of Management meetings, it's on the board agenda every month...I'm constantly putting it into people's minds'* (P27, P).

It became evident that leadership played a key role in interpreting SSE policy for other staff but also in translating the ideas generated in SSE into useable information. The AP1 did this in the

creation of the SIP. She stated, '*So I rewrote this with their standards (LAOS), the questions and methods of gathering*' (P28, SET/AP1). She did this '*...as most members of staff aren't into the whole SSE. They like the idea of this is what I can do in my class…And so that's like you need to make things accessible for people*' (P28, SET/AP1). Another teacher described, '*...I think you really need a group of people there who are looking at them, breaking it down and saying to the staff…*' (P29, CT/AP2).

4.9.2.3. Material Context

Time had a large influence on enactment. The principal described, '*...it's a lot of hard work, you know, and you have to make the time for it*' (P27, P). Certain periods of the year were interpreted as more conducive to the enactment of SSE. The AP1 portrayed the first term as a good time but explained certain times were '*crazy with initiatives. Like they really take over as well*' (P28, SET/AP1).

Furthermore, SSE work was sometimes conducted outside of school hours as '*there's never a release time or anything like that…*' (P28, SET/AP1) but it also received dedicated attention during Croke Park hours. This was insufficient according to the AP1 who declared '*...the more kind of paperwork heavy that our profession has become, I suppose has become overall, the less time we have in staff meetings for those natural conversations…they've become so packed, so jam packed*' (P28, SET/AP1). Speed was portrayed as an issue, in that '*it can be very dragged out*' (P29, CT/AP2).

A solution was being searched for, however, with the principal outlining, '*...we're trying different approaches in our meetings to try and bring more group work into it so that people will have more conversation*' (P29, CT/AP2). However, there were many competing priorities that the school had to address alongside SSE. The principal described:

...dealing with the day to day stuff in the school. And there's always some other...I mean we're opening up a special class now this September, for the first time. You know, a lot of my time and energy is going towards that...So, you know, and trying to put a policy together, a separate policy for that, enrolment policy. I'm trying to pick our six, the six children who are going to go into it, trying to avoid any section 29s, you know? Trying to get a teacher who will, who will, who will take the class. Trying to staff it, trying to put all the, you know...Aw it's, it's, it's a minefield...And I often remind myself as well the fact that we have over 500 boys in the school, and we have over 1000 parents that I have to deal with. I have 28 teachers, nine SNAs, caretaker, secretary. 40 staff, you know? I'm dealing with, with the Board of Management and I'm dealing with the Inspectorate.

(P27, P)

Class teachers pointed to a similar scenario, but through a different lens:

I suppose as a class teacher, you know, your priorities are always what's going on in your own classroom. So, your priority is always your own pupils and their achievement. And so outside of class time that could be dealing with behaviour issues. That could be dealing with parents, dealing with academics or psychologists. There's a lot more of that going on now I find. Which is brilliant that we have more services and things in the school, but you do spend a lot more time dealing with other professionals and parents and everything around individuals in your class...But those type of tasks are obviously going to take over, you know, time that you might spend on school self-evaluation...

(P29, CT/AP2)

In extension, initiative overload appeared to be significant. One teacher described, *'...and now having a different initiative every single week...It can be a lot and it can sometimes, maybe less is more in ways'* (P29, CT/AP2). All the while, emphasis needed to remain on the pupils. She detailed, *'there's no point in saying they're the top priority because I still think no matter what, you're doing something wrong if you're, if your top priority isn't just the pupil sitting right in front of you'* (P29, CT/AP2).

Staff turnover had some minor influence on the enactment of SSE in the school while supporting ICT resources and programmes also made the process easier and influenced SIP target design. Knowledge about the process was communicated to the staff by the SSE lead who sourced her knowledge from PDST training and the PDST website. The LAOS document was utilised

initially, according to the principal but now he said that *'...it's the process that I would follow'* (P27, P).

Some disdain was evident in relation to the document according to the SSE lead who stated, *'The purple one I hate. I think that's a horrible book - The looking at the schools document. I think it's a horrible book and the phrases and the words. Domains, no!...It's so wordy. It's not accessible.'* (P28, SET/AP1). This idea was further developed by the AP2 who asserted that the document was useful from the perspective of her role as postholder *'...rather than in my day to day teaching'* (P29, CT/AP2). Interestingly, the inspectorate was not viewed as a supporting resource. The principal had called the school inspector for advice and received an incidental inspection soon after. This led him to query, *'If I, by calling the inspector for advice. Is she just gonna come out...I'll admit, I looked for advice elsewhere after that'* (P27, P).

4.9.2.3. Situated Context

The school's size was seen to enable enactment. This was on account of the administrative principal role and large ISM who were able to lead the process. Furthermore, the student intake shaped SSE. For example, the focus on PE was on account of a need to address an overemphasis on games.

4.10. Site Nine - Scoil Breandán

Table 57. School profile

Category	Mainstream
Pupils	694
Class teachers	37
SETs	10
ISM	(14) Admin. Principal, Admin. Deputy, five AP1s, seven AP2s

4.10.1. SSE in Practice

SSE had been enacted in literacy from 2013 - 2015 and numeracy from 2015 – 2018. No formal process had been undertaken since 2018 and the latter process was disrupted between 2016 and 2018 (see table 58). Staff spoke of many informal school improvement processes that had occurred since, however. Staff reported utilising the six-step process model but monitoring and evaluation had not been undertaken (see table 59). The most recent process was led by an AP1 who was given the role due to her post being in maths. A maths committee was formed additionally.

Table 58. SSE timeline

Period	2012 - 2013	2013 – 2015	2015 - 2016	2016 - 2018	2018 - 2022
Focus	Did not engage	Literacy	Maths	Maths Disengaged	Disengaged
Completed	NA	Yes	No	NA	NA

Table 59. Overview of most recent process (Maths)

Focus identification	Gathering evidence	Analysis and making of judgements	Creation of SIP	Sharing of report	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation

It became apparent that only some actions had been taken and it was unclear to what degree that actions were taken across classrooms. This was seen in relation to the action of introducing and using PDST maths manuals for instance, with the AP1 stating, *'Yeah, I showed it to them…I'm not too sure how many people would have used it'* (P32, SET/AP1).

Table 60. Maths SIP targets and sample actions

Maths		
Target	Increase the number of questions answered correctly in the measures strand of time from 59% to 64% over three years (2015 – 2018).	Improve the number of pupils stating that they are good at problem solving from 51% to 75% within three years (2015 - 2018).
Action	Introduce a school wide approach to problem solving – RUDDECCC targeting time strand unit. Promote strategy when teaching time.	Introduce staff to PDST measures manual with focus on the teaching of time.

Little impact was evident because of the SSE processes undertaken in the school. Conversations centred on description of the process and referenced impacts that had resulted from informal approaches to improvement that were not SSE. Ultimately, it was apparent that SSE was not a strong feature of practice in the school.

4.10.2. Shaping Influence of Context

Table 61. Features of context that shaped enactment

External Context	Professional Culture
The Inspectorate	Attitudes, Beliefs, Motivations
Standardised Testing	Collaboration
Industrial relations	Leadership
Health Context	Skills and Knowledge
National Educational Policy	
Material Context	**Situated Context**
Time	School size
Staffing	
Training and Support	
ICT	

4.10.2.1. External Context

National educational policy shaped enactment of SSE. SSE policy specifically had motivated the school to enact the process while the six-step model had an influence on enactment. Other policy reforms shaped enactment as they were enmeshed with the SSE process. This was evident in references made to an upcoming wellbeing SSE which was externally mandated. This was seen as problematic as *'we have probably 90% of the stuff going on already… how much will people*

buy into it or what else can we do within the school to improve our wellbeing'. Rather, the principal identified the costs of an emphasis here in questioning *'are there more improvements to be made in, you know, Gaeilge or in primary languages'* (P31, P).

4.10.2.2. Professional Culture

SSE did not emerge as a significant feature of the professional culture. This had significant shaping influence on the enactment of the policy. Even though the principal believed that SSE was worthwhile, she felt that informal SSE was adequate, and as such, a formal SSE process had not been enacted in the school since 2018. She argued, *'I just don't believe it's a two-year cycle or a one-year cycle thing...it doesn't need to be this big palaver - oh you have to start a cycle and it goes on for this long and...it's happening all the time'* (P31, P). She went on to say that if the process were not mandatory, the school would engage in any case as it was productive. She contextualised this however, stating her interpretation of SSE as *'...it's one part of a huge list of jobs'* (P31, P).

Further to this, the principal held the perspective that SSE did not have to be enacted in an explicit way. She pointed out that staff were aware of the process *'...at the back of their mind'* and that they *'...do it without realising it because it's part of the culture here and it has been for a very long time'* (P31, P). She continued, *'So I think SSE is great when it's working in the background...it's always there, but does it need to be constantly thrown in people's faces...'* (P31, P).

The principal portrayed staff as complicit in undertaking improvement work in that, *'everybody here is actually very willing'* (P31, P) and that strong relationships existed between staff which was described as *'...a massive advantage to the SSE process as well'* (P31, P). However, it became evident that staff, other than the SSE lead, did not have much experience with the process. A teacher described:

> *I wouldn't know too much about it but I suppose my experience would be for interviews and having to know inside out the school self-evaluation. That was always a question that we had to have ready for it. So that's kind of my knowledge of it would be from reading it. And then again implementing the problem solving back when it started.*

> (P33, CT)

Regarding the most recently completed process, the SSE lead described an appreciation of stakeholder voice. She described, *…it's nice to have parents on board as well. That's why we, one of our targets was…to make sure to decrease the number of parents who would say we don't know what's going on in the school'* (P32, SET/AP1). This was dissonant with evidence gathered in other interviews, where data collected from stakeholders was described as less useful.

Collaboration was described as a feature that occurred at some stages during the 2015 process: *'Now the other teachers would have been in groups that we had during Croke Park hours. They would have had a, an input as well'* (P32, SET/AP1) but a significant amount of the process was conducted by the AP1. The principal saw her role as guiding and supporting the process, stating *'I've to make sure that these changes are actually being implemented within classrooms. So, whether that's visiting classrooms, or getting feedback maybe from children or teachers or so on'*, while the ISM were also described as significant *'Because without them, such changes mightn't happen, you know, as easy or as quickly because it would be just so hard to manage…Whereas they can be delegated out and it just keeps things smoother and so on'* (P31, P). The principal outlined:

> *I wouldn't have the time to take on all of that either. Do you know, yes, I can manage it and make sure that targets are and dates are met and whatever else. People are implementing things. But really you need all these little working committees together and that's where we are fortunate enough in this school to have such a big management team…*

> (P31, P)

Collaboration was described as an important facet of the most recent SSE process and the AP1 outlined that much of the work for maths was completed by her and another member of staff.

She did go on to describe the important role that committees played *'...for the actual specifics, was done with a group at a later stage'* (P32, SET/AP1).

4.10.2.3. Material Context

The material context had an important shaping influence on the enactment of SSE. Firstly, time was of immense significance. For the ISM, time for the translation of SSE policy was available during post-holder meetings while all staff engaged during Croke Park hours. However, the process was described as time intensive and was said to be constrained by competing priorities. The SSE lead explained, '*But it was very time consuming at the time. You know, when you were trying to teach a class and everything like that'* (P32, SET/AP1). She went on to describe those competing priorities made collaboration impossible, outlining '*where we get those hours out of, I don't know. So that's probably the biggest challenge. It's getting the time for teachers to sit together'* (P32, SET/AP1). These contextual realities interacted with participant beliefs and culminated in a recontextualisation of SSE policy in action. The deputy communicated,

> *So I do believe in it but I suppose it's ensuring that it's in place, in the classroom, around the school, as opposed to the documentation of it in a lovely report which is always lovely to do. But it's getting the time to do these lovely reports that poses the challenge.*

> (P32, SET/AP1)

The principal also interpreted the accountability aspect of the policy as irrelevant and due to constraints, she argued, *'...as Principal myself, once I know those changes are happening, I'm happy with that. Because it can be very hard to actually get the time to sit down and document all this'* (P31, P). Ultimately, the principal described the rationale for a recontextualised enactment of SSE:

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I think the structure of SSE is very simple, it can be, it's as simple as you make it or as difficult as you make it. You know? But I think from my experience working with teachers, you have to keep it simple. You know if it's simple, and again, going back to the two homework and the behaviour policy there that we just did recently. Teachers didn't even realise they were engaging in the SSE process. Did they need to know? Here's step one, here's step two. No, they didn't because it all worked out in the end. Whereas a lot of time could have been wasted sitting down with the staff - right, we have to go through this SSE cycle. Here's step one, we're going to do this now…we wouldn't have the time for that…

(P31, P)

Training and support were engaged with by the AP1 lead and school support was received from the PDST who helped create the SIP in 2015. The availability of ICT supports had made gathering data much easier according to the principal. Staffing and their skills and knowledge were seen as adequate.

4.10.2.4. Situated Context

The school's large enrolment meant that there were plenty of staff available for SSE related work. The principal explained, *'So, yeah a large team. So, I think that's a big bonus because everybody has their different area. So they will lead, I suppose, that. And then we will always look for maybe other members of staff to join in small committees'* (P31, P). This led the principal to describe that collaboration was more important as a result. She claimed, *'So discussion is important, am groupwork, teamwork…And I think teachers are more invested in that when it comes from, you know, their own ideas'* (P31, P).

4.11. Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings arising from the within-site analysis. Here, the data gathered from each site was analysed and presented to the reader in a site by site fashion. This provided a picture of SSE policy as it has been enacted before illuminating the shaping influence that context exerted on enactment at each of the research sites.

Chapter five now presents the findings of the cross-site analysis.

Chapter 5 – Cross-Site Findings

5.1. Introduction

Chapter five holds a crucial purpose in presenting the findings derived from a comprehensive cross-site analysis. The analysis utilised a constant comparative analysis approach (Glaser, 1965) which ultimately identifies six key themes. These themes are organised to present to the reader how SSE policy has been enacted along with the role of context in shaping this at the level of the case.

In the chapter, each theme is elucidated and supported by relevant data which is displayed in various formats. This includes participant quotations, tables, and graphs. In alignment with the previous chapter, participants are identified by participant number and role identifier. However, in this chapter, it has been necessary to provide the school pseudonym in addition in identifying each participant in this chapter. This is done with the purpose of ensuring that the data does not become decontextualised.

Themes are presented to the reader as the following:

1: *Temporal Dynamics in the Enactment of SSE Policy*

2: *Ambitions and Achievements in the Enactment of SSE Policy*

3: *Adoption, Adaption, and Avoidance in the Enactment of SSE Policy*

4: *Agency and Participation in the Enactment of SSE Policy*

5: *The Shaping Influence of External, Material, and Situated Context*

6: *The Shaping Influence of Professional Cultures*

5.2. Theme One – Temporal Dynamics in the Enactment of SSE Policy

A significant finding emerges in relation to how SSE policy was enacted by schools over time. This theme is broken down into three components. In the first, patterns in enactment over the longer term are outlined. Following this, trends in enactment over the shorter-term are examined. Finally, the pattern of informal approaches to school improvement, often presented by participants as informal SSE, is established and explored.

5.2.1. Enactment Over Time

Table 62 provides an overview of the enactment of SSE reported across schools since the policy was mandated. It includes the years SSE was undertaken and the focus areas chosen. It concludes at the point of research which occurred between May and June of the 2022 school year. Periods where participants reported that no real meaningful enactment occurred are represented by white spaces. Periods where enactment was reported are represented by blue spaces. Here, enactment is defined as the undertaking of SSE up until at least the creation of a SIP.

Table 62. SSE processes enacted across schools

	S. Breandán	S. M. B.	St. Paul's	Riverview	St. Cormac's	Brisk	Longfield	Churchtown	Scoil na nÓg
12/13				School not yet	Literacy & numeracy 1	Numeracy			Literacy
13/14	Literacy			Art		Science			
14/15			Literacy & numeracy (abandoned)	Literacy	Literacy & numeracy 2				Numeracy
15/16	Numeracy								Aistear
16/17		Literacy			Literacy & numeracy 3	Literacy & digital learning (extended by 2 years)			
17/18		PE		Maths					Physical Literacy
18/19		Gaeilge	Literacy		Literacy & numeracy 4		Gaeilge	Digital learning	
19/20							Science (abandoned)	Wellbeing	Digital learning
20/21		Digital learning					Literacy		
21/22		Wellbeing							

5.2.2. Longer-term Enactment

At the level of the case, it is clear that all schools had enacted SSE at some point in time. This was evident in that all schools had created school improvement plans, and all sites featured participants that provided insights regarding their experiences of the process in action. While this is certainly a positive reflection, this does not capture the entire reality based on the evidence arising from this research. While it can be said that schools have enacted SSE policy, what emerges from the evidence once schools are compared over a ten-year period, is that SSE has been enacted in a fragmented way.

Once the sites are compared more closely with respect of this, similarities and differences emerge, and it is possible to group schools in terms of strength of consistency in enactment over time (see table 63).

Table 63. Consistency of enactment over time

Consistency of enactment	Sites
Strong (long-term)	Scoil na nÓg, St. Cormac's
Strong (more recently)	Longfield, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí
Moderate	St. Paul's, Brisk, Riverway
Weak	Churchtown, Scoil Breandán

Strong consistency of enactment was apparent in some schools, and this was evident in two respects. Firstly, a number of schools reported and demonstrated consistency in complying with expectations since the 2012 mandate. Two schools are categorisable in these terms and include St. Cormac's and Scoil na nÓg. Here participants reported formal enactment of SSE policy for between 8 and 10 years and documentary evidence triangulated these claims. In the second respect, there were some schools where consistency in enactment had become strong more

recently. This was observed in respect of Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí and Longfield. Here SSE had become a consistently employed facet of practice since 2016 and 2018 respectively.

Remaining schools by comparison enacted SSE with a moderate or weak degree of consistency. Moderately consistent sites included St. Paul's, Brisk, and Riverway where each school enacted the process for at least four years in total. Contrastingly, there were a number of schools with which consistency of enactment was not a feature. This was seen in Churchtown and Scoil Breandán where enactment up until the creation of a SIP was reported for three years or less.

While variation in consistency of enactment is visible between schools, once the evidence is considered at the level of the case, interesting patterns are identifiable. In this, three periods of problematic enactment emerge. The first period of challenge emerges during the 2012 – 2016 cycle of SSE where five of the participating schools reported no meaningful or lasting enactment of the policy. This was the observed in Churchtown and Longfield, for instance, where SSE was not reported to be a meaningful feature of practice between 2012 and 2018, six years after the policy was mandated. The second period existed during the 2016 – 2018 years while the final, most recent period of challenge arose in 2020 and continued up until the point of research, where five schools were not formally enacting the process.

5.2.3. Shorter-term Enactment

While the enactment of SSE can be analysed over the longer-term, it is also possible to analyse the enactment of SSE over the shorter-term. Two significant insights are evident in the data once this perspective is taken. These include variation in the duration of each individual SSE process and the day to day enactment of the SSE process.

In table 62 above, where enactment is demonstrated across the case, variation is most obvious with regard to duration of each individual SSE process. For example, the longest SSE process reported was four years in duration with the shortest completed SSE process being one year. It is of note that there was an outlier in the data, where in one individual SSE, that is in respect to

Science in Longfield, the process was abandoned. This was the case even though a SIP had been completed.

Regarding the day to day enactment of SSE however, participant interview and focus group data provides further rich insight. What emerged from the data was that SSE was commonly viewed as an activity that was undertaken periodically and in short bursts. While this was a commonly evident pattern across sites, variation was seen with respect of this also. For instance, in some sites, periodic bursts were described as a tactic or strategy. This was the case in Brisk, Longfield, and St. Paul's for instance:

> *So we (ISM) like to try and get chunks of time to do all the paperwork and the research, the gathering, analysis, and get the plan together.*
>
> (P14, P, Brisk)

> *Well, when we're working on a specific plan, it would be very specific and you'd dedicate a few meetings to it.*
>
> (P08, P, Longfield)

In others, the SSE process was described as more loosely planned and enacted in bursts due to necessity. This was visible in Churchtown and is exemplified in the following exert from the principal interview in Riverway:

> *(Laughs) It's intermittent. It's intermittent…It's kind of like, well it's the start of the year. And then there's probably something that happens in the middle and there's a scattering at the end. And then you go from year to year and that's basically as best as I can describe it.*
>
> (P22, P, Riverway)

5.2.4. Informal SSE

While stark gaps in the enactment of SSE in a formal sense are clear in the evidence, a further significant pattern existed with respect to the informal enactment of SSE policy across sites. Interestingly, even where disengagement with the formal process was reported, many participants argued that the objectives of the policy were being met in any case, and a strong

belief existed that schools were continuously self-evaluating for improvement in an informal way. This was a commonly observed pattern across the case:

> *I think like there's constant evaluation going on, maybe not necessarily the whole formal process...*

<div align="right">(P08, P, Longfield)</div>

> *But those conversations are happening all the time. You know, are we referring to our school self-evaluation is a part of it? Is that our target? Are we meeting that? It's probably an area that we probably need to address folded into our planning notes, etc. That could be something we could look at for sure. In terms of to, kind of have it kind of mentally there as a word.*

<div align="right">(P15, ADP, Brisk)</div>

It is important to note however, that again, variation was evident in that some schools employed informal approaches alongside the formal SSE process. This was reported in Longfield, Churchtown, and Brisk, while others reportedly employed an informal approach predominantly. This was strongly presented in Scoil Breandán. Here, even though a documented process had only occurred once over a ten-year period, the principal argued that there were many examples of SSE that had occurred informally:

> *...my opinion on SSE is we're doing it all the time that it doesn't need to be this big palaver - oh you have to start a cycle and it goes on for this long and...it's happening all the time...I, somebody coming in and - let me see your SSE report for the last few years. Well I've lots of them around but they're here, they're there and they're there.*

<div align="right">(P31, P, Scoil Breandán)</div>

5.2.4.1. Increase in Informal SSE

It is of note that the prevalence of this approach was observed to be increasing of late in a number of schools where participants, particularly those in formal leadership roles, reported that informal approaches were now deemed adequate. This was evident even in schools where SSE had previously been described as embedded, successful, and impactful. This was communicated by the principal in Scoil na nÓg for instance, who reflected, *'And certainly at the beginning, we felt*

we had to do it. Now, I don't think we did. You know, I mean, a professional conversation amongst ourselves might be enough' (P01, P, Scoil na nÓg).

While this was a common feature across sites, variation was observed in relation to how closely aligned informal enactment was by comparison to the formal policy. In some schools, this informal approach had clearly been influenced by SSE policy:

> *We, like this year, we were really working on English, and it wasn't an official self-evaluation, but like they did all the same things like they surveyed us, parents, pupils, and like set up an action plan on that. And so much has changed.*

> (P24, CT, Riverway)

5.2.4.2. Variations in Informal SSE

What is interesting in this is what specific elements of the policy were included or avoided by schools in their informal enactments of the policy. Similarities here emerged in that schools frequently reported employing the setting of a focus, whole staff collaborative input, and the setting of actions to achieve targets. Less frequently included aspects included the gathering of evidence, the inclusion of parental and student voice, and formal monitoring and evaluation.

Importantly, a key similarity that emerged was evident in the documenting of the process. This was a feature of the process which was interpreted in a contentious way in many sites. These elements permeated participant descriptions of the informal approaches utilised, as depicted in table 64.

Table 64. 'Informal SSE' examples

'Informal SSE'	Participant/Site	*Data example*
	(P08, P, Longfield)	*We just wouldn't have been, it wouldn't have been the formal process and we wouldn't have been doing all the paperwork involved.*
	(P25, SET/P, St. Paul's)	*But then since then, it's become just more like, ingrained in us constantly improving all the time…So it's just reminding yourself to record it. Paperwork, paperwork, paperwork. Because it is, a lot of it is being done throughout the school.*
	(P31, P, Scoil Breandán)	*We've been using the process but not documenting it. And I think that's maybe where school self-evaluation can sometimes get a bit lost. Because as far as I'm concerned, the school self-evaluation is happening all the time. You're always working on something that needs to be worked on.*
	(P20, SET/DP, St. Cormac's)	*Am, you know, I suppose that is, that's what we were doing on the ground. You know, we're not issuing a report every, after every time. We're not gathering the data and sitting down or whatever. It's, we're doing it as we go along.*

5.3. Theme Two - Ambitions and Achievements in the Enactment of SSE Policy

Theme two exhibits the ambitions and achievements associated with SSE across the case. To achieve this, findings relating to the focus, the purpose, and the perceived impacts that emerged from the cross-site analysis are elucidated. This analysis presents the underlying purposes of school improvement and compliance, that SSE was focused on certain areas more than others, and that anticipated and unanticipated impacts were reported by participants as a result of SSE.

5.3.1. The Focus of SSE

The focus areas chosen are presented in table 65. An outlier in terms of frequency was observed in literacy and numeracy, with fifteen SSE processes. Digital learning was recorded in four instances. Comparatively, PE was in focus three times, Wellbeing, Science, and Gaeilge twice, while Aistear and Art appeared once. It is important to note that although Literacy and Numeracy are standalone curricular areas, these were frequently the dual focus of individual SSE processes. As such, they were recorded in this way.

Table 65. Focus of processes enacted across sites
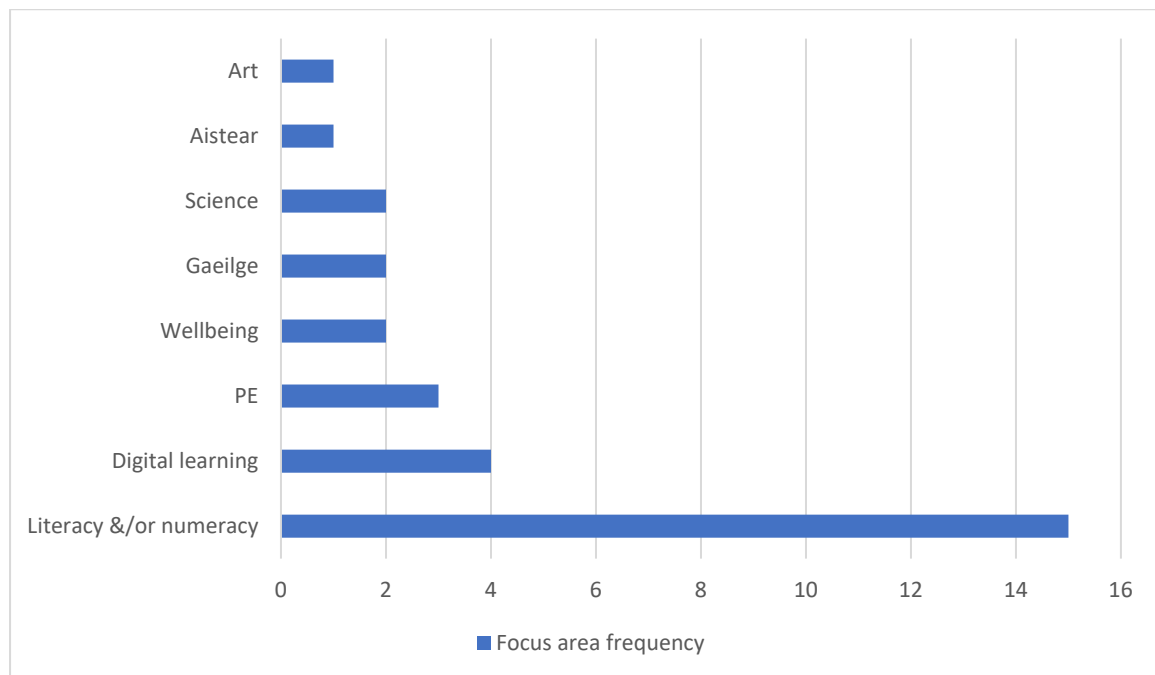
Participant responses provide further illustrations and a mixture of rationale are provided with respect to focus selection. In some instances, the focus chosen was described as being determined by a need within the school or an interest among staff for progression in a certain area. This was described in relation to Aistear in Scoil na nÓg and Science and PE in Longview. For others, the SSE focus areas were presented as being determined by national educational policy directions provided by the DE. This was communicated in Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí and Longfield, for instance:

> *So you know, the fact that we're doing all this work and putting all this time into digital learning, I suppose we wanted that recognised and I suppose what better way to do it? But then to combine it with then, with our school self-evaluation, and get the credit for it.*

> (P27, P, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí)

> *But I think that was probably a good start, because we were forced into it. Because we were like, we better do this. Because it was in our WSE report. And now we're like, actually, we can do this.*

> (P11, CT/AP2, Longfield)

In a few sites and in relation to some of the focus areas chosen, it was observed that choices had been determined by the ease with which they could be completed. This was the position portrayed in Riverway in relation to art, for example.

What is missing in respect of focus area is also striking. Once the broader curriculum is considered, the data indicates that there has been a dearth of attention paid to certain disciplines including the Arts and the SESE subjects by schools in this case study. This has been reflected in the data with a particularly worrying trend visible in subsequent translations of policy that feature a strong compliance orientation:

> *...it's a shame now that they're making that priority because I don't think it's actually a priority but yet, it's one we're gonna have to just do for the sake of it because it's been identified as priority by the inspectorate.*

> (P08, P, Longfield)

5.3.2. The Purpose of SSE

Once sites were compared regarding the purpose with which SSE was enacted, two distinguishable categories of underpinning emerged. These included the enactment of SSE for school improvement and the enactment of SSE for compliance. What was particularly interesting with regard to this was that these purposes were not presented as mutually exclusive within schools across the case. Rather, as opposed to an either or scenario, a complex intermingling of these purposes was observed in the evidence.

5.3.2.1. School Improvement

With respect to school improvement, participants across sites consistently described the process as a means of improving their schools. This was put in concrete terms as a desire to improve student experiences and learning, improve teacher knowledge, skills, and practices, and a desire to make teachers' work more efficient. For a very strong majority of participants, SSE was presented in these ways:

> *I suppose we're kind of always trying to improve the teaching and learning that's happening in the school.*

> (P17, CT/AP2, Brisk)

> *You have to learn…if you want better children, you should really better the school. If you better the school, you better the children. So it makes sense.*

> (P04, CT/AP2, Scoil na nÓg)

What was striking in this was that this underpinning purpose was described as being existent in relation to all the work that participants engaged with, regardless of whether it was in relation to the enactment of SSE or in relation to their work as teachers and leaders more broadly. Additionally, even where participants described not enacting SSE, they portrayed school improvement as the reason for which SSE policy should be enacted.

5.3.2.2. Compliance

As such, it is unsurprising to observe that compliance was also seen to be a necessary motivating factor in enacting SSE. This was especially visible with regard to the enactment of a formal SSE process, as demonstrated by the principal in St. Paul's. When asked why the school engaged in SSE, she replied, *'The formal one because we had to. It was something we had to do, but we would have done it anyway'* (P25, SET/P, St. Paul's).

This was a common pattern across sites. Even though school improvement was presented as the underpinning purpose for enacting SSE, without an external expectation to comply with the policy, SSE would not have been enacted as it was. This was further observed in Churchtown, where the principal described the motivating purpose: *'And I suppose that, you know, expected of us to have done. To be done and you know, and that's, like, you know, parents will be aware of that as well'* (P05, CT/P, Churchtown).

Compliance as a motivating purpose was problematic in terms of its resultant influence on the quality of enactment, however. This was most clearly visible with respect to the early enactment of the process and was associated with unimpactful application of the SSE process on the ground:

> *So the first couple of years, we kind of did it, kind of. I can't even remember what we did (Laughs).*
>
> (P22, P, Riverway)

> *...we probably didn't buy into it. You know, we did look at data in the school. But in a very superficial way. We did sample parents, but hand-picked parents...But we were so superficial, that we really didn't get into any depth and so therefore, it didn't really impact upon us...*
>
> (P19, P, St. Cormac's)

However, in some sites, SSE was described as progressing to a point where school improvement was now the central motivating factor. This was demonstrated by a participant in Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí, for instance, where it was outlined, '*So instead of just doing things kind of for the*

sake of it, it's all about doing something that you're going to get the benefit of and that the school is getting' (P29, CT/AP2, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí).

5.3.3. Perceived Impacts of SSE

From the evidence gathered, perceived impacts identified within each site were compared. From this evidence, it emerged that similarities and differences existed in relation to the strength of perceived impact across sites. In the Irish primary context, educational quality is conceptualised within the domains of teaching, learning, leadership, and management (DES, 2016b, 2016c) and this provided the framework within which the findings were comparatively organised. Table 66 presents an overview of judgement passed on the reported impact across sites.

Table 66. Degree of impact reported in the areas of teaching and learning and leadership and management

School	Judgement 1: Reported Impact - Teaching & Learning	Judgement 2: Reported Impact - Leadership & Management
Scoil na nÓg	Large	Moderate
Churchtown	Little	Moderate
Longview	Large	Large
Brisk	Large	Moderate
St. Cormac's	Moderate	Moderate
Riverway	Little	Moderate
St. Paul's	Large	Large
Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí	Large	Moderate
Scoil Breandán	Little	Little

5.3.3.1. Anticipated Impacts

In this research, perceived positive impacts associated with SSE were seen to be varied between sites (see table 66). In Longfield and St. Paul's, SSE was associated with large positive impacts in both teaching and learning and leadership and management. Scoil Breandán was an outlier in that SSE was associated with little reported positive impact in either domain. In most other schools, large positive impacts were observed in the domain of teaching and learning, while moderate positive impacts were evident in leadership and management practices. This was except for St. Cormac's, where positive impact on teaching and learning was categorised as moderate. When this is considered in comparison to the overarching objective with which SSE was introduced, that is with the aim of improving teaching and learning, this reflects positively with respect of most schools where meaningful perceived impacts are reported.

5.3.3.2. Unanticipated Impacts

However, this research uncovered an interesting finding relating to how schools understood positive impacts. What became particularly apparent was that participants regularly reported impacts that were not always understood in line with the formal SIP targets chosen. For instance, some staff reported that they were motivated to engage in professional development as a result of being involved in the SSE process, while others described taking a new lens on other practices, unrelated to the SSE process focus:

> *…I think it makes you aware of, like, reflecting on your own teaching…subconsciously, you're kind of thinking how can I change things as well.*

(P12, CT, Longfield).

> *I did two summer courses on it…Because I felt a little bit inadequate.*

(P04, CT/AP2, Scoil na nÓg)

In extension of this, concerning leadership and management, the standardisation of teaching and learning across classrooms was also reported in several sites. Particularly, by comparison to school improvement efforts that were not aligned with SSE, some participants determined that

the policy was helpful in providing structural benefits. This was argued by some participants to be significant as it had a consequent impact on teachers' practices and pupils' learning experiences: *'I suppose, it gave a structure to it.. I think actually it's a bonus now. It gives a better shape to it. A better structure and a better timeline'* (P14, P, Brisk). Examples of stronger levels of accountability arising were also evident, and are depicted in table 67.

Table 67. 'Accountability' examples

'Accountability'	Participant/Site	*Data example*
	(P01, P, Scoil na nÓg)	*…it brings the consistency that you need.*
	(P13, CT, Longfield)	*…you know a bit more about what's going on in the school like policy wise and you know, what kind of management to be looking for you to be doing.*
	(P17, CT/AP2, Brisk)	*…focuses your attention on or it reminds you that you know, to get the parents involved and to kind of incorporate the pupil voice.*
	(P05, CT/P, Churchtown)	*And maybe like there is that pressure on them as well that they know we'll revisit it and it's like, well, you know, what, you know, how have you addressed this in your…they're accountable, you know?*

5.3.3.3. Impacts Changing Over Time

A further interesting finding emerged in that impacts were seen to change overtime between SSE processes in individual schools. This was evident in schools such as Longfield, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí, and St. Cormac's where early iterations of the process were presented as unimpactful

but that with subsequent processes, impacts reportedly grew. This perspective appeared frequently in the data and was tied to SSE as a positive experience:

> *I do remember we found target right and quite tricky at the start and we didn't know how to actually put down targets that we could see were, what's the word? Measurable? So how can we actually say we've reached that target and say how we've done it. So I think that says we've gotten much better at doing that.*

> (P09, SET/DP, Longfield)

> *I've engaged with a whole lot more in the last couple of years. Because I think we've got a lot more out of it. We've put a lot more in. We've got a lot more out than we did at the very beginning.*

> (P29, CT/AP2, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí)

However, in other instances, even when SSE had previously been associated with significant impacts, the process had been disengaged with and as such, no impact could arise. This was vividly evident in St. Paul's. Here deep change had resulted following the most recently completed SSE process, but SSE had not been engaged with in over two years since that point in time.

5.4. Theme Three – Adoption, Adaption, and Avoidance in the Enactment of SSE Policy

Theme three presents the evidence pertaining to how schools have adopted, adapted, and avoided SSE policy. The theme draws on findings relating to two central features. These are identified in alignment with the six-step process model and time, place, and pace in the enactment of SSE policy. Overall, this theme provides an overview of what elements of SSE policy have been enacted, what elements have not, and ultimately, how SSE policy has been remade and recontextualised in context by actors.

5.4.1. Alignment with the Six-Step Process Model

Important insight is achievable with regard to how SSE was enacted with examination of the features of the process that schools employed as they enacted the policy. In this research, emphasis in analysis was placed on the most recently completed SSE process in each school. Process steps enacted across sites are recorded in green in table 68. Steps that were not enacted are recorded in red.

Table 68. Process features undertaken

	Focus identified	Gathered evidence	Analysis	Judgement	SIP	Sharing of report	Implementation (Initiated)	Confirmed completion of actions	Formal monitoring	Formal Evaluation
S. na nÓg	green	green	green	green	green	red	green	green	red	red
Churchtown	green	green	green	green	green	red	green	green	red	red
Longfield	green	green	green	green	green	red	green	green	red	red
Brisk	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	red	red	red
St. Cormac	green	green	green	green	green	red	green	green	green	green
Riverview	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	red	red	red
St. Paul's	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	red	red	red
S. M. B.	green	green	green	green	green	red	green	green	green	green
S. Breandán	green	green	green	green	green	green	green	red	red	red

What becomes evident once this evidence is considered is that schools across the case enjoyed success and faced challenges in similar areas, with some variation between sites also visible. Areas where schools most frequently demonstrated alignment with the SSE policy model include the identification of a focus, the gathering of evidence, the analysis and passing of judgments based on evidence, and the creation of a SIP. Comparatively, areas in which schools demonstrated divergence from the SSE policy model became particularly visible in the latter stages of the process. In particular, monitoring and evaluation of the process were seen to be formally undertaken in only two of nine schools.

Overall, participant commentary consistently reported that most aspects of the process had been undertaken but that elements of the process were missing in all sites. Illuminating examples of avoided features are provided in table 69.

Table 69. 'Avoided' examples

'Avoided'	Participant/Site	*Data example*
	(P08, P, Longfield)	*We do. You know, the identifying the focus, gathering the evidence, then analysing and making judgments and all that we will do. I suppose maybe one, one thing we could work on a bit more is maybe, maybe involving parents in the process that bit more.*
	(P27, P, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí)	*And I'm sure maybe we were doing four of the six steps and doing some of them correctly and some of them half. So I suppose that gave us structure to it.*
	(P31, P, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí)	*I suppose maybe one, one thing we could work on a bit more is maybe, maybe involving parents in the process that bit more.*
	(P01, P, Scoil na nÓg)	*No, we didn't. And that's something I know I've fallen down on. I haven't and most schools will put them up on their website.*
	(P14, P, Brisk)	*So I'd like to feel that we were probably following five of those steps previous to this. I would say the monitoring was probably our area that we weren't strong on.*

Once schools are considered in relation to one another, interesting patterns are visible concerning the elements of the six-step model which have not been enacted. These are evident in respect of the sharing of a report where five of nine schools did not enact this step, in the completion of all actions, where four of nine schools could not state that this had been achieved, and in formal monitoring and evaluation where only two schools reported that this had been enacted.

5.4.2. Time, Place, and Pace

Once sites were compared, similarities and differences emerged with respect to three aspects of SSE. These included the time in which SSE was enacted, the places in which it was enacted, and the pace with which it was enacted. These aspects are now presented as they were identified in the data.

5.4.2.1. Time and Place: Translation

With regard to the time in which SSE was enacted, findings indicated that two distinct conceptualisations of the SSE process were held across sites. The first pertained to what is described here as the technical aspects of the process with the second being described as the classroom aspects of the process related to teaching and learning specifically. While actions undertaken as part of the SSE process were referenced in the data, a very significant degree of attention was paid to the technical aspects of the process in participant responses.

Across sites, the technical work around SSE was frequently cited as taking place in Croke Park meetings. This was especially with regard to the collaborative facets of the process including the identification of a focus, engagement with evidence, in contributing to the formulation of an SIP, or in relation to sensemaking. Without Croke Park, many reported that SSE would not look as it did, and others further indicated that without Croke Park, SSE would not happen:

> *If Croke Park weren't there, that'd be a different ballgame altogether then in terms of when it would be done.*

(P19, P, St. Cormac's)

> *Well, when else would it be? You know. There's no, I mean, once the children come in the doors at nine o'clock. You now the gates open, you look at your watch and the bell is going and it's the end of the day. There's no time at any other stage.*

(P01, P, Scoil na nÓg)

However, very many participants also outlined that a reliance on Croke Park time for SSE was highly problematic. This was particularly attributed to competing priorities that also take time in Croke Park meetings, while some negative attitudes were observed in relation to Croke Park more broadly (see table 70).

Table 70. 'Problems with Croke Park' examples

'Problems with Croke Park'	Participant/site	*Data example*
	(P15, ADP, Brisk)	*...there's not enough of them or there's too little of them or people don't have the headspace after school to do it.*
	(P25, CT/P, St. Paul's)	*Just the Croke Park hours. But a lot of that is, we need for the day to day stuff.*
	(P23, SET/DP, Riverway)	*That agenda is getting longer and longer...I think everybody resents the Croke Park time.*
	(P14, P, Brisk)	*The dreaded Croke Park hours...Croke Park hours are seen as a negative. We use them sensibly here, but teachers would not, they would be delighted if we got rid of them.*

However, Croke park was not the only time in which the process was translated. In St. Cormac's, SSE was a feature of senior management meetings which took place after school and reportedly took a significant amount of time. In Springfield and Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí, actors reported that SSE was periodically carried out at home in the evenings or during holiday time, with some reference made to the negative influence this had on actors' personal lives.

5.4.2.2. Time and Place: Interpretation

The previous examples refer to translations of the policy, and it is intriguing to consider interpretations of SSE policy also. What becomes clear is that SSE is interpreted differently in various places and at various times. For example, principals often reported that initial readings and sensemaking of SSE policy occurred off-site during CPD courses both specifically related to SSE or during training that pertained to another area unrelated to SSE. Furthermore, many teachers referred to off-site continuing professional development and drew attention to the

consistent reference made to SSE during all continuing professional development non-SSE specific courses they attended. This was directly associated with the choices and actions made in relation to the practical application of SSE in some contexts. For example, in Longview and Scoil na nÓg, CPD engagement directly influenced the focus areas chosen in the SSE process.

5.4.2.3. Pace

Another important finding that emerged in the comparative analysis between school sites was the pace with which SSE was enacted. Two schools emerged as outliers here. These were St. Paul's and Longview. While St. Paul's had enacted its most recent process in a highly rapid way, this was a particularly notable feature of the enactment of SSE policy in Longview. Here, a pattern of rapid enactment was consistently observed across SSE processes with participants described the technical aspects of the process as occurring over a very short time frame. This was said to have contributed to success in that in ensured momentum was maintained and that the process realised the impacts it had set out to achieve.

Comparatively, most other schools enacted the SSE process over longer periods and this was described as problematic by participants in some schools. For example, in Riverway, it became apparent that the pace of enactment was perceived as being problematic by both the principal and the teachers, as it did not allow for the school to meet its developmental needs. Particularly, momentum was described as being lost to the detriment of impact on the ground.

5.5. Theme Four – Agency and Participation in the Enactment of SSE Policy

Theme four focuses on the people involved in the enactment of SSE policy. Firstly, the involvement of staff in the school sites is compared and examined before parental and student involvement is explored. What emerges is that the degree of agency and participation in the enactment of SSE policy, alongside the relevance it holds for staff, appears strongly associated with position.

5.5.1. Staff Involvement

To create a picture of staff involvement in the SSE process, the role of the principal, the ISM, and teachers were compared and contrasted, as evident in the most recently completed SSE process in each school. From this, it was possible to provide an overall judgement on the quality of collaboration at each site. Table 71 portrays the degree of involvement across sites in relation to the enactment of the most recently completed SSE process. The constituent elements are discussed in the coming sections.

Table 71. Leadership and participation across sites

Site	Role of Principal	SSE lead	Role of ISM	Role of Teachers	Overall degree of collaboration
S. na nÓg	Strong involvement	NA	Some involvement	Some involvement	Moderate
Churchtown	Strong involvement	NA	Little involvement	Little involvement	Weak
Longfield	Strong involvement	NA	Strong involvement	Strong involvement	Strong
Brisk	Overseen/delegated	Strong involvement	Strong involvement	Some involvement	Moderate
St. Cormac's	Overseen/delegated	Strong involvement	Strong involvement	Some involvement	Moderate
Riverview	Delegated	Strong involvement	Some involvement	Some involvement	Moderate
St. Paul's	Strong involvement	NA	Strong involvement	Strong involvement	Strong
S.M.B.	Overseen/delegated	Strong involvement	Some involvement	Some involvement	Moderate
S. Breandán	Delegated	Strong involvement	Some involvement	Some involvement	Moderate

5.5.2. Collaboration

Regarding collaboration, SSE was described as a collaborative process in all sites. However, once all of the evidence at each site was considered, variation in the level of collaboration becomes visible. In a few sites, SSE was evidently highly collaborative, with teaching and leadership staff reporting a strong degree of involvement at all stages. This was so in Longfield in particular where staff detailed deep involvement, regardless of position, but was also observed to a strong degree in St. Paul's during the most recently completed SSE process:

> *So we kind of talked about it in the staff meetings and then kind of would break up then into smaller groups and discuss how it would impact like our class band.*

> (P12, CT, Longfield)

It definitely is a thing that has to be done as a whole staff. Not individually.

<div align="right">(P26, CT/DP, St. Paul's)</div>

Comparatively, in most other schools, while collaboration was an evident feature, it became apparent that whole staff collaboration occurred to a more intense degree at specific stages of the process. This was particularly evident at the stages of identifying a focus, creating the school improvement plan, and where staff would review a plan and offer additional insight. There was one notable exception in the data with regard to collaboration. In Churchtown, SSE was portrayed as something that was very heavily reliant on the principal alone, with other staff demonstrating very little involvement or knowledge with regard to the process.

A further interesting facet of the evidence related to the varying degrees of involvement staff members held in the enactment of SSE policy observed. This was observed in several respects. For instance, principals and ISM members across a majority of sites had more significant roles in the enactment of SSE policy when compared to those in non-ISM positions. Furthermore, it was apparent that in some sites, much of the work that occurred in SSE, especially with respect to the technical elements of the process, was undertaken by the ISM or a committee. Examples of this are presented in table 72.

Table 72. 'Significance of formal leaders' examples

'Significance of formal leaders'	Participant/ Site	*Data sample*
	(P14, P, Brisk)	*We tend to leave it till September for the in school management team.*
	(P15, ADP, Brisk)	*It was core leaders at every level. I was involved in the maths plan. There was a literacy group involved with the literacy that would be maybe management, say post holders for the various groups.*
	(P29, SET/AP2, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí)	*Again, it'd be great if everybody was looking at them all the time, but I think in reality, it's more so, it's what's coming from the management and saying, you know, this is what we're focusing on. Or this is the approach the department are taking to this. And this is what we're being asked to do. And this is what you're being asked to do. And then people just take, take that and run with it, you know, more so. I think that's the practicality of it, whether that's the right thing to do or not.*

Committees were particularly evident in St. Cormac's, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí, and Scoil Breandán, and were consistently lead by a significant leader. This was not always the principal, however. In many instances delegation of responsibility for SSE was evident. In Brisk, a clear, formal, and very deliberate hierarchy was reported with the principal delegating SSE responsibility to a the deputy principal who lead a team comprising of one teacher from each grade level. Comparatively, in St. Cormac's, Riverview, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí, and Scoil Breandán, responsibility for SSE was delegated to a formal post holder other than the principal, who was not always supported by a committee.

5.5.3. Significant Individual

While the formal position that the SSE leader held varied between schools, a common pattern emerged in that a prominent individual was central to enactment in the schools. This was the case across schools and across SSE processes. Here, a principal, deputy principal, or AP1 ensured the process was enacted. This was observed concerning communication of the policy but also in facilitating others being involved. Even more strikingly still, it was common across the case that SSE leaders described that many steps within the process were conducted alone or that work between steps was undertaken by them alone. This finding was triangulated in many instances by staff in schools. Here, much commentary determined that without a key individual taking the lead on the process, it would not have been enacted as it was. This is exemplified below in table 73.

Table 73. 'Significant individual' examples

'Significant individual'	Participant/ Site	*Data sample*
	(P02, CT/DP, Scoil na nÓg)	*I suppose (Principal) has been good at kind of organising it…She kind of would have the plans laid out…so she would be the one organising it all and then we meet as a staff and kind of discuss where we feel we need to improve.*
	(P30, CT, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí)	*I mean, (Postholder), as I said, and she's so good, like she's super organised and would know what was going on and everything like that.*
	(P08, P, Longfield)	*…this was like something that has to be done. So I don't want to have to do it all by myself. So let's do it in a collaborative way. You know? Even though I'm still doing the basis of it, you know?*

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5.5.4. Positionality

A clear finding emerging from the data was that the position that staff members held was strongly associated with the degree of involvement and agency in enacting the policy. For example, SETs across schools reported that SSE was less applicable to them, while in some sites, teachers of infants described the content of the SSE process as holding less relevance in their work. Seniority and experience appeared significant also. For example, newly qualified teachers (NQTs), while few in number in the research, often described their roles as implementing actions decided by others, but there were some instances where teachers described similar feelings:

> *But in terms of do we refer to this as part of our school self-evaluation? I'm not too sure. I think it's kind of interwoven and maybe the words of school self-evaluation or SIP plans and such, kind of nearly stay with maybe the ISM team per se.*

> (P15, ADP, Brisk)

Even so, it was interesting that even among the broader teaching staff, varying degrees of involvement and relevance were reported. In some instances, class teachers at certain grade levels did not feel involved or described SSE as something where they just received direction. This was also described by some more recently qualified teachers, such as an NQT in Brisk, who reasoned that her role was to do what was asked. Others reported that the SSE process was not relevant to the needs of their class group or role, as was the case with some infant teachers in both Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí and Longfield. In several sites, SETs outlined that SSE was not relevant to their work and had not impacted on their practice. This is depicted in table 74.

Table 74. **'Positionality' examples**

'Positionality'	Participant/ Site	Sample quotation
	(P13, CT, Brisk)	*I suppose my role would be to make sure that I'm informed of the school self-evaluation and that I'm on the same page as everybody else coming into the school and implementing that into my day to day.*
	(P29, CT/AP2, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí)	*I was teaching in the junior end, didn't hugely impact me.*
	(P30, CT, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí)	*I suppose the only way I'm involved is following what I'm told to do.*
	(P04, SET/AP2, Scoil na nÓg)	*I'm in SET at the moment. So, actually, I haven't really had to really do, as much with it.*

5.5.5. Student and Parental Involvement

The degree and nature of student and parental involvement in the SSE process was an important finding within the study. It was clear from interview and focus group data, alongside the evidence collected from school improvement plans, that all schools had included students and parents, at least to some degree, in the SSE process. While this was so, involvement most prevalently consisted of students and parents providing evidence to inform decision making by in school actors.

While participants frequently determined that parents and students should be involved in the process, it was also frequently stated that the value they added, was not particularly strong. This was described by the principal in Scoil na nÓg for example. Here the inclusion of questionnaires to gather perspectives was described as artificial:

But we have done like the, we have done questionnaires for parents and children for each, each of them. So they're, there if you want to see them. But yeah. Some of it seems a bit artificial.

(P01, P, Scoil na nÓg)

However, there were a few instances where teachers reflected upon insights that did arise from pupil evidence, but these were minimal in the research data:

The students really surprised us. They were far more aware of what's going on in the school. They were very vocal on what wasn't good in the school, and what areas they would like to see implemented and introduced to the school.

(P14, P, Brisk)

Concerning the involvement of parents and students, this was often described as something that was ongoing throughout the year and was an informal aspect of school life:

Yeah, I do. Yeah. So they're…I'm involved with the parent's association, and they're doing up say a survey at the moment on lunches. And they're doing it, they had previously done a survey on homework. And they're doing one on like cycling to school. So they're, they're used to the idea that they have a voice and that what they contribute, how they contribute will be listened to and will impact what we're going to do.

(P24, CT/AP2, Riverway)

Interestingly, there was a feeling of parental and student involvement as being a shortcoming in the processes enacted. This was especially evident in several of the interviews with school leaders and was particularly visible in the study's junior schools. Here the voice of children was described as difficult to capture. Comparatively, in Riverway and St. Cormac's, parental interest in school governance was described as an ideal rather than a reality.

5.6. Theme Five – The Influence of External, Material, and Situated Context

Theme five presents the findings related to the external, material, and situated context. In doing this, the section presents each of the components that were identified within each contextual dimension before illustrating their specific influences on the enactment of SSE policy across sites.

5.6.1. The Shaping Influence of External Context

Four influential components of external context were identified across the case and have been defined as the broader national context, the national policy context, SSE policy, and external agents. Similarities and dissimilarities were observed in relation to the shaping influence of these factors on the enactment of SSE policy in the schools.

5.6.1.1. Broader National Context

The broader national context was a highly influential and dynamic force across school sites. In the evidence, the broader national context was positioned almost exclusively as a constraining influence on the enactment of SSE policy. This was most evident with respect to social and economic conditions, such as the 2007 economic recession and more recent housing and cost of living crisis, which was particularly strongly referenced in Brisk and Churchtown. Here, second-order effects arising included negative attitudes in the reception to the policy, staff turnover, and an absence of substitute cover were discussed, highlighting an impact on both interpretations and translations of the policy. Furthermore, the constraining influence across sites arising from the industrial relations dispute, alongside the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighted the volatile and impactful influence of the broader national context. Overall, it was common that participants reported that little time or energy was available for SSE policy under such conditions.

5.6.1.2. National Educational Policy

The influence of national educational policy was significant across the case. In the first instance, SSE was mainly enacted during Croke Park hours, as legislated at a national level. Without this, time for collaborative work in SSE would have been problematic. While helpful, this was frequently described as inadequate for the scope of work that was necessary for SSE to be enacted appropriately.

Adjacently, national policy priorities were seen to permeate SSE processes in that schools often clustered SSE with other policies. This frequently directed the focus of the process according to many, including the principal in Churchtown, who stated, *'they were influencing why we were picking those topics…And I suppose that, you know, expected of us to have done'* (P05, CT/P, Churchtown).

The national policy context was also described as immensely constraining due to its complicated and overloaded nature. This was experienced more intensely in some schools over others. Examples where this was particularly constraining included Riverway, Churchtown, Scoil na nÓg and St. Cormac's, where actors referred to a lack of time and energy for SSE due to the intensity of competing priorities.

SSE policy specifically, by comparison, was significant in that the framework promoted particular practices, directed the focus of SSE, and ensured the process was enacted. This was commonly associated with the policy being mandated, and as such, an expectation existed that school improvement be employed in line with the communicated formal structure.

This had two interesting implications for schools. Firstly, school improvement was seen to benefit from a stronger structure, but also, new practices of educational governance were enacted because of the six-step policy model. An example of this was demonstrated by a teacher in Brisk who stated that SSE *'…had to be informed by factual material'* (P17, SET/AP1, Brisk), for instance. Furthermore, an increase in performative practices was reported in some schools. This

was especially evident where paperwork was undertaken for the sake of it or where the process took on a strong managerial tone.

5.6.1.3. External Agents

External agents of significance included the Inspectorate and the PDST who guided interpretations and translations of the policy. For example, the Inspectorate was reported to provide an expectation that SSE policy be enacted, communicated what the policy would look like in practice, and ensured that certain practices were employed in SSE. Furthermore, they helped principals ensure SSE was received by teachers as an expected facet of practice in some sites.

This influence was demonstrated by the SSE lead in Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí, who outlined the influence of the school inspector: *'…she's saying that you know, you need to be more specific with your target…I felt that it was like, well, this is what the Department wants you to do. So, this is what you need to do'* (P28, SET/AP1, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí). Comparatively, the PDST were seen to provide guidance in respect to the interpretation and particularly, the translation of the policy in the context of curricular progress and change: *'…they'd always refer to school improvement SSE process…that sort of motivated us to look at science as a subject and so each time there's been a reason…'* (P08, P, Longfield).

It also became apparent, that in a few instances, a formal school improvement orientation was enabled by other schools and private external actors. In relation to other schools, the principals in Brisk and St. Paul's communicated the benefits of school visits in that they allowed for the observation of potential changes that could be enacted in their schools. This was alongside the guidance that other schools' SIPs provided school leaders as they tried to make sense of the policy for their own contexts. Interestingly, in Brisk, a private external actor was brought in to motivate staff to engage with the formal process in addition.

5.6.2. The Shaping Influence of Material Context

The factors of significance that were categorised within the dimension of material context included time, professional resources, financial resources, and system supports. Again, these factors enabled and constrained the enactment of SSE policy.

5.6.2.1. Time

Time was evidently one of the most significantly influential factors in relation to the enactment of SSE across the case. Regarding time, this was very commonly described as *'...the greatest pressure for all of this'* (P23, SET/DP, Riverway). While Croke Park hours were identified as time in which SSE could take place, these were described as the time in which all other collaborative work was conducted in the schools. Consequently, these were determined to have *'... become so packed, so jam packed'* (P28, SET/AP1, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí).

Time was also said to have been influenced by the vast range of competing priorities that schools and their staff had to deal with. This was related to both external reform directives but also in the form of day to day challenges. Here a pattern of firefighting emerged frequently: *'I would say time isn't in place. That's the big thing. We just don't have time to get up to the level of expectations that there are...you're just constantly firefighting'* (P25, SET/P, St. Paul's).

5.6.2.3. Professional Resources

The availability of professional resources was central to the formal enactment of SSE policy. This reality was closely aligned with school size where pupil numbers determined the overall size of staff within each school site. Where larger staff sizes existed, important benefits were described, while conversely, smaller schools faced challenges. The enabling influence of this included the existence of larger ISM teams, the existence of administrative roles of responsibility who could lead the SSE process, and the ability to delegate and form committees.

Furthermore, some participants in larger schools described having a greater degree of knowledge and skills available on their staff. This facilitated enactment of the formal process, while the influx of new staff was described as bringing fresh ideas: *'...one advantage would be that we would have a lot of teachers who were very familiar with specialised programmes...'* (P19, P, St. Cormac's). In addition to this, more promotion opportunities arose in larger schools. This was positioned alongside a willingness for staff to lead and engage with the SSE process to enhance promotional prospects in a few instances.

Comparatively, the constraining influence was observed in schools with smaller staff sizes, in the prevalence of staff turnover, and the widespread unavailability of substitutes. These challenges were especially evident in the two small multigrade schools. Here, much of the work for SSE was seen to fall on the principal out of necessity. Of further note, the two small multigrade schools in the data set had engaged in very few formal SSE processes, and this was determined to be due to the specific contextual challenges that they faced: *'I think for a school such as this. I think all of the vast majority of the responsibility for the entire process could land on somebody like myself'* (P05, P/CT, Churchtown). However, even in larger schools, participants frequently referred to limitations in staffing as an inhibiting factor in the enactment of the formal SSE process.

This challenge had become more intense of late where staff turnover had been described as tremendously inhibitive of formal enactment of the policy. This was seen to be detrimental to continuity regarding SSE, while turnover also led to a loss of knowledge and capacity. Concomitantly, substitute teachers were consistently portrayed as unavailable across sites in recent years. This brought with it significant pressures for the enactment of the policy. As the teaching principal in St. Paul's asserted, *'...I have so many principal release days I haven't taken this year. It's an absolute joke'* (P25, SET/P, St. Paul's).

5.6.2.4. Financial Resources

Financial resources were identified as influential and were seen to come from three distinct origins including the DE, parents, and private sources. DE funding was seen to facilitate and direct the focus of numerous SSE processes including in Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí. Here digital literacy funding supported formal enactment of an SSE process with this focus.

Parents were referred to as providing important funds for SSE in several instances, including in Scoil na nÓg and Brisk. Here, the principal in Brisk described being able to utilise these funds to respond to challenges of release time for SSE by privately hiring substitute staff: *'We would hire in BA graduates…Free teachers up, and a lot of the SSE work would be undertaken then'* (P14, P, Brisk). A similar approach was employed by the principal in St. Cormac's where funding from a private, religiously affiliated body, enabled the release of staff for CPD.

5.6.2.5. System Supports

System supports of importance were evident in the availability of CPD, SSE relevant supporting policy documents, and ICT. In most instances, CPD was described as influential for the enactment of SSE policy in the schools. Here CPD, regardless of whether it directly related to SSE, or whether it referred to the potential of SSE to bring about change in the specific area, was consistently described as a motivational factor in enacting SSE in the schools. This was particularly regarding focus and collaborative discussion, as described by the principal in Scoil na nÓg as, *'…they're sharing that (CPD knowledge) with, with staff at staff meetings and that and it just spikes an interest'* (P01, P, Scoil na nÓg). More CPD and ongoing support, rather than one off provision, was frequently requested by participants, and underscored the importance of the factor for actors.

ICT was very frequently referred to as having improved over time across sites, with a strong positive effect on actors' capacities to collect, analyse, and interpret evidence. Supporting policy documents, when presented as positive, were outlined as helping leaders make sense of the

process in practice. Interestingly, in a few instances, there was reference to the influence of the LAOS document shaping practice towards stronger governance practices in the schools:

…it gives you barometers, I suppose, measures…you can say right, under leadership and management of this post, this curricular area, or this organisational area…

(P14, P, Brisk)

Comparatively, supporting documents were viewed as problematic by some participants. This was described in that they were very complex in design or did not help with teaching and learning specifically. A very significant pattern that emerged here was in relation to the translation of SSE policy into practice. This was a regular feature in the data, well captured in the following example: *'Like how and when do they expect us to do it because that never comes with the documents'* (P15, ADP, Brisk).

Furthermore, training was described as a problem in that there had not been enough of it and that it was not sustained. Additionally, it was very apparent that a vast majority of non-principal participants had never received training.

5.6.3. The Shaping Influence of Situated Context

The situated context again enabled and constrained the enactment of SSE policy. Key components of this included school type, school history, and location. Situated contexts were one of the most diverse areas of influence in the case where schools showed many differences in their situated realities. It is notable that significant commonality was observed in addition.

5.6.3.1. School Type

School type had a clear shaping influence on the enactment of SSE policy across sites. The benefits of having a larger school size have already been outlined in relation to the augmented professional resources that this brought. However, there were further important facets of this worth noting. What was interesting here was that some schools capitalised on SSE policy to

ensure that it met the needs of their school. For example, some schools enacted SSE with a focus on progressing practice in areas deemed important in their context. This was evident in St. Cormac's in relation to literacy and numeracy and the objectives of DEIS, or in Scoil na nÓg where Aistear was embedded through SSE. This aligned strongly with the junior school compositions.

While this was an enabling feature in these instances, it emitted a constraining influence elsewhere. In Scoil na nÓg and St. Cormac's, the schools' junior pupil intake meant that evidence gathering was viewed as problematic, particularly as it was collected from younger children. From the perspective of a developing school, which was the case in Riverway, the principal and a class teacher determined that the slow paced and focused SSE process did not meet their needs. Rather, myriad changes needed to be instigated and as such, focus was directed elsewhere. As for St. Cormac's, the DEIS status of the school meant that the process was consistently focused on literacy and numeracy only.

5.6.3.2. School History

School history was an uncommon but important feature for some schools. For example, in St. Paul's, a turbulent historical landscape existed that had preceded the current school principal's appointment. Here, WSE reports had been published outlining the need for significant change in several areas. While this historical scenario had led to a situation where there had been a large turnover of staff, this was also seen to present opportunities that enabled the enactment of SSE policy in the school. Consequently, SSE was utilised to achieve the changes outlined by the Inspectorate and as such, the school's history, in combination with Inspectorate direction, were deeply influential on enactment of the SSE process. Further to this, the fact that there had been a negative WSE report meant that staff in the school desired change. This facilitated the enactment of the process in a collaborative way, according to the principal.

Conversely, history constrained enactment elsewhere. In Riverview, school history was described as having made SSE unconducive to meeting the needs of the school. As the school had been divested and was categorised as a developing school for much of the period in which SSE was enacted, the process was undertaken to comply in most iterations. This was at the expense of achieving meaningful progress. The principal argued that he was constrained from meaningfully enacting SSE as he was consumed by the necessities of managing a failing building for instance.

5.6.3.3. Location

Regarding school location, some schools described problems attracting and maintaining staff or in attracting substitutes. This was attributed to the school's rural or suburban location in Brisk, St. Cormac's, and St. Paul's. Conversely, staffing challenges were not attributed to location in urban settings.

5.7. Theme Six – The Shaping Influence of Professional Culture

Theme six relates to the influence of professional cultures in the enactment of SSE policy. This contextual dimension is presented as a standalone theme due to its central significance in shaping the enactment of SSE policy across the case. In terms of components, attitudes and leadership were seen to be of utmost importance here. However, this research finds that variations in response to the contextual influences outlined in theme five, were particularly significant in shaping enactment of SSE policy, and consequently differentiate it from the other aforementioned contextual dimensions.

5.7.1. Attitudes

Attitudes in relation to SSE policy were an important facet emerging from the cross-site analysis. Initially, it was commonly reported that attitudes towards the policy were negative, with one principal summarising that even though he had received training, he *'...was still pretty sceptical*

about it' (P19, P, St. Cormac's) and a deputy describing, *'...it received welcome, and it received ah here we go again...something else, we're doing this already. Which we are...'* (P15, ADP, Brisk). Interpretations such as these were linked to weak translation of the policy in that *'...therefore the first school improvement plan we produced was very generic...it didn't really impact upon us...'* (P19, P, St. Cormac's).

However, across most sites, attitudes were observed to have become more positive, with the school improvement potential and achievements, alongside a growing capacity for self-evaluation, identified as contributing factors:

> *...it should be a part of, like, practice. Of just good practice. That like you are, I think it, you should be like responsible for reflecting on what's going well, both within your own like practice and then the like, wider school.*

> (P24 , CT, Riverway)

This was an interesting facet of the data. In this, it was clear that the core message of SSE had been accepted, but that this did not mean that formal SSE policy was being interpreted as the most appropriate approach in all instances. In some interviews with key leaders, it was evident that a belief existed that SSE did not have to be an explicit or formal process. This was strongly linked to the enactment of SSE policy in an informal way:

> *I just don't believe it's a two-year cycle or a one-year cycle thing...it doesn't need to be this big palaver - oh you have to start a cycle and it goes on for this long and...it's happening all the time...it's one part of a huge list of jobs...So I think SSE is great when it's working in the background...it's always there, but does it need to be constantly thrown in people's faces...*

> (P31, P, Scoil Breandán)

> *...I think SSE here is just a really natural process. It's just embedded in everything that we do.*

> (P25, SET/P, St. Paul's)

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This was becoming an increasingly commonplace view, with a number of principals now determining that a less formal process would be appropriate. This was even observed in schools where the formal process had been experienced as a success previously.

Attitudes in relation to specific steps of the six-step process were also important. This was observed in relation to several areas where it was outlined that these steps were employed to comply with external expectations:

...we don't need the results now, to see where we're, where we need to improve on.

(P04, SET/AP2)

In a way it's been done for ticking a box. But I still think it's something you should do.

(P28, SET/AP1)

Attitudes also appeared strongly tied to position in that SSE was generally viewed as an activity for school leaders. This was an attitude held by many leaders and teachers. Furthermore, other staff viewed SSE in very different ways, based on their position:

I wouldn't know too much about it but I suppose my experience would be for interviews and having to know inside out the school self-evaluation. That was always a question that we had to have ready for it. So that's kind of my knowledge of it would be from reading it. And then again implementing the problem solving back when it started.

(P33, CT, Scoil Breandán)

This extended towards external actors in addition, with some attitudes determining whether the Inspectorate, the PDST, parents, or students were appropriate to be involved, as depicted in table 75.

Table 75. 'Who should be involved' examples

'Who should be involved'	Participant/ Site	*Sample quotation*
	(P14, P, Brisk)	*We didn't take up the offer. And the rationale behind that was we have such a big staff here with such great expertise. And I felt that it wouldn't be of any benefit to us.*
	(P27, P, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí)	*If I, by calling the inspector for advice. Is she just gonna come out…I'll admit, I looked for advice elsewhere after that.*
	(P05, P/CT, Churchtown)	*I think if it's something that's very academically based…Parents opinions might not be as influential because, you know, they might not have the insight that a teacher would have…*
	(P08, P, Longfield)	*So like there's some decisions I don't think the whole community needs to be involved in.*

5.7.2. Leadership

Leaders, particularly school principals, had an immensely strong influence on the professional culture in schools and this had a strong shaping influence on the enactment of the policy. This was most clear in two respects. Firstly, leaders were key in making sense of the policy and communicating this interpretation to others on staff. Secondly, some leaders were recorded as having a strong ability to facilitate the process and ensure its success. This was particularly evident in Longfield and Scoil na nÓg:

She's totally facilitating does lead it as well, but she totally facilitates our input.

(P11, CT/AP1, Longview)

Yeah, I think (Principal) has been really good from the start. Where I know, if you mean, I know that you're supposed to take your core subject and one other area. But she will have it kind of laid out from year to year.

(P04, CT, Scoil na nÓg)

Comparatively, in Scoil Breandán, the principal did not view the formal process as important and as such, emphasis was placed on informal approaches to school improvement. This was similar in Brisk and St. Cormac's. However, in these examples, the policy was enacted but done so predominantly by the ISM:

It's definitely living. But in terms of do we refer to this as part of our school self-evaluation? I'm not too sure. I think it's kind of interwoven and maybe the words of school self-evaluation or SIP plans and such, kind of nearly stay with maybe the ISM Team per se. Or if there's upcoming interviews and stuff like that. It might be kind of rolled out. It's not something that is fluent or part of, I suppose staff dialogue, and planning and things.

(P15, ADP, Brisk)

5.7.3. Responding to the Challenges of Context

While all schools faced challenges arising from the various contextual circumstances in which they attempted to enact SSE policy, comparative analysis identified a highly significant finding in that similarities and dissimilarities existed in relation to how schools were able to respond to the contextual conditions in which SSE policy was enacted. A common perspective held across sites related to SSE being experienced as a struggle. Evidence relating to this is presented in table 76.

Table 76. 'SSE as a struggle' examples

'SSE as a struggle'	Participant/Site	*Data sample*
	(P05, CT/P, Churchtown)	*...it's another pressure. It's another requirement that takes a lot of time.*
	(P01, P, Scoil na nÓg)	*I feel there's so many new initiatives coming our way. It's, it just feels so pressurised now, you know? With the new PLC and the new Maths Curriculum that's coming. I just feel we've so much to cope with that we're just sort of squeezing in the self-evaluation because we have to. Because there's so many other things that are new, that we have to assimilate, that we have to cement, that we have to embed. Like all those things that are in the process of school self-evaluation, they've been put on us anyway.*
	(P17, SET/AP1, Brisk)	*Time and then as you're working your way through that process, you know, there's always something else coming from the department. So how, how do you kind of stay abreast of all that and still do what your, your school improvement plan is with, with quality? It's very hard.*

Once the sites are compared, what is most interesting are the ways that these influences became manifest between schools. This was observed in three respects. Firstly, there were some schools where, despite the challenges experienced, an ability to enact the policy for school improvement existed. Comparatively, there was a cohort of the schools where an emphasis on the enactment of the policy in order to comply was observed. Thirdly, there were several schools in which the process was avoided. The following section outlines the similar struggles experienced by the

schools in undertaking SSE before depicting the variations evident in response as schools avoided, complied with, or embraced SSE policy in practice.

5.7.3.1. Improvement Orientated SSE

Despite facing challenging contextual circumstances, some schools managed to embrace SSE policy and utilise it to progress school improvement. Schools with a particularly strong emphasis on enacting SSE policy for school improvement included Longfield and Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí. While these schools reported experiencing the challenges of the external context as constraining influences, an ability to respond creatively to make the policy work was consistently evident across SSE processes undertaken in the sites. This was evident in Longfield where the pace of the process had been increased as a strategy and is further outlined by the principal in Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí, in the following:

> *I suppose what we try and do is, we try and look at weaknesses. Areas that we need to work on or areas we need to improve on…initially at the start, it took a while I felt to get the, the teachers to come on board and get their head around it. Initially it was difficult…And it's when you look at that, you know, you have to be proud of, of what we've been, what we've achieved over the last five or six years since we started it.*

> (P27, P, Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí)

5.7.3.2. Compliance Orientated SSE

In the evidence, a creative ability to respond to challenges was displayed by other schools in addition, including in St. Paul's, Brisk, St. Cormac's, and Scoil na nÓg. However, a clear orientation towards compliance was observed in the enactment of SSE policy in the face of challenging contextual circumstances. Due to the contextual conditions at play, SSE was experienced as a struggle, and the associated response was to ensure that the policy was complied with. In these sites, while school improvement was spoken about in an informal way, the formal process was driven by a desire to comply: *'The formal one because we had to. It was something we had to do'* (P25, P/SET, St. Paul's).

5.7.3.4. Avoidance of SSE

In some of the schools, SSE was viewed very much as a struggle. This was particularly evident in Scoil Breandán, Riverway, and Churchtown. Here, the schools appeared to avoid the process as a result of the contextual challenges they faced: '*Am like, to be honest, we haven't been majorly focused on it of late. You know, we really haven't'* (P05, P/CT, Churchtown). This was again positioned as a response to the challenging contextual circumstances in which the policy was enacted:

> *We've run with these schemes and we've run with that and we can stop and say right, what are we doing? What are we not? And we're doing that. There's loads of surveys done within that process. But yet school self-evaluation was just like, this thing that was like, oh, Jesus, this as well. And we didn't do it very well.*

> (P22, P, Riverway)

5.8. Conclusion

This chapter set out to present the key findings of the cross-site analysis of this multi-site case study. By utilising a comparative analytical approach, findings previously established from the within-site analysis, outlined in chapter four, were compared and contrasted to identify similarities and differences between sites. To organise these findings, a thematic format was chosen to communicate these findings to the reader. Six themes of significance were developed and were elucidated with reference to the data.

Chapter six now interrogates the findings of the research in relation to the literature.

Chapter 6 – Discussion

6.1. Introduction

From the literature review undertaken in chapter two, the research context and significance of SSE policy were elucidated before a gap in knowledge was identified through synthesis and analysis of the relevant literature. What emerged as striking was the lack of knowledge that existed in relation to how SSE policy was enacted in schools under real world conditions. This was especially evident in the Irish primary context. Here, the availability of empirical literature related to the phenomenon broadly, but especially with regard to the influence of context, was limited. As such, the research posed two questions to advance knowledge in the field. These were how has SSE policy been enacted in Irish primary schools and how has context shaped the enactment of SSE in the Irish primary schools.

To inform answers to these questions, the literature was engaged with to formulate a tentative conceptual understanding. This was bolstered by drawing on policy enactment theory (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012) which enhanced the potential explanatory power of the research. Following this, a multi-site case study was designed and undertaken with the purpose of providing rich and deep accounts of SSE policy in practice in Irish primary schools. These accounts were presented in chapter four where within-site findings were provided. For each site, these findings included SSE in practice and the shaping influence of context on the enactment of the policy in nine schools. Following this, a cross-site analysis was undertaken and presented in chapter five. Here six themes of significance were outlined. These findings are now discussed in relation to the relevant literature and theoretical framework. From this, the insights attained lead to an overall interpretation of the research problem.

6.2. Temporal Dynamics in the Enactment of SSE Policy

Theme one provides rich insights into the enactment of SSE policy over time. Ball, Maguire and Braun, (2012, p. 98) describe how policy is 'very much mediated by time', and as such, it is not surprising that temporal variations were significant in this research. Three pertinent observations arose in the comparative analysis and included depictions of the longer and shorter-term enactment of SSE policy, and the prevalence of informal approaches to school improvement.

Firstly, longer-term enactment was found to be periodic rather than continuous in a majority of sites, and cross-site comparison revealed clear categories in relation to consistency of enactment between sites. Here strong, moderate, and weak patterns of consistency existed. Furthermore, it was observed that three periods where an avoidance of enactment was evident existed at the level of the case.

Secondly, over the shorter-term, a clear pattern across the case was recorded also. Here, individual SSE processes were not enacted in a continuous fashion. Rather, SSE policy was enacted at specific periods of time during the school year and occurred in short bursts. Thirdly, it emerged that when SSE was not formally enacted, school improvement processes of an informal nature were described as occurring in the schools instead. For many participants, this was argued to be an informal version of SSE policy in action.

6.2.1. Enacting SSE in a Fragmented Way

When reflecting upon these findings, it is possible to draw important insights. Firstly, it is clear from the data that SSE policy has been enacted and that this is a statement that can be applied to schools across the case. In this, each school provided SIP planning documents and featured actors who could describe their experiences of the SSE process in action. This research therefore provides supporting evidence to that outlined in more recent studies conducted in relation to SSE in the Irish primary context. In these studies, participants have described the degree of engagement with SSE policy positively (O' Hara *et al.*, 2016; Brown *et al.*, 2021). As such, the

research findings here appear to confirm a growing acceptance and employment of SSE policy over time in schools. This is particularly apparent once comparison is made with earlier, less positive interpretive commentary (McNamara *et al.*, 2011; McNamara and O'Hara, 2012).

While this is certainly a positive reflection, this does not capture the entire picture. Once SSE was considered over the longer-term across sites, it was clear that the policy had been enacted in a fragmented way. In essence, while schools had formally enacted SSE policy, the existence of significant gaps between these enactments was a very striking feature. While this is a finding that has been alluded to in other empirical research (O'Brien *et al.*, 2017), this is a novel finding in the Irish primary context.

While this research confirms findings that indicate that SSE policy was initially enacted in a problematic way in some Irish schools, it serves to extend this picture in its observations that SSE has been enacted in a fragmented way over a much longer-term.

6.2.2. Enacting SSE with Varying Consistency

This research builds further upon the empirical evidence showing variation between schools in the consistency of SSE policy enactment. In this research, the overall degree of consistency demonstrated between school sites showed similarities and dissimilarities. Here, the enactment of SSE was categorised as strong, moderate, or weak in consistency over time. Furthermore, the strong category was further sub-categorised into schools with strong consistency over the longer-term and strong consistency more recently.

In the Irish context, schools have previously been reported to have had varying degrees of success in maintaining engagement with the process (O'Brien, McNamara and O'Hara, 2015). This is a reality that has also been appreciated by the DE, who have acknowledged that schools are at different stages regarding SSE (DE, 2022). Findings in this study provide further triangulating evidence to this effect but also add depth and richness. In essence, it is indicated that schools do not experience the challenges and opportunities surrounding the enactment of SSE policy to the

same degree. This appears to be associated with the variation in policy response that arises between sites.

This indicates alignment to the underpinning theoretical framework of policy enactment where the culmination of various site-specific factors are seen to be of paramount importance. In the coming sections, the dimensions and factors that 'influence differences in policy enactments between similar schools' (Braun *et al.*, 2011, p. 585) are borne out further.

6.2.3. Adjusting the Continuous Process

This research adds novel insight with regard to the enactment of SSE policy over the shorter-term. In the study, a clear pattern emerged in that many schools described the process as something that took place at certain periods throughout the school year and was avoided during others. This raises important questions once the policy desire for SSE to become 'a way of working' (DES, 2018, p. 263) is scrutinised.

Once participant explanations are considered, it was clear that policy actors described facing many challenges as they attempted to enact the policy. As such, it was necessary to respond in creative ways. In this research, it was evident that one response took the shape of a more rapid translation of the policy in practice. In sum, contextual circumstances brought challenges that threatened the idealised policy, and schools needed to negotiate these fixed expectations in response to their contextualised realities (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012). While the specific challenges that arose were unpredictable, their inevitability was predictable. Here actor responses included employing SSE in short bursts as a necessity or as a strategy, where brief periods of time were identified in which the policy could be formally enacted.

While this is a novel insight in relation to SSE policy in Irish primary schools, this picture has been elucidated elsewhere in relation to policy more broadly. Maguire, Braun and Ball (2015, p. 497) for instance, determine that 'Time is a key factor in realising policy enactments – or not; and at certain times policies are high profile…and then move to the background at other times'.

This, they describe, is tied to an interaction between people and context and is observed where policy actors get tired as a result of intense workload, or where different times of the year are identified as being more conducive to the enactment of policy than others. Ultimately, this 'renders policy enactment a more fragile and unstable process than is sometimes imagined' (Maguire, Braun and Ball, 2015, p. 498), an interpretation that certainly shines through in the negotiated enactment of SSE policy over the shorter-term in this study.

6.2.4. The Significance of Informal Approaches

An unexpected finding emerged in relation to what can be understood as informal SSE. While the existence of informal SSE has been referred to by the Inspectorate, where schools were described as 'using the logic of the process to help them think' (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2019, p. 2), it is the prevalence of this finding and how participants described its function that was most notable.

In some schools, it was apparent that informal SSE processes were said to have occurred in conjunction with the formal SSE process, but in others, these were employed instead of the formal SSE process. This appears to indicate that school improvement efforts continue in schools even in the absence of formal SSE. Additionally, it was apparent that many participants felt that the school improvement objectives of SSE policy were being met, despite the process not being enacted as anticipated in policy.

While this underscores heterogeneity in SSE policy between sites (Braun *et al.*, 2011), where SSE policy was negotiated and recontextualised as it was interpreted and translated in context (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012), it was notable that of late, an emerging trend was visible. This was seen in that schools were increasingly employing more informal approaches. This was even the case where successes in SSE had previously been achieved. Once the implications of this picture are interrogated, a key point for discussion arises regarding what this means for a process

that is conceptualised in theory to be grounded in systematicity and underpinned by a structural framework (MacBeath, 1999).

This research offers evidence from which we can examine this in its comparison of the enacted process and the policy model. This is discussed further in section 6.5. However, while any variation between policy and practice can be viewed with scepticism, Inspectorate commentary appears to indicate that informal enactment is not something to be viewed in a negative light necessarily. In this, they portray schools as 'meeting the 'requirement' placed on them by the circular, but were realising the potential of SSE and making it their way of working, their way of reflecting and their way of bringing about improvement' (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2019, p. 2). As such, this discussion progresses by paying close attention to the implications of a less formal approach to SSE as it arose across the case.

6.3. Ambitions and Achievements in the Enactment of SSE Policy

Theme two portrayed the ambitions underpinning the enactment of SSE policy and the impacts reportedly achieved as a result of the process. This theme drew upon cross-site comparisons of focus, purpose, and perceived impacts associated with the enactment of SSE policy in the schools. Most pertinently, once this evidence is examined, it becomes clear that SSE exists within a contested space where internal and external desires meet. Furthermore, it is apparent that impacts experienced can be anticipated or unanticipated.

6.3.1. The Purpose of SSE

The purpose underpinning SSE is a key area of consideration within the established body of literature (Chapman and Sammons, 2013). This research contributes further to knowledge by elucidating the underpinning purposes with which SSE policy was enacted in this context. In this research, purpose was a highly complex variable.

6.3.1.1. Enacting SSE Policy for School Improvement or Compliance

Firstly, across the case, it was clear that SSE was understood as a mechanism through which schools could improve. In one sense, this finding appears to reflect well on the acceptance of SSE policy in Irish primary schools, and complements similar findings arrived at by others. Here SSE has been described as benefitting from 'widespread acceptance' (McNamara *et al.*, 2021, p. 8). Ultimately, the underpinning purpose of school improvement that is strongly communicated in the Irish policy framework (Hislop, 2015) appears to be an accepted facet of the work of teachers and leaders.

This shone through in participant responses and appears to reflect well upon actor interpretations of SSE policy in this context (DES, 2016c). Here, internal responsibility for quality now appears as an increasingly accepted element of the role of teacher as professional, as sought in models of modern educational governance (Hislop, 2017; Brown *et al.*, 2018). While this finding is positive, it must be said that the goal of school improvement for the betterment of its students is one which few would argue against. While this was a strongly communicated value across and within sites, SSE was not necessarily underpinned by a school improvement purpose alone.

Rather, once the translation of the policy is focused upon, the significance of compliance as a motivating purpose becomes apparent. This was evident in that participants frequently communicated that without an expectation for SSE policy to be enacted, it would not have been as prevalent a feature of practice, or would not have looked as it did. With this, it is apparent that both school improvement and compliance were significant underpinning purposes with which the process was underpinned in these schools.

6.3.1.2. Accountability and Enactment of SSE Policy

Adjacently, it was interesting to observe that there was little reference in the data to two purposes for SSE that are outlined as influential in the literature review. These include the economic and

accountability purposes (MacBeath, 1999; McNamara *et al.*, 2022). While SSE was not viewed as a cost saving measure (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008), according to the data gathered across sites, the accountability element does offer an important perspective from which to consider the data.

In essence, while accountability was an absent feature of participant dialogue, at least in an explicit sense, it appeared to come through in less explicit ways. This was particularly the so with respect to certain features of the process model, a finding discussed in greater depth in section 6.5. Here, process features that can be argued to have a strong accountability function, such as paperwork, the sharing of findings with the community, setting of measurable targets, monitoring and evaluation, and many of the recommendations communicated to schools through the Inspectorate, were frequently described as being enacted to comply. This was comparable to other steps which were viewed more favourably which were more strongly associated with school improvement.

6.3.1.3. The Confluence of External and Internal Purpose

From a theoretical perspective, this raises important points for discussion. In essence, it appears that the purpose of SSE can be understood from two perspectives. The first involves the purpose with which SSE is employed from the perspective of the system. Naturally, the literature has outlined that this can be related to school improvement, accountability, or for economic purposes (MacBeath, 1999; McNamara *et al.*, 2022). Comparatively, based on the findings of this research, purpose can be looked at through the lens of the policy actor. In this, it appears SSE can be understood as being enacted with the purpose of fulfilling internal desires and appeasing personal values, such as school improvement or improved teaching and learning experiences. Alternatively, it can be understood as being enacted to fulfil external desires, such as the accountability mechanisms that are subsumed into the six-step process model.

While this brings challenges and complexity in terms of interpretation of this research finding, this is something that has been well established in the literature. Here, the tensions and contradictions in the underpinning purpose of SSE have been discussed elsewhere (Chapman and Sammons, 2013; McNamara *et al.*, 2022). This appears to be particularly evident in that compliance has been shown to promote engagement with SSE, but that this also has the potential to stifle innovation in schools (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2015). As argued by Janssens and van Amelsvoort, (2008), accountability demands generate accountability orientated SSE, while improvement orientated demands create improvement orientated SSE.

6.3.2. The Focus of SSE

In the Irish primary context, SSE is mandated so that schools will achieve improvements in relation to a specific area of focus (DES, 2016b, 2016c). In this research, the focus of each SSE process undertaken by each school was presented and compared. This was done in relation to all of the school improvement plans that were available since the policy was mandated in 2012. From this evidence, clear patterns emerged across sites. This was observed in that SSE was focused on literacy and numeracy to an outstanding degree, while digital literacy and wellbeing were also frequently in focus.

This is similar to findings outlined elsewhere in the empirical literature relating to the Irish context (O'Brien *et al.*, 2019) but evidence in this research provides further rich and novel insight. Obviously, the initial cycle of SSE communicated the expectation that schools focus on literacy and numeracy specifically (DES, 2012c). However, this research adds further to this in that literacy and numeracy were frequently chosen as focus areas even outside of the 2012 – 2016 timeframe. This is especially intriguing as requirements for the 2016 – 2018 cycle provided schools with greater agency in choosing areas of focus (DES, 2016a). Even with this being the scenario, in some schools, literacy and numeracy continued to be focused upon.

Hislop (2017) provides some explanation in his commentary that there was a risk that SSE would become associated with literacy and numeracy only, due to the emphasis here in the initial rollout of the policy (DES, 2012c). While this interpretation is rational and reasonable, additional interpretation is possible that might help to explain this observation further. While schools had the freedom to choose their own areas of focus following this period (DES, 2016a), SSE continued to be strongly aligned with national policy priorities that were communicated in parallel with SSE policy. This was evident in relation to an expectation that the new primary language curriculum be enacted through SSE, for example. Here SSE was explicitly identified as a tool to embed this curricular reform, and this may go some way towards explaining the continued emphasis on literacy.

This also emphasises a common school response that was observed as schools tried to deal with challenges of competing priorities and limited time. As Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012, p. 5) state '…policies can be clustered together to form new policy ensembles that have unintended or unexpected consequences in schools'. This was further exemplified in that digital literacy and wellbeing were frequently clustered with SSE.

In one sense, this appears as a positive in that schools have been aligning their SSE efforts with national priorities, particularly those communicated in the relevant departmental circulars. However, what is less prevalent in terms of focus, and what is missing altogether, is also significant. Based on the evidence, it can be inferred that little or no emphasis has been paid to certain curricular areas.

O' Breacháin and O'Toole (2013), in research relating to the primary context, tie the general emphasis on literacy and numeracy in Irish schools back to the broader governmental strategy regarding literacy and numeracy (DES, 2011). Here, they assert that unintended consequences can be attributed to this, and in particular, they draw attention to the fact that this had the potential to threaten the holistic ethos of the 1999 curriculum. In the current research, it was glaringly clear

that certain subject disciplines were highly infrequent or completely absent from the data set. This study indicates that this pattern is associated with external expectations placed on schools.

Observations of a similar nature have been made elsewhere in that policy changes, particularly evaluation and inspection related policy, have the potential to achieve unintended consequences in schools, with research drawing attention to the teaching of a narrower curriculum, for example (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2015; Dyson, 2020). While these findings do not suggest that external direction of focus narrows the curriculum, it certainly does appear to be narrowing the areas in which schools in this context orientate their developmental planning activities. For many participants in this research, external directions superseded internal needs, even when this was not perceived to be rational in the individual context.

6.3.3. Perceived Impacts

On a positive note, despite the complicated picture emerging in relation to focus and purpose, it was clear that all schools reported that SSE had achieved impacts of note. These were categorisable in line with the domains of teaching and learning and leadership and management, where schools reported impacts of varying qualities across these domains (DES, 2016b). However, impacts were identified outside of these areas in addition.

At the level of the case, positive impacts were most strongly evident in the domain of teaching and learning, but positive impacts were also reported in relation to leadership and management in nearly all of the schools in this study. This aligns with experiences outlined elsewhere in the Irish primary context (Ní Chróinín, Murtagh and Bowles, 2012; O' Hara *et al.*, 2016) and further triangulates interpretations arising from Inspectorate surveys undertaken in March 2022. In these, it was stated that 'in general, schools are finding that SSE is having a positive impact on the quality of education they provide' (DE, 2022, p. 3).

Obviously, the overarching objectives of the policy are that schools improve, and the findings of this research provide many examples of positive impacts. It is also interesting that perceived

impacts were reported outside of the immediate targets and actions set in school SIPs. Here participants drew attention to increased levels of self-reflection upon practice more generally and becoming inspired to engage in CPD and collaborative practices for example.

This has been found in other literature also where SSE has been theorised and empirically observed to impart additional impacts beyond the specific targets chosen (Nelson, Ehren and Godfrey, 2015). These include in engagement with CPD and in improving school organisational structure or professional culture of collaboration for instance (Bubb and Earley, 2009; Schildkamp, Visscher and Luyten, 2009; Ní Chróinín, Murtagh and Bowles, 2012; Schildkamp *et al.*, 2012).

While positive unintended impacts were recorded, negative unintended impacts were also commonly reported. This was observed in feelings of being overburdened with SSE adding further pressure and stress to those charged with enacting the policy (O' Hara *et al.*, 2016; Nelson, Ehren and Godfrey, 2015). While these experiences are a well-established reality in the Irish context (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2010; Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Coolahan *et al.*, 2017; Rahimi and Arnold, 2022), this is concerning once the central role that the SSE process holds in improving Irish schools is considered in relation to sustainability going forward.

6.4. Adoption, Adaption, and Avoidance in the Enactment of SSE Policy

Theme three provided insights into the specifics of SSE policy as an enacted process in the schools. What becomes evident, once comparisons are drawn between the policy as it is encoded in text and how it was decoded by actors (Ball, 1993), was that schools negotiated SSE policy as they enacted it (Braun *et al.*, 2011). This was most explicitly visible in the adoption, adaption, and avoidance of certain features which can be understood as a response to their situated realities (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012). Specifically, this was borne out in relation to alignment with

the six-step policy model, and in relation to the time, place, and pace in which the policy was enacted, contributing to a recontextualisation of SSE policy (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012).

6.4.1. Enactment of the Six-Step Process Model

Once the features of the most recently completed SSE process at each site are compared with the six-step process model, insights into how schools adopted, adapted, and avoided elements of the policy are identifiable.

In the research, it was consistently observed that schools enacted all elements of the investigation stage of the process and had created a SIP with targets and actions for improvement. This is interesting as some of these facets of the policy have previously been recorded as problematic in the literature. This has been particularly evident with regard to evidence use which has been identified as a challenge to success in Irish schools (Young *et al.*, 2018; O'Brien *et al.*, 2019). This challenge did not emerge strongly in the evidence accumulated in this research, and participants described the degree of skills and knowledge available in the schools in good terms. This reflects well on actor capacity developing over time and contrasts with findings outlined in previous research, where capacity has been viewed in a less positive way (McNamara *et al.*, 2011; McNamara and O'Hara, 2012; Brown *et al.*, 2016).

Comparatively, areas where schools were seen to diverge from the policy model began to emerge in the completion of all actions, in sharing a report with the school community, in incorporating student and parental voice, and in the final stages where monitoring and evaluation were formally undertaken. Furthermore, iteration was a feature observed in only one school.

When it comes to the completion of actions, this challenge has been observed previously in the literature and appears as a common area requiring development in schools (Schildkamp and Visscher, 2010; van der Bij, Geijsel and ten Dam, 2016). This challenge is further underscored in the broader literature where change action is seen to be notoriously difficult to achieve in practice (Harris, 2011).

With regard to the other areas which were avoided, a novel interpretation is possible, based on the explanations offered by participants. When each of the remaining facets of the process are considered, it can be argued that these are more closely aligned with accountability than school improvement, and these elements appeared to be avoided due to the lack of perceived value they were offering teachers and leaders in their practice. This was evident in participant responses where certain steps were described as being undertaken because they had to be, while others were presented as valuable in terms of teaching and learning.

Overall, this appears to be a good example of the 'negotiation and contestation of policy' (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012, p. 72) where values and their intersections with context are significant in shaping enactment (Keddie, 2013). Of further note, it is apparent that SSE appears to be performing more strongly in a summative role, while the formative aspects of the process are somewhat less evident. This has been identified as a shortcoming in other contexts also. Schildkamp *et al.* (2012) have associated an inability to turn findings into actions as a key limitation to successful SSE and have tied this to a lack of skills and knowledge. This is also a concern as the use of findings to produce a positive effect is a fundamental objective of any evaluation effort (Scheerens, 2002; Ehren *et al.,* 2013).

6.4.2. Time, Place, and Pace in Enacting SSE Policy

Time and space have been identified as playing 'a crucial role in the when, how, and why of policy enactment' (Maguire, Braun and Ball, 2015, p. 14) and it is unsurprising that a similar picture emerged in relation to SSE policy in this context. Section 5.5.2. in chapter five outlined the time, place, and pace of enactment of SSE policy across sites. This is a significant contribution as it is an area that has been identified as lacking in guidance by academic commentators (McNamara *et al.*, 2021; O'Brien *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, in the literature review, it was identified that a significant gap existed arising from a lack of knowledge regarding how schools have undertaken the policy in practice. This is especially important in light of the

assertion that 'Polices rarely tell you exactly what to do, they rarely dictate or determine practice' (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012, p. 3).

6.4.2.1. Croke Park Time

In the research, the policy was highly commonly reported to be enacted in Croke Park hours which aligns well with guidance from the DE (McNamara *et al.*, 2021). Here it was apparent that the policy and its aims were communicated to staff who were able to make sense of and begin to translate the policy into concrete actions and practices. This is significant, as Croke Park hours have been strongly associated with austerity in Irish schools and have carried with them negative connotations for school staff. This has been interpreted as an impediment to progress by some commentators (Coolahan *et al.*, 2017) and a similar picture did come through in the data in this study. However, it was also evident that for many, Croke Park time was now accepted as the only time in which administrative work and developmental planning could occur.

What was of additional interest here was that the enactment of SSE policy was spoken about by participants primarily in relation to the more technical elements of the process, while actions by teachers in classrooms were less prevalently discussed. This is a finding that has been referred to elsewhere. For instance, O'Brien *et al.* (2020) have argued that SSE is most strongly evident at the school level as opposed to the classroom. In the current research, the findings appear to point towards SSE being interpreted as an event somewhat external to the classroom and to the practices of teaching and learning. This aligns with other research where SSE has been described as 'an annual event to be completed rather than an ongoing aspect of school life' (Brown *et al.*, 2017, p. 93). This is somewhat concerning based on the assertion that SSE is a means to an end where improvement in learner experiences and outcomes is the end goal (O'Brien *et al.*, 2022).

6.4.2.2. Professional Learning

Interestingly, participants also consistently referred to the significance of CPD in helping them to make sense of the policy. Furthermore, much reference was made to the consequent influence

this had in relation to where the process focus and actions were subsequently undertaken in the schools. This ties in with other research where professional learning specific to SSE was seen as significant (O' Brien, McNamara and O' Hara, 2014; O'Brien *et al.*, 2017, 2020), but also adds to the picture of enactment further. Here interpretations of interpretations of policy are seen to be influential, as anticipated in the theoretical framework (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012). Furthermore, the transmission of expectation for SSE policy to be enacted appears to be a significant facet of the professional learning experience.

6.4.2.3. Pace

Variations in the pace of enactment of SSE policy was an important finding in the study. In effect, there were a few schools who employed the SSE process in a rapid way, while by comparison, several schools described the process as drawn out. Policy enactment theory provides us with a frame with which we can interrogate this finding further. In essence, it appears that the pace with which the process was enacted is representative of a recontextualisation of the policy. This appears to have been positively influential in some schools and somewhat inhibitive in others.

In the study, this had consequences in that the momentum was either maintained or was seen to be negatively impacted as challenges arose in the day to day experiences of the participants. In the schools that employed the process in a rapid way, it appears that they were able to avoid these challenges of momentum, as was described in Longview and St. Pauls, demonstrating agility in the face of challenge. Comparatively, in others, SSE SIPs already in place were extended beyond the initial timeframe to ensure that external mandates were complied with.

While these schools faced challenges arising from the external context, it was possible to continue to comply with the policy mandate by extending the SIP they already had in place. However, this appears to be at dissonance with the overall objective of SSE in improving the quality of education provided, underscoring the implications of variations in recontextualisation of SSE policy. Overall, this is described by Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012, p. 142) as the creative

fabrication and forging of policy in response to situated reality and that this can account for 'heterogeneity in practice' observed between sites in this research.

6.5. Agency and Participation in the Enactment of SSE Policy

Theme four depicted who was involved and, conversely, who was not in the enactment of SSE policy. What was of central significance here was that the strength of agency and participation in the process was associated with the position actors held in their schools. In extension, how internal actors perceived groups who were not directly involved in teaching and learning or leadership and management, was significant. This appeared to be linked to the degree and quality of involvement that these groups held in the enactment of the policy.

6.5.1. Varying Involvement in the Enactment of SSE Policy

Collaboration among staff is presented in the literature as a central facet of successful SSE (MacBeath, 1999; Scheerens, 2002) and is portrayed as a fundamental element of SSE policy in this context (DES, 2012c, 2016a, 2016c, 2018b). The benefits of collaboration are presented by Saunders (1999) in that it promotes a sense of shared ownership, achieves enhanced buy-in from the wider body of staff, progresses clarity in terms of organisational strength and weakness, and facilitates the inclusion of various perspectives. This highlights the significance of a SSE as a collaborative process. Across the case, while variation in reported quality of collaboration was observed between sites, it was evident that collaboration was a reported feature of SSE, at least to some degree, in all schools.

While this finding aligns with the picture that collaboration is a feature of SSE in Irish primary schools (O' Hara *et al.*, 2016), this research adds further nuance and detail. In the schools, while collaboration was in place at certain points in time, it was often reported that a significant quantity of the work for SSE was undertaken by school leadership. This has been outlined in other research, where distribution of leadership in SSE has been identified as key in successful SSE

(Vanhoof and Van Petegem, 2011) and where middle leadership has been identified as particularly important in SSE in the Irish context specifically (Brown *et al.*, 2021; Quinn, 2021).

While collaboration and distribution of leadership was observed to some degree across most sites, it was interesting to observe that consistently, one significant individual was paramount in the SSE process. This can be interpreted as positive in that the literature highlights the critical need for a leader who can facilitate and drive the process (Emstad, 2011; Schildkamp *et al.*, 2012; Schildkamp and Visscher, 2013; Karagiorgi *et al.*, 2015). However, it was also apparent that these significant leaders often completed a majority of the work in SSE, to the detriment of wider collaboration.

This was an important finding as these leaders communicated some frustration at having to undertake a majority of the work, while it was also apparent that non-leadership staff sometimes communicated that they would appreciate more involvement. For instance, SETs, NQTs, and teachers in some infant level classrooms argued that they were not as involved in enacting the process, or that the process was not seen to be as applicable to their practice.

Consequently, it appears that the degree of involvement that participants held in enacting the process was aligned to the position they held in the school. Here, formal school leaders, and particularly members of the ISM, were the most prominent actors in the process. This triangulates findings arising from the Irish post-primary context, where a similar picture has been detailed (Skerritt *et al.*, 2023). In the current research, the influence of the principal was observed in varying ways. In some schools, the principal performed as the key leader in driving the process and facilitating the involvement of others. In other instances, the principal took a role of overseer, with responsibility for driving the process delegated to another leader or group of staff members, or was not very involved at all.

This is significant with respect to enactment, as school leaders appeared to hold an immense influence over how others are involved in enacting SSE policy. In this, some leaders described that explicitly including teachers in SSE was unnecessary. This is described by Maguire, Braun

and Ball (2015) as shielding, where some staff have been observed to be protected from policy, and was a similarly communicated by some of the significant individuals in this case study.

While SSE policy presents an idealised process where collaboration is central, it is clear from the study that different roles exist within schools in relation to interpretation and translation of SSE policy. This has been described by Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012, p. 49, emphasis in original) as '*policy positions* which are involved in making meaning of and constructing responses to policy through the processes of interpretation and translation'.

6.5.2. Students and Parental Voice

A further important facet of agency and participation was observed in the ways in which students and parents were involved in the process. SSE policy, in conjunction with policy developments more broadly in Irish primary education, outlines that the process should be participatory and democratic in nature (DES, 2016c). Theoretical literature also promotes this as an important element of SSE (MacBeath, 1999; Simons, 2002; Lorino, 2018).

It was apparent that the schools in this study were involving parents and students to some degree at least. Across sites, participants referred to gathering evidence from parents and students to inform their decision making efforts in SSE. This is a finding that has been identified in the post-primary context by O' Brien *et al.* (2019) where schools frequently included parents and students through survey and questionnaire, while Brown *et al.* (2020, p. 98), in research also carried out in the post-primary context, note that parental and student involvement in SSE has progressed to a point where most schools appeared to be making 'considerable efforts to involve students and parents in SSE and school developmental planning'. However, they do present the point that 'There is little or no evidence from our research that parents or students are involved in decision making or action planning stages' (ibid., p. 99), which coincides with the findings in this research. However, there was some reference to this being thought about in a few sites.

This research offers additional novel insight to the picture of parental and student involvement in this context. This was evident in that participants openly described parent and student involvement as less informative than might have been anticipated. Particularly, it was apparent that parents were believed to be more helpful when it came to non-academic changes required in the school. This is an area discussed in work by Faddar *et al.* (2021). Here cognitive and affective attitudes of school staff have been theorised to influence the involvement of students and parents in the SSE process. This appears to be a useful lens through which to view the findings in this study, where it was evident that teacher and leader attitudes towards the involvement of outside actors were significant.

6.6. Enabling and Constraining: The Orientating Influence of Context

Theme five and six presented the ways in which the external, material, situated, and professional context shaped the enactment of SSE policy in the schools. Here, findings highlighted the specific components of each of the four contextual dimensions that were significantly influential across the case, before comprehensively describing how these influenced the enactment of SSE policy across sites. These findings are now discussed in relation to the relevant literature and underpinning theoretical framework, with each dimension and its constituent factors first discussed before the broader enabling, constraining, and what ultimately can be described as orientating influence of context, is delineated.

6.6.1. External Context

The findings of this research indicate that the external context has had a significant shaping influence on the enactment of SSE policy in Irish primary schools. In the study, the influence of the external context was most evident with respect to four distinct factors. These were the broader national context, the national policy context, SSE policy, and external actors. Most significantly, the shaping influence of the external context was seen to be enabling and constraining of

enactment. This aligns particularly well with Braun *et al.*'s (2011, p. 594) understanding of the influence of external contexts on policy enactment in terms of 'pressures and expectations'.

Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012, p. 36) add further to the theoretical interpretation by specifically identifying 'the wider local and national policy frameworks' as centrally significant. Consequently, the research findings indicate a largely coherent picture between established theory and the empirical evidence arising in this research. However, this research argues to extend this further by appreciating to a stronger degree the significance of the broader national context in shaping the enactment of SSE policy at a local level. This point, alongside an examination of the shaping influence that the external context imparted, are discussed in the coming sections.

6.6.1.1. The Confluence of Policy Ideals and Contextual Conditions

The national policy context, and SSE policy specifically, was seen to set expectations for and provide direction in how the process should be undertaken in the schools. With this, from a top-down perspective, it was encouraging to observe a change in routines and practices across the case that was associated with the national policy framework. Obviously, as the introduction of any policy is to steer the conduct of actors (Henry *et al.*, 1997), with SSE policy specifically being introduced to help and guide schools 'in their self-development' (Coolahan *et al.*, 2017, p. 141), SSE policy and the wider national policy framework certainly had had an enabling influence on the enactment of the process. This was clear in how participants spoke about their roles and the importance of school improvement, alongside the reported activities of SSE and the various impacts it achieved.

Furthermore, it was observed that external actors who were associated with this national policy framework played a key role in influencing how actors interpreted and translated the policy. This is important in a policy environment that has been described as 'low stakes' (Skerritt *et al.*, 2023, p. 712) and such direction has been identified as key to successful reform in this context

(Coolahan *et al.*, 2017). Evidently, the Inspectorate and PDST were seen to communicate the expectation for SSE to be conducted, while also providing guidance and direction in relation to how it can or should be done. This again reflects positively on system level policy supports in helping schools achieve the objectives set out in SSE policy (DES, 2012a, 2012c, 2016c).

While policy supported schools in providing a vision and motivation for enactment, the broader national context, including economic, social, and health related variables, provided the backdrop against which the policy was enacted. This created strong constraining pressures. These scenarios have been outlined as tremendously influential in the enactment of policy elsewhere. Bradbury (2023) for instance, describe crisis enactments of policy, where actors have had to alter enactment of policy in the face of contextual challenges. This was observed in the prioritisation of speed and a reorientation of emphasis back towards the immediate needs of pupils, and the above external dynamics appear to have had a similar influence on SSE policy in this research.

This finding confirms the argument presented elsewhere in that 'the effectiveness of any policy cannot be independent of context and culture but rather is profoundly shaped and moulded by it' (Harris and Jones, 2018, p. 196) and in theory, the centrality of a conducive context is presented as a key element to the successful implementation of policy (Viennet and Pont, 2017). With this, this research draws into view how actors have negotiated the confluence of policy and external context.

6.6.2. Material Context

The material context was also seen to shape the enactment of SSE policy in enabling and constraining ways. Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012, p. 29) define the material context as 'the 'physical' aspects of a school: buildings and budgets, but also to levels of staffing, information technologies and infrastructure'. In this research, professional resources, financial resources, and system supports were highly influential in shaping the enactment of SSE policy.

These findings align well with the theoretical model proposed. However, some non-physical factors, especially time, also emerged as equally important, and are argued as a necessary addition with respect to the enactment of SSE policy specifically. As such, it is suggested in this research that the material dimension might better be described as *resource context*. This can allow for a more accurate interpretation in understanding how context shapes the enactment of SSE in Irish primary schools.

6.6.2.1. Professional Resources and Time

Professional resources and time were immensely influential and were two highly interrelated factors. As outlined in the literature, time is seen in this research to be a hugely important factor in undertaking SSE (Nelson, Ehren and Godfrey, 2015), with strong evidence that limited time exists in the Irish primary context for SSE to occur (Brown *et al.*, 2016; Quinn, 2021).

Concerning professional resources, it has been acknowledged in the literature that challenges relating to staffing have existed in the primary context for much of the time period in which SSE policy has been mandated (Coolahan *et al.*, 2017; INTO, 2018; O' Doherty and Harford, 2018). This was strongly communicated by participants across sites. Here staff turnover and a lack of substitute teachers were shown to have been hugely problematic for schools as they enacted the policy.

Professional resources were observed to be linked to variation between sites in addition. Here, larger numbers of teachers and larger leadership teams were associated with stronger potential for SSE. This adds to findings presented in other research in this context. Here the size of ISM has been associated with how the process was managed (Quinn, 2021) and where middle leadership have been identified as key (Brown *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, while the research around SSE highlights the centrality of the principal in SSE, time was said to be limited for SSE work, even for those who did not have teaching duties in this research. In the Irish primary context, this scenario has been previously shown and has been

especially associated with administrative and legislative tasks. These have been argued to have had an inhibitive influence on leadership engagement with matters of teaching and learning more generally (Coolahan *et al.*, 2017; O' Doherty and Harford, 2018). This has been further evident in relation to SSE specifically (O' Hara *et al.*, 2016; Brown *et al.*, 2021).

Fundamentally, this research brings to light the implications of this with respect to the enactment of SSE policy. However, this research also identifies a key policy response to the challenges of time across site. This was observed in that a significant individual was key in enacting SSE at each site, and the overall quality of collaboration in the SSE process appeared to have been challenged by a lack of time and incapacity to distribute leadership in SSE. Most significantly, the interrelationship between limited time, a factor experienced across sites, and the strength of leadership and administrative staff within sites, had very meaningful implications for the enactment of the policy in context.

6.6.2.2. Finances and Supports

Finances and supports were also somewhat significant. ICT developments were described as helpful by participants and appear to have addressed challenges related to tools and data management systems that were said to have existed previously (Hislop, 2013). Further CPD by comparison, was an area that the schools still felt they would benefit.

With regard to finances, this has been identified as particularly influential in the enactment of policy in research in the English context (Braun *et al.*, 2011). However, this did not emerge strongly in this research. This could indicate that the Irish approach to school funding is working well. However, the financing of the Irish school system has been criticised by some commentators (Coolahan *et al.*, 2017), but that appears as a general point rather than as a criticism of disparity between individual schools.

While it was interesting to observe that finances were not perceived by the research participants to be constraining of enactment in the case study, there were examples of some schools, including

Brisk and St. Cormac's, who were able to draw on parental and private finding to respond to staffing and time challenges, drawing into view the significance of these sources of income in this context (Financial Support Service Unit, no date). This option did not appear possible in all schools, indicating some disparity existed between sites.

6.6.3. Situated Context

Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012, p. 21) categorise as situated factors 'those aspects of context that are historically and locationally linked to the school, such as the school's setting, its history and intake'. At the level of the case, the most significant factor in shaping the enactment of SSE policy appeared in the school type. However, school history and setting, while less influential at the level of the case, exerted important influence in a few sites.

6.6.3.1 School Type

Differences that existed in school type were observed to contribute to variance between the schools in relation to the enactment of the policy. This was related to both student intake, location of the school, and to a lesser degree school history or ethos. For example, the junior school status of Scoil na nÓg was attributable to the school's intake while the socio-economic status of St. Cormac's determined its DEIS status. This is similar to that observed in research in the English context. Here socio-economic context has been established as an important factor in the enactment of policy (Braun *et al.*, 2011; Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012).

These situated realities were particularly influential with respect to the focus areas chosen in SSE but also influenced the level of funding available and to how parental and student involvement played out in the SSE process. As described by Braun *et al.* (2011, p. 590) 'Schools can become defined by their intake, but also define themselves by it', and this was clear to some degree across all sites.

Interestingly, other factors of school type had an augmenting or diminishing influence on the enabling or constraining influence of other dimensions of context. For example, in multigrade schools, professional resources and time were observed to be much more limiting than in schools of a larger size, further underscoring Ball, Maguire and Braun's (2012) interpretation that contextual influences can be strongly intertwined.

6.6.3.2. Unique Contextual Circumstances

In a few schools, much more specific influences arose in the enactment of SSE policy. While commonality was not identified in respect of the factors experienced at each site, this appears to support the view that 'a range of situated factors influence how schools enact policies' (Maguire *et al.*, 2020, p. 489). For instance, the influence of school history was strongly apparent in the enactment of SSE policy in Riverway and St. Paul's, while ethos was influential during one SSE process in Riverway only. Interestingly, location, while somewhat influential in enabling schools to attract and maintain staff, did not emerge as significant a factor as outlined in other research in other contexts (Braun *et al.*, 2011; Lupton, 2011; Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012; Maguire *et al.*, 2020).

6.6.4. Professional Culture

Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012, p. 174) conceptualise the professional culture as 'less tangible variables' than the other dimensions of context. In this research, the significant facets of professional culture that emerged as important in the enactment of SSE policy were understood in terms of attitudes and leadership. Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012, p. 27) describe that 'Most schools have distinct sets of professional cultures, outlooks and attitudes that have evolved over time and that inflect policy responses in particular ways'. This position aligns very strongly with the findings of this research where attitudes and leadership were highly influential, particularly once the actions that schools took in response to other contextual challenges were scrutinised.

6.6.4.1. Attitudes, Leadership, and Responding to Context

In the research, it was clear that attitudes shaped the interpretations and subsequent translations of the policy in practice, with leadership a hugely influential factor in shaping the quality of professional culture overall. While attitudes and leadership have of course been presented as important prerequisites for successful SSE (Emstad, 2011; Schildkamp *et al.*, 2012; Schildkamp, 2019), this research provides novel accounts of the influence these factors have on enactment in this context.

Ultimately, attitudes and leadership concerning the SSE process were seen to be varied and to exert an enabling or constraining effect. This was observed both between sites and within sites over time. As already detailed, interpretations of the policy were closely aligned with the dynamics of external context, but other commentators have argued that the material context is also influential in shaping attitudes towards educational reform (Cohen and Mehta, 2017). Of most interest to this research, the professional culture appeared to be related to the enactment of SSE policy in varying ways. These included in schools where the policy was embraced as a means of achieving school improvement, where the policy was complied with, or where the policy, or elements of the policy, were avoided.

Once this occurrence is interpreted through the lens of policy enactment theory, it is possible to draw the connection between what is happening in these schools and Ball, Maguire and Braun's (2012) assertion that policy is enacted in innovative and creative ways. Maguire *et al.* (2020) extend upon this observation in arguing that schools have different capacities to innovate, and that these capacities are determined by the unique culmination of contextual circumstances in which they find themselves. This, they argue, explains heterogeneity in enactment: 'Hence the possibilities for the creative and the imaginative exercise of professional agency on the part of school leaders are more limited in some schools than others' (ibid., p. 504).

Similar has been identified in research that is not aligned with policy enactment theory. For instance in work conducted by Hall and Noyes (2009), cultural variations were linked to the subsequent quality of SSE observed. This is further supported in findings arrived at by Hofman, Dijkstra, and Hofman (2009) who argue that stronger school cultures for SSE are those with high innovation capacities and willingness to draw on staff strengths to respond to contextual change.

6.6.4.2. Resistance to SSE

The quality of policy response, particularly those enactments of SSE policy that are orientated towards compliance or avoidance, have been understood as forms of actor resistance with respect to certain policies. This is described in work undertaken by Bradbury (2019) and Braun and Maguire (2020) where resistance to policy can vary from avoidance, explicit rejection, to a superficial compliance. This has been described as 'doing without believing' by Braun and Maguire (2020, p. 433).

While this might be viewed by some as a tentative proposition, the empirical evidence accumulated here provides especially strong examples of resistance, with less explicit resistance being accompanied by explicit, direct, and formal rejection of the policy as observed in the 2016 Union directive to disengage with the policy. While this disengagement has been explained by the DE as having nothing to do with the policy itself, others have directly associated SSE with being a threat to the teaching professional. For some, SSE is seen to represent a manifestation of 'regulating the teachers' own regulation' (Carr and Beckett, 2018, p. 4) that has arisen because of the neoliberal agenda at play in the age of globalisation. While the core message of school improvement communicated in SSE policy aligns with participant values and beliefs, the wider conditions in which it is anticipated to occur appear to negatively influence interpretations, translations, and ultimately enactment.

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6.7. Overall Interpretation

This research set out to address two closely related research objectives. These were to establish how SSE policy has been enacted in Irish primary schools before seeking to understand how context shaped these enactments in these schools. Based on the research findings and discussion, the following section draws an overall interpretation in relation to these research questions.

6.7.1. How Has SSE Policy been Enacted in Irish Primary Schools?

Based on this research, three broad qualities of enactment are argued to be identifiable across the case. The first quality included schools where SSE policy was embraced as a tool enabling school improvement, as was depicted strongly at points in Longfield and Scoil Máirtín Buachaillí. Here, it appears that the policy was predominantly underpinned by a desire to improve teaching and learning and despite the challenges faced, efforts were made to ensure that successful improvements in educational quality could be attained. In this, a strong alignment with the objectives of formal SSE policy was apparent in the evidence (DES, 2012a, 2016c, 2018b).

Comparatively, there were many schools where compliance seemed to be a more significant end in the enactment of the policy, certainly when compared to the aforementioned schools. While this did not mean that a school improvement orientation was not evident, it did appear to be subservient to one of compliance. This approach to enactment appeared to be heavily linked to schools experiencing contextual challenges as stifling, and this looks to have had implications for the quality of the SSE process in practice and subsequent impacts achieved.

In addition, there were some schools where the policy was mostly avoided and again, this appeared to exist on a continuum of sorts. Here, there were examples of schools who rejected a need to employ a school improvement process that aligned with the policy vision for SSE, instances where specific elements of the six-step model were avoided, or instances where schools periodically complied with and periodically avoided the expectations of the policy.

Importantly, while these broader categories of enactment are useful, there are further important points to be made. The prevalence of informal approaches to school improvement was important across sites and did not appear to be related to these categories. Furthermore, it must be noted that schools cannot be said to have existed completely within these categorical boundaries. Rather, this research reveals that enactments ebbed and flowed over time, and as such, the boundaries identified may be understood as fluid, dynamic, and strongly linked to the enabling and constraining influences of context. This link between context and enactment is further exemplified in relation to research question two. However, it is first important that further insights are explored in relation to research question one.

6.7.1.1. Enactment Varies Over Time

Firstly, this research contributes to knowledge by outlining how SSE policy has been enacted over time in the participating schools. These findings are significant in that such a longitudinal picture has not been captured before in relation to SSE in this context. This is helpful in that it adds richness and depth to our understandings of what 'doing' SSE policy in context actually looks like, addressing shortcomings identified in the field of policy analysis (Maguire, Braun and Ball, 2015) and literature review.

As such, the enactment of SSE appears as a dynamic and complex process. Here, evidence indicates that enactment evolved over time, reflecting a scenario where 'Policy is not 'done' at one point in time…it is always a process of 'becoming', changing from outside in and the inside out. It is reviewed and revised as well as sometimes dispensed with or simply just forgotten' (Ball, Maguire, and Braun, 2012, pp. 3-4). This is important to keep in mind when considering the above broad theoretical propositions, as the policy was not enacted in a rigidly consistent way by any school over time.

With respect to the temporal picture illuminated by this research, these findings have clear implications which become vividly evident once theoretical models of SSE are drawn upon for

comparison. In foundational theoretical models of SSE, continuity is presented as a key facet of the SSE process (MacBeath, 2010), while SSE has been widely positioned as an 'essential corollary' in managing schools (MacBeath, 2008, p. 385). This is also a message that comes through very strongly in formal training for the SSE process where SSE has been presented as 'Every teacher, every classroom, every day' (Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), n.d., p. 19). Based on the evidence presented in this research, SSE does not yet appear to have been employed as a continuous or even essential practice in many schools.

6.7.1.2. Purpose Matters

The findings emerging in relation to the underpinning purpose with which SSE was enacted are consequential. In effect, this research established that SSE policy is enacted with two distinct but complexly interwoven underpinning purposes in school improvement and compliance. Overall, these findings raise interesting questions with regard to SSE in this context. As Swaffield and MacBeath (2005, p. 239) write, a key underpinning idea in ensuring that meaningful SSE occurs in schools is that it is done by schools 'to themselves, by themselves and for themselves'. Based on the evidence in the data set, it appears that there is a duality that exists in respect of agency and prescription with regard to focus choice and also, it appears that SSE is undertaken with a strong motivation to comply in many schools. This of course does not capture an additional key finding in the avoidance of SSE policy, which emerged as a clear enactment of SSE policy in and of itself (Braun and Maguire, 2020).

This scenario is not without consequence and the key underpinning theoretical argument that SSE needs to begin from a point of genuine curiosity (Saunders, 1999) is one that does not emanate as strongly as might have been hoped, based on the case study evidence. While this might be a novel way of explaining what might be happening, similar ideas have been interrogated in the literature. Alvik (1995) for instance, interprets the purpose of SSE along a continuum where a culture of wondering, or a bureaucratic culture of answers exists. In this

research, it appears that there are schools at either end of this continuum with implications for some in that a motivation to comply has been argued to result in 'a ritual of self-inspection rather than an ongoing and dynamic process of self-evaluation' (MacBeath, 2008, p. 385).

With this, the position put forward by some who argue that the majority of schools have engaged with SSE (Hislop, 2017), must be questioned. While this position certainly can be argued for and is supported by findings identified in this research, at the very least, conceptualisations of what engagement of an appropriate quality pertain to, must be considered. Accordingly, the observation that there are '…some schools in which SSE is not yet well embedded' appears to be an appropriate estimation of the situation on the ground (DE, 2022, p. 3) and a picture of SSE being 'built-on rather than built-in' (O'Brien, McNamara and O'Hara, 2015, p. 384) can be argued to align more closely with the empirical evidence.

6.7.1.3. Implications of Recontextualisation

Furthermore, this research outlined how SSE has been adopted, adapted, and avoided, as it is enacted in context. This has important implications that must be appreciated. For instance, it is argued in the literature that for SSE to function as intended, it must be systematic and grounded within a framework (MacBeath, 1999). This is significant on several levels and previous research in the field highlights that the quality of SSE is associated with how it is undertaken (Vanhoof and Van Petegem, 2011).

Furthermore, theoretically, SSE is grounded in the belief that should schools reflect on their practices in a structured way, school improvement can truly take hold (MacBeath, 1999; Antoniou, Myburgh-Louw and Gronn, 2016). Empirically, there is evidence indicating that this is the case (Hofman, Dijkstra and Hofman, 2009; Demetriou and Kyriakides, 2012) but this is by no means conclusive in the literature (van der Bij, Geijsel and ten Dam, 2016). In the Irish primary context, policy prescribes a recommended process model, which based on the evidence presented here, is adhered to by schools, at least to some degree and at least sometimes. However,

it is also clear that elements of the model are not as stringently adhered to, or have been avoided altogether.

This raises additional questions. For instance, there are some within the field who hold a position whereby stringent alignment is not appreciated as strictly necessary. This is a position held by Saunders (1999) who argues that SSE frameworks only need to provide a guiding set of informative principles. This is interesting in light of findings in this research whereby, despite piecemeal alignment, positive impacts are widely perceived by actors in schools and have also been referred to by the Inspectorate. Whichever perspective is right, a general consensus exists in the field whereby SSE needs to begin from a point of genuine desire to improve.

6.7.1.4. The Problem of Positionality

A further contribution made in this research emanates from the findings relating to agency and participation. In this research, as observed elsewhere, it emerged that positionality was highly significant in the involvement and agency actors held in enacting the process. While school leadership is understood as key in the process, so is collaboration, and it was apparent in the study that a complex and complicated relationship existed between these. In essence, leadership bore the brunt of much of the interpretation and translation of SSE policy in context, with collaboration, a somewhat less significant aspect of SSE in the schools. Naturally, this left some teachers with less agency in the process and even obstructed them from establishing their own interpretation or translation of the policy.

This extended to the involvement of students and parents. In this research, SSE was predominantly presented as the work of school staff. While parents and students provided evidence, it was interesting to observe that in school actors often argued that this was more appropriate than these agents holding influence over decision making processes more explicitly. This raises questions with respect to the role that parents and students should have in the overall governance of the school, at least with regard to formal decision-making processes such as SSE.

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6.7.2. Context Shaping the Enactment of SSE Policy

With the picture of how SSE policy was enacted attended to, it becomes possible to discuss how context shaped the enactments elucidated in the research. From the evidence accumulated, it was clear that context was a highly significant influence in the enactment of SSE policy in this study. Throughout this research, the enabling and constraining influence of policy was clearly elucidated through rich and informative examples and this finding has previously been established in relation to other policies in other contexts (Braun *et al.*, 2011; Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012; Maguire *et al.*, 2020). As such, this research progresses knowledge by strengthening the supporting evidence available.

This research extends knowledge in addition however, and facilitates deeper interpretations of policy enactment, specifically with regard to SSE. It achieves this by providing insights into the specific quality of mediating influence that context exerts (Braun *et al.*, 2011) and enables the presentation of further theory which is now discussed.

6.7.2.1. Context Orientates the Enactment of SSE policy

In essence, the evidence gathered provides strong insights into the mediating role of context in the enactment of SSE policy. Centrally, this mediating influence appeared to orientate enactment in varying ways that resulted in varying recontextualisations of SSE policy between sites. This is to say it orientated actor interpretations and translations toward three qualities of enactment outlined in relation to research question one.

Firstly, it is theorised that context can orientate enactment towards an embracing of SSE policy, where the core objectives of the policy permeate the evaluation effort in practice. Comparatively, in some sites, contextual pressures appear to have orientated enactment more strongly towards a compliance imperative, where SSE is enacted because it is mandated and expected. Finally,

context can be seen in the research to orientate enactment towards an avoidance to the policy, or toward avoidance of certain features of the policy model for instance.

This interpretation differs somewhat from the theoretical framework established by Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012). In their work, context functions as a pressure in enabling or constraining the enactment of policy. With SSE policy however, it appears that it is necessary to be more specific in our interpretation. This stems from the overall picture whereby SSE can be enacted in a way that aligns with the idealised policy vision to achieve school improvement, in a way that functions to comply with expectations predominantly, or avoided and resisted.

6.8. Conclusion

This chapter set out to discuss the findings of the research. In this, the six emergent themes presented in chapter five were interpreted in relation to the relevant literature. Furthermore, findings from chapter four, the within-site analysis, were interwoven into the discussion to ensure interpretation was not stripped of context. This was undertaken with the purpose of informing an overall interpretation of the findings in relation to the research questions which are outlined in the final sections of this chapter. These questions asked how has SSE policy been enacted in Irish primary schools in the first instance, and how has context shaped the enactment of SSE policy in Irish primary schools in the second.

Chapter 7 now concludes the research by providing a summary of the study and overview of the findings, by delineating the contributions and significance of the research, and by outlining the limitations and opportunities for further research.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

7.1. Introduction

This research set out to examine the enactment of SSE policy in Irish primary schools. To address what was argued to be a very significant gap in the literature, the research sought to depict and understand how SSE policy had been enacted in the first instance, and then to progress towards an explanation as to why this has been the case in the second. As such, it also focused on exploring the role of context in shaping the enactment of SSE policy in Irish primary schools. Therefore, the research was directed by two research questions which are presented in the following:

- How has school self-evaluation policy been enacted in Irish primary schools?
- How has context shaped the enactment of school self-evaluation policy in the Irish primary schools?

The research was presented over the course of seven chapters. Chapter one presented the background to the research and established and defined the research problem. Then, it briefly presented the guiding theoretical framework before presenting the research questions.

Chapter two then examined the literature relevant to the research. Here literature associated with policy in practice was engaged with before a close examination of the research context was undertaken. Finally, the theoretical, political, and empirical literature concerning SSE, and SSE in Irish primary schools specifically, was surveyed. Overall, this provided a framework from which the study was underpinned.

Chapter three detailed the research methodology. Following deep consideration of the philosophical and methodological literature, the specific research design utilised was outlined. In line with the overarching pragmatic worldview, the research was driven by the questions asked. In response to these questions, the research employed a qualitative multi-site case study

methodology. This enabled the gathering of data from information rich sources which were selected purposefully and with maximum variation. This approach enhanced credibility, and ultimately, a point of redundancy was reached once nine school sites had been engaged with in the fieldwork. The rigor of the research was bolstered further by the inclusion of multiple sources of data drawn from interviews, focus groups, and documents. Furthermore, a variety of perspectives were incorporated into the research by including participants who held a variety of roles in the school sites.

A key strength of the research is evident in the analytical approach that was employed. This involved the analysis and presentation of within-site findings, arrived at by means of a deductive analytical approach. This approach drew upon a priori knowledge arising from the literature and was further supported by the guiding theoretical framework of policy enactment theory. This process produced deep and rich accounts of SSE policy in practice along with a comprehensive portrayal of the shaping influence of context at each of the nine school sites. These findings are presented in chapter four.

While within-site findings offered profound and extensive insights, as is consistent with the multi-site case study tradition, a cross-site analysis was undertaken. This facilitated the identification of themes with broader applicability across the participating sites. Using an inductive constant comparative analysis method, the research identified six themes of significance which are presented in chapter five. Chapter six then discussed the research findings by situating them within the existing literature, determining novelty, and in providing an overall interpretation of the research questions asked.

Chapter seven now concludes the research. It has done so by firstly providing a summary of the overall endeavour. Next it briefly presents and integrates key findings before outlining the contribution, significance, and implications of the research project. Finally, it outlines the limitations before depicting opportunities for further research.

7.2. Overview of Findings

Six major themes were identified. These are now summarised for the reader.

7.2.1. Theme One - Temporal Dynamics in the Enactment of SSE Policy

Theme one was entitled 'Temporal Dynamics in the Enactment of SSE Policy'. This theme outlined how SSE was undertaken by schools over the longer and shorter-term. Furthermore, it elucidated how schools were seen to vary in their consistency of engagement with the formal SSE process before portraying three periods of problematic engagement that existed across sites. In extension of this observation, the shorter-term enactment of SSE policy and the existence of informal approaches, referred to as informal SSE, demonstrated two significant patterns within the case.

7.2.2. Theme Two - Ambitions and Achievements in the Enactment of SSE Policy

Theme two, 'Ambitions and Achievements in the Enactment of SSE Policy' presented the purpose, focus, and perceived impacts associated with the enactment of SSE policy in the schools. In this, school improvement and compliance motivations, and the ways these motivations were tied to the enactment of the policy, were demonstrated. Furthermore, commonalities across sites were depicted in relation to where the SSE processes had been focused. Finally, the perceived impacts with regard to the most recent SSE process in each school were then compared, unveiling the varying qualities and strengths of impact that was achieved between sites.

7.2.3. Theme Three - Adoption, Adaption, and Avoidance in the Enactment of SSE Policy

Theme three, 'Adoption, Adaption, and Avoidance in the Enactment of SSE Policy', provided observations relating to the specifics of enacting SSE policy in the schools and compared these across sites. What became evident was that schools remade SSE policy by adopting and adapting

certain features of SSE policy and the six-step process, while other elements were changed, avoided, or resisted. This ultimately unveiled the recontextualisation of SSE policy as actors negotiated the fixed expectations of policy in light of their situated realities. In addition, this theme detailed the time, place, and pace with which the policy was translated and interpreted and the subsequent implications that arose as a result.

7.2.4. Theme Four - Agency and Participation in the Enactment of SSE Policy

Theme four, 'Agency and Participation in the Enactment of SSE Policy', exhibited who was involved in the enactment of SSE policy, and subsequently, who was not. What was of central significance here was that the strength of agency and participation in the process was associated with the position actors held in the schools. Schools varied with regard to strength of collaboration in SSE but commonalities were evident in the overall prevalence of school leadership in enacting SSE policy, alongside the permeating influence on enactment that a significant individual held at each site. Furthermore, the involvement of parents and students was represented.

7.2.5. Theme Five - The Shaping Influence of External, Material, and Situated Context

Theme five, entitled 'The Shaping Influence of External, Material, and Situated Context', presented the prevalent and less prevalent factors that made up external, material, and situated contexts in which SSE policy was enacted. Following this, the ways in which these factors enabled and constrained the enactment of SSE policy across sites was revealed.

7.2.6. Theme Six - The Shaping Influence of Professional Culture

Theme six, 'The Shaping Influence of Professional Culture', again outlined the specific components of professional culture observed across sites before establishing the shaping influence these exerted on the enactment of SSE policy across sites. Again, this dimension of context was seen to enable and constrain the enactment of SSE policy. However, this dimension

was observed to be particularly important due to its association with each school's ability to respond to the contextual conditions that existed.

7.3. Integration of Findings

In considering how SSE policy has been enacted by the participating schools in this study, it is unsurprising to observe that the findings present a complex and complicated picture. Of course, this research did not set out with the aims of simplifying and presenting policy in practice as something linear and rational. Rather, it has been approached with the intention of elucidating the reality of policy work as it is experienced in schools, and to provide accounts of SSE policy that maintain a realistic and contextualised feel (Ball, Maguire, and Braun, 2012).

Consequently, the accounts of SSE policy in practice arising from this research are in many ways challenging to integrate into a simple conceptual narrative. While this may be, this aligns well with the theoretical perspective and methodological approach which underpinned the study. Here, policy was viewed as 'discursive processes that are complexly configured, contextually mediated, and institutionally rendered' (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012, p. 3), and rich, diverse, and deep findings are a natural and expected outcome of qualitive methodological approaches (Glaser, 1965; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2017).

Overall, this should not be viewed as a negative. Instead, it is argued here that the challenge in communicating the realities of enacting SSE policy is probably more indicative of the value and relevance of the research rather than its shortcomings. While the presentation of definitive and generalisable statements is not possible nor sought in any case study research (Stake, 2005), the product of any research undertaken within the paradigm of pragmatism is to progress knowledge towards a deeper understanding of truth (James, 1907; Putnam and Putnam, 2017). With this, at a certain level of abstraction, this multi-site case study can 'provide people with the vicarious experience useful for transferring assertions from those cases to others' (Stake, 2005, p. 88) and the findings of this research can be argued to highlight broader, useful assertions in the 'doing'

of SSE policy in Irish primary schools. As such, it is possible to draw upon these findings to inform an overall interpretation relating to the research objectives.

Two such assertions arrived at are now presented to the reader in the findings statements 'Enactment of SSE Policy is Shaped Deeply by Context' and 'Context Orientates the Enactment of SSE Policy'. Each statement is presented with reference to supporting evidence before the connections made by the researcher are articulated.

7.3.1. Enactment of SSE Policy is Shaped Deeply by Context

The first assertion this research makes is that the enactment of SSE policy is shaped deeply by context. In enacting SSE policy, it was clearly established that the policy was enacted in different ways over time. Evidence outlining this was demonstrated in theme one where the temporal dynamics in enacting SSE policy were illuminated across sites. While enactments between sites showed commonalities and differences, this research clearly portrays the changing quality of enactment over time both within and across school sites, and links this to the contextual enablers and constraints experienced.

The research arrives at this conclusion based on evidence which is provide in theme five and six. Here the shaping influence of the external, material, and situated context depicted the deep links that existed between changing enactments over time and the contextual enablers and constraints that were experienced during different time periods. Furthermore, the findings can account for the heterogeneity observed in enactment between school sites. As outlined in the evidence presented in theme six, the professional culture and capacity to respond seemed to explain the varied enactment of the policy.

While the research exposed the temporal dynamics in enacting SSE policy, it also progressed to examine the process at a closer level. It did this by exploring the most recently completed SSE process in each school and comparing these across sites. This unveiled that SSE policy has been negotiated and ultimately recontextualised in the schools. Evidence supporting such a conclusion

is presented in theme three where the adoption, adaption, and avoidance in the enactment of SSE policy is accounted for.

In this, the research has demonstrated the ways that the six-step process has been aligned or misaligned with while the time, place, and pace with which the process was enacted was further portrayed. What emerged as particularly significant here was the interrelationship the recontextualisations of SSE policy had with the contextual dimensions outlined in themes five and six. Here, the challenges and opportunities which context presented appeared to be heavily linked to the recontextualised enactment of policy observed at each site.

This interpretation was further bolstered by evidence arrived at in theme two. Here the ambitions underpinning and the achievements reported in the enactment of SSE policy were depicted, along with the evidence gathered and presented in theme four, where agency and participation in the enactment of SSE policy was articulated. What appears as particularly appropriate to conclude from these observations was that context shaped the quality of enactment in relation to these highly consequential elements of the SSE process. This was most visible empirically in the contextual enablers and constraints which again appeared to mediate enactment. Here the policy focus and purpose was directed for better or for worse, along with the shaping of who was involved in enacting the process, and to what degree.

7.3.2. Context Orientates the Enactment of SSE Policy

With all of this in mind, the second assertion articulated in this research is that context orientates the enactment of SSE policy. In the multi-site case study, while variance was observed in relation to enactment over time and between school sites, it was possible to identify three broad categories with which context orientates the enactment of SSE policy. These were evident in the enactment of SSE policy for school improvement, in the enactment of SSE policy to comply, and avoidance or resistance in enacting SSE policy.

The evidence supporting such a conclusion permeates themes and is arrived at based on the insights they cumulatively provide. The evidence portrayed in themes one to four has clearly demonstrated the ways in which SSE policy has been enacted, with actor interpretations and translations comprehensively detailed, alongside what ultimately depicts its recontextualised quality. Adjacently, themes five and six strongly articulate the orientating influence that context has on these enactments, with accounts clearly detailing the quality of influence.

From this evidence, it is asserted that enactment is not only enabled and constrained by context, rather, it provides pressures that work to direct actor interpretations and translations towards either of these broader categories of enactment. While this is the case, this research also establishes that such a claim cannot be held as fixed in relation to any school. While at the point of research, it was possible to position each school in one of the aforementioned categories, it was clear from the within site analyses that enactments were fluid over time. With this, enactment was susceptible to the changing external, material, and situated context, along with the changing professional cultures that existed in the schools at any point in time.

7.4. Contribution, Implications, and Significance

This research has made several significant contributions, extending and confirming the existing body of knowledge. These contributions are detailed under the headings of theoretical contributions, empirical contributions, and practical contributions. The significance of this research lies in its comprehensive and detailed examination of SSE policy enactment in Irish primary schools. By filling a critical gap in the literature, providing robust empirical data, and offering valuable theoretical and practical insights, this research has important implications for future SSE policy and practice. Policymakers and practitioners can utilise these findings to enhance the effectiveness of SSE processes, ultimately contributing to improved educational outcomes in Irish primary schools.

7.4.1. Empirical Contributions

This study provides robust empirical data gathered from a diverse sample of Irish primary schools. While the sample is confined to the Dublin area, it includes nine comprehensive, rich, and empathic accounts of SSE policy in practice. This addresses a critical gap identified in chapter two. Here the literature review highlighted the need for empirical accounts of SSE policy enactment in Irish primary schools. Although some comparable empirical research exists in the Irish post-primary context and broader international literature, the evidence specific to Irish primary schools was limited. This research contributes to closing this important gap by providing extensive, contextualised accounts, culminating in theoretically and empirically informed explanations of how SSE policy is enacted and why SSE policy is enacted as it is in this unique setting.

The significance of this contribution is further enhanced by the innovative use of a multi-site case study design. This approach gathered multiple perspectives from teachers and leaders in each school and incorporated documentary evidence, adding depth and breadth to the data set. The approach also extended beyond within-site analysis by employing a further inductive cross-site analysis. While not making the findings generalisable, it strengthens their applicability and transferability while maintaining contextual specificity (Stake, 2005; Jenkins *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, this creative empirical approach has added unique and novel evidence, analysis, findings, and conclusions to the field.

7.4.2. Theoretical Contributions

This research has significantly advanced the understanding of SSE in Irish primary schools. Firstly, by drawing on an appropriate theoretical framework in the shape of policy enactment theory, the study contributes to theoretical knowledge concerning the enactment of SSE policy. It delineates how SSE policy has been enacted across nine individual sites, highlighting the influential role of context in shaping this. Secondly, the study offers strong analytical comparisons, revealing similarities, differences, and broader assertions applicable at the level of

the case. While these theoretical assertions are not generalisable, they do offer valuable contributions to theory, policy, and practice.

Crucially, the research is argued to have achieved its overall research objectives. In this, novel, empirically grounded theory outlining how SSE policy has been enacted in selected Irish primary schools, and the shaping influence of context on enactment, has been provided and directly contributes to addressing the research questions and filling a clear knowledge gap.

This research also contributes to the field of critical policy analysis more broadly. By examining SSE policy as an enacted practice in Irish primary schools, the research strengthens, challenges, and extends understanding of policy in practice. Particularly, the research highlights the significant influence of context in policy work, supporting Braun *et al.*'s (2011) call for a greater appreciation of contextual factors in policy analysis.

Furthermore, the research provides evidence suggesting modifications may be required to the underlying theoretical model. Specifically, it proposes reconceptualising the *material context* as *resource context*. This is argued to more accurately depict the enactment of SSE policy as evident in this study. Additionally, it advocates for a greater appreciation of the broader external context's influence on policy enactment, which was significant in this research in addition.

7.4.3. Practical Contributions

This research makes significant practical contributions. These are now presented as opportunities to enhance enactment of SSE policy, opportunities to enhance the impact of SSE policy, and opportunities for professional learning in SSE.

7.4.3.1. Opportunities to Enhance Enactment of SSE Policy

This research highlights the critical role of communicating SSE policy effectively, especially once the significance of interpretation is considered with respect to enactment. While progress has been made in developing an awareness of the policy among school principals and other

formal leaders to some degree, there is considerable opportunity to engage teachers who do not hold formal leadership roles. This is an essential consideration as interpretation of policy is key in ensuring the process is subsequently translated as a collaborative activity by all school staff, and that actions are taken in each classroom in the school. While written policy documents, guidelines, circulars, and updates are helpful, this research indicates a need for additional supplemental approaches.

Professional learning emerged as a key factor in ensuring the process was prioritised and sustained in this study. Notably, professional learning opportunities focused on areas beyond the SSE process explicitly, were highlighted as an important tool in directing enactment of the policy in schools. For example, professional learning courses focused on wellbeing referred back to SSE and its ability to achieve change in this area in schools. Thus, it is suggested that this approach continue to be pursued as a means of facilitating enactment of the policy.

Concerning translations of the policy, it appears that a greater degree of clarity with respect to when and how the technical facets of the process can be enacted is required. With this, capacity to enact the process under real-world conditions will need to be supported in schools going forward. For instance, schools will benefit from clear timelines and process exemplars which align with the contextual realities in which they operate. This research provides important feedback in relation to how this might look, with rapidity in the use of the six-step model presenting a tremendous opportunity with which successful enactment can be progressed. Furthermore, this research highlights that a one size fits all approach to such supports will not be enough. Rather, consideration of the various contextual influences within which actors enact policy will facilitate policy success further.

While it was suggested in the research that schools are finding it difficult to release teachers for professional learning, a further approach may include embracing and leveraging the opportunities presented by social media. This appears to be an area of untapped potential in the communication and promotion of policy related ideas and practices. Consequently, this research argues for the

exploration of alternative approaches to communicating policy. Oide, the rebranded Professional Development Service for Teachers, and the Inspectorate are particularly well positioned to communicate expertise, ideas, and practices widely and in an easily accessible way. This would provide the system with frequent ideas relating to the translation of the policy into concrete actions and practices in Irish primary schools while also offering opportunities to share various examples of the process in action in various types of schools.

This research also portrayed a picture of hierarchy with respect to agency and participation in the enactment of SSE policy. This is argued to be unhelpful in relation to the overall objectives of the policy where collaboration and buy-in are immensely important. One avenue for potential progress here lies in initial teacher education and in teacher induction. Here it will be important to provide students and newly qualified teachers with meaningful, positive, practical, and sustained engagements with the SSE process.

While students in initial teacher education receive input with regard to what the process and policy involve, teacher education institutions have significant potential to produce teachers who are strongly equipped to add value at the level of the school from the outset of their employment. Subject specialisms, common in Irish higher education institutions, offer great potential here. It is suggested that a specialism in SSE specifically would provide greater expertise to the system or alternatively, a greater emphasis could be placed on SSE as part of existing subject specialisms. Furthermore, clear direction can be provided to schools and newly qualified teachers involved in the Droichead induction process. Here, structures promoting involvement and the development of skills and knowledge relevant to the SSE process could harness the potential that these teachers hold, further contributing to a truly collaborative SSE process in the Irish primary context.

In the immediate term, it is possible to give some advice to schools and their staff. Firstly, where feasible, it would be beneficial to establish a formal structure for SSE to flourish. Potential

opportunities here may include developing a distributed model of leadership and ensuring that the process is interpreted and translated with a school improvement purpose. This may be achieved in several ways.

For instance, responsibility for enacting SSE policy can be made a formal facet of each formal leadership role within the school. Adjacently, it is suggested that the process be undertaken in as collaborative a way as possible. While committee formation will be possible and helpful in supporting success in larger schools, it is suggested that the process seek to involve all actors on staff as much as possible. In smaller schools, creative management of time will be required and the scope of change targeted will need to be narrow and specific. Furthermore, it will be important for experienced staff to facilitate the development of SSE skills and knowledge in others. This will help staff to ensure capacity for the process remains embedded in the face of contextual challenges such as turnover.

For school leaders, the research underscores the importance of creating conditions that facilitate collaborative, school improvement-oriented SSE processes. While time for SSE is clearly limited, explicitly isolating a set time in each Croke Park meeting for SSE and making it a permanent element of the Board of Management meeting agenda is also recommended. In extension, by ensuring that the process sets targets and actions that are focused on highly specific changes in relation to classroom practice, the quality of teaching and learning in schools can be enhanced in a sustainable way over time.

7.4.3.2. Opportunities to Enhance the Impact of SSE Policy

This research presents several important policy implications. Considering the SSE policy objectives of school improvement and quality assurance, the findings have relevance for policy designers, the DE, and the Inspectorate.

The study underscores the influential role of context on the quality of policy enactment, suggesting that enabling factors for school improvement should be promoted, while constraining factors should be mitigated, as much as practically possible. One key area where potential exists is the area of control of the SSE process. There should be a clear decision and communication regarding control, especially in terms of process focus and purpose. While addressing national priorities is necessary, the feasibility of addressing these within a single SSE process or a four-year cycle should be questioned. Findings from this research suggest that overall, schools should be granted stronger autonomy in choosing their own focus to ensure meaningful engagement and buy-in and that individual SSE processes focus on change that is realistically achievable. This is especially pertinent once the turbulent long-term picture of enactment portrayed in this study is considered.

Time and professional resources emerged as crucial factors influencing the meaningful enactment of SSE policy in addition. While these factors are challenging and costly areas to develop at the level of the system, future considerations should explore how schools can be provided with sufficient time to engage in collaborative and contextually responsive SSE processes. One potential solution is to allow for shorter, more narrowly focused SSE cycles, which might be less vulnerable to a loss of momentum in the face of inevitable contextual challenges. Furthermore, discussion and fresh ideas are clearly required with regard to time for formal, collaborative, whole school developmental planning. In other systems, significant time is made available for schools to engage in such processes outside of teaching hours. Based on the study findings, it appears that similar avenues could be explored and this will be of utmost significance in achieving significant and sustainable progress in the quality of teaching and learning in Irish primary schools going forward.

7.4.3.3. Opportunities for Professional Learning in SSE

Evidence arising in this study highlights specific areas where professional learning can be targeted. These include professional learning in relation to the completion, monitoring, and

evaluation of actions and targets, involving a wider body of stakeholders, and in specialised training in relation to enacting the process in a contextually responsive way.

Firstly, the steps of the six-step process beyond the investigation stage require emphasis. Specifically, increased opportunities for professional learning in the areas of communicating with and involving more deeply students and parents in the process, and in the final step of monitoring and evaluation will be necessary. Next, and most importantly, addressing a need for skills in completing actions planned for and initiated is an area in need of attention.

This study provides clear direction with regard to how this might be addressed. Here, professional learning can enable schools to develop capacity in their ability to respond to and mitigate the dynamic contextual circumstances that inevitably face in enacting policy. Based on the evidence, capacity here will involve more than just an ability to adapt and adopt elements of the SSE policy to suit their needs. Rather, it is necessary to proactively put in place strategies to anticipate, mitigate, and respond to change in ways that facilitate the achievement of school improvement objectives over time. Professional learning orientated towards agility can help schools identify the opportunities that exist to them in responding to context. In progressing this capacity, it would be beneficial that those tasked with designing and delivering these learning opportunities would have had practical, real-world experience in enacting the policy themselves in schools.

7.5. Limitations

While this research employed a qualitative multi-site case study, providing enhanced validity and credibility by comparison to single case studies, the findings are not generalisable beyond the specific case studied. The qualitative nature of the data gathered relied on participant responses which can be subject to participant bias. To address this, further a variety of evidence was gathered at each research site and included a variety of perspectives to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings.

Researcher bias is also a potential limitation. The data analysis approach relied on qualitative methods which inherently embrace subjectivity in interpretation. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that others may interpret the data and findings differently. To mitigate this, a range of steps were employed to ensure rigor, credibility, and validity in the research, as outlined in detail in chapter three. With these steps, it is argued that researcher bias has been reduced as much as possible and that interpretations have been clearly justified and supported with evidence.

A further limitation is offered in relation to the involvement of stakeholders in the research. The inclusion of a broader range of stakeholders in the research, including students, parents, Board of Management members, and potentially school inspectors would enhance the breadth of insight achieved.

Despite these limitations, the value offered by the qualitative methodology employed was fully embraced. Ultimately, this approach allowed for comprehensive exploration of the research problem, providing valuable insights in respect to the research questions where researcher reflexivity was held to be significant.

7.6. Further Research

Given the limitation of generalisability in this study, further research is considered essential to test the theoretical assertions made. Employing a quantitative research design would help to validate these findings across a broader and more representative sample while qualitative research undertaken in a wider geographical area would add further richness and breadth to the interpretations presented in the current study. Additionally, there are many opportunities through which the empirical picture presented here could be enhanced. Additionally, it is suggested that further research would include a broader range of stakeholders and participants at each site.

Observations of the technical process in action and examination of its translation into classroom practices of teaching and learning would also be highly beneficial. This study relied primarily upon participant accounts of the SSE process in schools. Incorporating field observations in

future research could present a more nuanced understanding and help to further mitigate the challenges associated with self-reported data.

Concerning further impact, future research would be immensely beneficial in relation to the design of professional learning opportunities for schools in enacting SSE policy. Specifically, an approach to support schools in becoming more responsive to the contextual pressures in which they enact they enact the policy, presents enormous potential.

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Appendix A: Ethical Approval

Ronan Gubbins
School of Policy and Practice

Prof. Joe O'Hara
School of Policy and Practice

2nd March 2021

REC Reference: **DCUREC/2021/036**

Proposal Title: **Leading quality improvement in Irish primary schools: A triangulation mixed methods approach to understanding the enactment of school self-evaluation**

Applicant(s):   **Ronan Gubbins, Prof. Joe O'Hara, Dr. Shivaun O'Brien**

Dear Colleagues,

This research proposal qualifies under our Notification Procedure, as a low risk social research project. Therefore, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this project.

Materials used to recruit participants should state that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Geraldine Scanlon
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

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Appendix B: Informed Consent

Informed Consent Form – Principal interview, school document analysis, and staff focus group

What is the purpose of the research?

I, Ronan Gubbins, am seeking to complete PhD research in Dublin City University, School of Policy and Practice. I am studying school self-evaluation (SSE) in Irish primary schools. I am interested in the relationship between context and how SSE is done in schools. My research supervisors are Professor Joe O' Hara and Assistant Professor Shivaun O' Brien.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

What you will be expected to do in the research study?

The school will be asked to provide some school self-evaluation documents (school improvement plans/reports). The school principal will be asked to participate in an interview. Teaching staff will be asked to participate in a focus group interview.

How your data will be anonymised

Your data will be anonymised and analysed for inclusion in a PhD thesis. You will be given the opportunity to review the data before it is included in the research. This anonymised data will be included in a PhD thesis and may be published in academic journal articles.

Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)
I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)
Yes/No
I understand the information provided
Yes/No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study
Yes/No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions
Yes/No
I am aware that my interview will be video and audiotaped
Yes/No
I am aware that I can choose to keep my camera off
Yes/No

Your involvement in the research study is voluntary

I understand that I may withdraw from the research study at any point

Yes/No

Confidentiality of your data and legal limitations

To protect your identity, you will use a pseudonym interviews. Your data will be recorded using a unique identifier/pseudonym to preserve anonymity. The interview/focus group will be recorded in audio format. Any information that could identify you, including your name and school, will be redacted from the research. Data collected will not be used for any other purpose than that outlined above. Every available means of ensuring your anonymity is made in line with the legal limitations and DCU data protection guidelines. Due to the sample size, you are advised that certainty concerning anonymity cannot be guaranteed. All data generated in the research study will be held securely in a locked cabinet or with a

password encrypted electronic device. Your data will be used in a PhD thesis and may be published in academic journals. The data will be destroyed five years after the research project by Ronan Gubbins.

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participants Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Please include your email address if you wish to receive a summary of the research results upon completion: _____

Appendix C: Plain Language Statement

Examining the role of context in shaping the enactment of school self-evaluation in Irish primary schools: A triangulation mixed methods study

Dear participant,

I, Ronan Gubbins, am engaging in PhD research in Dublin City University Institute of Education, School of Policy and Practice. I am studying the relationship between context and school self-evaluation (SSE) in Irish primary schools. My research supervisors are Professor Joe O' Hara and Assistant Professor Shivaun O' Brien.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

What is involved for participants?

You will be asked to provide data for the research by taking part in the following:

- **Interview –** The school principal will be asked to take part in an interview. Here you will be asked questions and engage in dialogue concerning your experience and perspectives regarding SSE.
- **Focus group/interview** – Willing participants among the teaching staff will be asked to take part in a focus group. Here you will be asked questions and engage in dialogue concerning your experience and perspectives regarding SSE.
- **School Improvement Plan** - You will be asked to provide your school self-evaluation report and improvement planning documents.

Why?
The purpose of the collection of this data is to examine the relationship between context and how SSE is carried out in Irish primary schools. This data will be used in a PhD thesis in a fully anonymized form.

How interview/focus group work?

I will request that interviews/focus groups be recorded in audio format to facilitate data gathering and data analysis.

How will the school improvement/DEIS plan element work?

You will be asked to provide your school improvement planning documents. These will be analysed to address the research questions. Any identifying information from documents will be redacted.

How will taking part benefit you?

Participants may benefit by having their voice heard, by sharing their professional experiences, and by facilitating educational research.

How can I keep up to date with the project?

During the research project, you can keep up to date on the research twitter page **@GubbinsRonan**. When the project is finished, a summary of findings will be emailed to you, if you include your email address in the informed consent form.

Are their potential risks to me as a participant arising from my involvement in the research?

Due to the small number of participants in the study, anonymity cannot be guaranteed. However, all steps to ensure complete anonymity are taken. It is my priority that schools and participants are unidentifiable.

How is my confidentiality protected?

I will apply a pseudonym to any data stored or included in the research. All data will be anonymised using computer software. Participant and school names will be redacted and will not be used in the study. Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

Your participation is entirely voluntary

You may withdraw your consent to take part at any point. Previously collected data will still be processed unless otherwise requested by you. If requested, your data will be deleted at any point.

Your personal data and GDPR compliance
- Dublin City University (DCU) is the data controller for this research.
- Files will be stored on the DCU Google Drive and will be accessed using a password protected computer. Any notes made by the researcher will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home and will not feature names of participants or schools/locations. Only the researcher will have access to this cabinet.
- Data will not be shared or transferred. The researcher, Ronan Gubbins, and the researcher's supervisors, Professor Joe O' Hara and Assistant Professor Shivaun O' Brien, will have access to the data.
- Data may be used to inform future research of a similar nature including future academic publications.
- Data will be retained for five years following the conclusion of the research and then destroyed by Ronan Gubbins. This will enable the analysis of the data, submission of the PhD thesis, and publication of the findings in academic journal(s). Ronan Gubbins will delete all data.
- You have the right to lodge a complaint with the Irish Data Protection Commission at any point.
- You have the right to access your own personal data and you can do this by contacting the DCU Data Protection Unit through the DCU Data Protection Officer – Mr. Martin Ward (data.protection@dcu.ie Ph: 7005118 / 7008257).
- You can withdraw consent to take part or include your data at any point by contacting the researcher.

Contact information

If you have any questions about this project, please contact the researcher.

Name: Ronan Gubbins

Tel: 085 8240035

Email: ronan.gubbins@dcu.ie

Research twitter account: **@GubbinsRonan**

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person,
please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation
Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie