‘It ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it’

School Culture and Curriculum Development- exploring an integrated approach to leading curriculum change.

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Abstract

Recent syntheses of research in educational leadership have found that 'there is good evidence that the professional environment in the school can also affect student's learning. The responsibility for creating and maintaining the most conducive professional environment lies with school leaders' (Coe, Kime & Singleton 2022). This suggests that factors such as school culture may, through its impact on teacher's professional environments, impact student outcomes. However, the abstract nature of terms like 'culture', combined with the relatively sparse research into school culture, has meant that school improvement efforts (specifically related to curriculum) are not always able to leverage the potential power of overtly developing school culture.

In order to address the relative lack of research in this area, this small-scale practitioner research explores the potential of a theoretical framework that could be utilised by leaders. 'Cultural curricular knowledge' (CCK) (Impact, 2024) modelled on 'Pedagogical Content Knowledge' (Shulman 1986), attempts to refocus leader's implementation efforts on a dual development of both culture and curriculum. This study involved two 45 min focus groups with teachers, exploring their lived experience of a curriculum change. An intervention was delivered to senior leaders (Headteacher, two assistant headteachers and two subject leaders), providing them with bespoke training, incorporating the key themes that emerged from the baseline focus group that emerged as areas for development in school culture, as well as a focus on 'CCK' and in particular, sensemaking (Ancona 2012). The follow up focus group was used to ascertain whether teachers felt, even slightly, a shift in leadership practices and culture that further support their curriculum design and delivery work.

The findings suggest that particular conditions supported curriculum change, such as psychological safety: 'the conditions and climate in which people are comfortable being themselves' (Edmondson 2003). However, certain tensions hindered curriculum change, including external constraints, and a lack of perceived autonomy, suggesting that there was a distinction between the climate of the sector and the 'microclimate' of the school. The theoretical framework of 'CCK' (Impact, 2024) may therefore be useful for leaders to utilise when they're considering the conditions required within their own school context. However, it is limited by the reliability of 'culture data' and external constraints that may undermine the internal culture of a school, potentially limiting leaders' ability to intentionally and deliberately control the 'micro-climate' of their schools.

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Table of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Term
TA	Thematic Analysis
CCK	Cultural Curricular Knowledge
PCK	Pedagogical Content Knowledge
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
CPD	Continuing professional development
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status
RQ	Research Question

Table 1: Abbreviations used throughout this project

1. Introduction

In September 2018, I was asked to move from my role as Deputy Headteacher of a one-form entry school in a leafy, affluent part of West London (rated Outstanding), to become Deputy Headteacher of a two-form entry school in Greater London, that had experienced 5 headteachers over the past 5 years. The local community described the school as a 'test factory' and when I visited ahead of joining in September, the 60 Year 6 students were sat in rows in the library and sheepishly told me it was because 'we're too naughty so we have to stay in here.' The curriculum had been entirely narrowed and students were receiving a limited diet of reading, writing and mathematics daily. The staff were disenchanted, and morale was low, leading to an apathy towards any sort of professional development. The school was in an area of significant disadvantage and the provision was further exacerbating this challenge. Arriving in September it was clear that myself and the principal who had also been moved from the Acton primary school, had a significant challenge on our hands. We had to deconstruct the curriculum and collectively with staff, redefine and re-establish an aspirational curriculum offer, focusing heavily on it serving the very unique needs of the pupils from the locality. As we began to do this, something became very apparent. There was a very important pre-requisite to this body of work- creating the optimal conditions in the school for staff to thrive. Staff needed to have a shared vision of our purpose, a collective understanding of the steps we were taking to get there and to feel security, safety and belonging as they carried out the important curriculum development work that was required. In order to address this, we began working on both curriculum development and school culture in tandem. Every strategic school improvement decision was paired with conversation about how the change would be experienced on the ground and what measures we could take to get the conditions for this change right.

In March 2020, the school received a 'Good' judgment following our Ofsted Inspection. More importantly, staff turnover stabilised significantly, with over 21/30

staff members remaining after the first year, giving the school the stability, it needed to continue on its journey. Feedback from Ofsted reflected the shift in curriculum ambition and coherence that the staff had collectively achieved, as well as recognising the role that leaders played in this change.

'Leaders are ambitious for all pupils in the school. They know what they want pupils to learn by the time they finish school. Pupils study a wide range of subjects. Leaders make sure that these subjects are well planned, and teachers deliver the plans in a way that is interesting for pupils.'

'Staff are very appreciative of the support they receive from leaders in the school. Leaders listen to staff and respond to their needs.' Ofsted Report, March 2020.

Fast forward to January 2023 and I joined a multi-academy trust in their central team. My role is 'School Improvement Lead-Curriculum & Assessment', supporting curriculum development in all 12 of the schools (both primary and secondary) within the trust. As part of this role, I also act as an 'Education Improvement Partner' for one school- a three-form entry primary school in East London. The school has experienced significant changes in leadership over the past five years, as well as multiple iterations of the curriculum. This has had significant implications on both quality of education and staff culture and moral. In September a new Principal and Deputy Headteacher joined the school began to lead on the implementation of a Curriculum, Learning and Teaching framework, as co-constructed by leaders across the trust, to achieve curriculum alignment across all schools. School culture and morale are, understandably, a barrier to this important curricular work. Typically my role would be constrained to development of curriculum, learning and teaching but my past experiences in similar contexts suggested, that a focus on both this AND the school culture was necessary for the curriculum change to be successfully implemented and sustained over time.

As mentioned previously, a new curriculum framework had been adopted by all of our primary schools within the trust from September 2023. The purpose of this was to create further alignment within the trust, so that schools could benefit from 'the trust dividend' (Nicholls 2023) see Figure 1. e.g. sharing of planning across schools. This is the notion that as school trusts grow, there is an inflection point at which collaboration across schools in the trust can be usefully leveraged to secure improved provision across all schools within the trust. The school where my research is based, is faced with, a common and persistent challenge in school improvement which I've now encountered many times across multiple contexts in my career. They must navigate a period of curriculum change, whilst cultivating a culture that catalyses and sustains this change over time.

Figure 1: Seeking a Trust Dividend (Nicholls 2023)

This research sets about to address the relationships between curriculum change and the culture required to catalyse and sustain a change in curricular provision. It aims to establish whether school culture and the conditions in which teachers operate, impact their lived experiences of curriculum change. It also aims to establish potential tools for leaders, in terms of how they might adapt their working practices to best support the development of their school culture and their curriculum simultaneously.

There are examples of teachers who stay in the same school for a lifetime and other examples of teachers who stay in a school for less than a term. This in turn has a significant impact on school improvement efforts that improve outcomes for pupils. As a School Improvement Leader, it's important to me to unpick how leaders can both: maintain a stable and fulfilled staff and raise the bar for quality of education for pupils through curriculum development.

In order to explore the existing literature on this topic I have posed the following questions for my literature review:

1. What external and internal factors influence curriculum development?
2. What is 'culture', what is 'school culture' and how is it linked to school improvement?
3. What are the existing frameworks, tools and CPD available to leaders to support them in developing both curricular and culture in their schools?

2. Literature Review

The literature review is organised into three sections, to provide a focused review of the available evidence regarding school culture and curriculum change. The first section focuses on the nature of curriculum development in schools and national curriculum reform as a key macro influence. The second section focuses on exploring the varying perspectives on school culture, as to provide a working definition and consider its influence in school improvement efforts. The third section focuses on the role leaders play in establishing and sustaining school culture particularly during curriculum change at a school-level and considers what tools are available to support them.

2.1 Curriculum Design and Change

In order to truly appreciate the nature of curriculum development in schools, I must explore the 'ecosystem' within which curriculum exists. This will enable us to appreciate the complex nature of curriculum development and truly grasp the multiple factors that influence its evolution within a school setting and therefore, how it's led by leaders. In order to do so, it is necessary for us to consider both the macro (national) influences and the more micro (local) influences. The history of curriculum reform in the UK to present day will provide us with a broader understanding of the national expectations that shape curriculum, before exploring how this is then further shaped and refined at school level. Together these will provide us important information about the sheer scope and complexity of the work and the interplay between external and internal forces that shape it.

Before exploring this, it is important to establish a working definition of 'curriculum'. There is no universally agreed definition of curriculum, and some definitions are more useful than others in capturing the multi-faceted nature of the word. Tyler (1957) describes the curriculum as 'all the learning experiences,

planned and directed by the school to attain its educational goals' (pg.79). Tyler's definition holistically captures the all-encompassing nature of the word. Tanner and Tanner's (1995) definition points more specifically to
the sequential nature of curriculum and largely focuses on the process of knowledge-building. They assert that curriculum is 'the reconstruction of knowledge and experience that enables the learner to grow in exercising intelligent control of subsequent knowledge and experience.' Priestley's (2021) definition, in contrast, offers a far more nuanced view and highlights the layered and social nature of curriculum: 'The multi-layered social practices, including infrastructure, pedagogy and assessment, through which education is structured, enacted and evaluated' (Priestley et al, 2021). This definition highlights the dynamic nature of curriculum and refers to the 'social practice' inherent in curriculum development. This emphasis on the social nature of curriculum development, is particularly helpful in this research, given the focus on school culture and curriculum design.

Given the social lens with which Priestley views curriculum development, I will begin by exploring the wider 'ecosystem' within which curriculum is situated, before attempting to understand it's more nuanced intricacies at school-level. I will begin by providing a chronology of the political backdrop that has influenced curriculum development in UK schools in the past 60 years.

David Eccles, the Conservative Secretary of State in 1962, established the 'Curriculum Study Group' within the Department for Education to address concerns around falling standards in UK schools. In 1964, Sir Edward Boyle repurposed the group and renamed it the Schools Council. The Schools Council represented a partnership between central government and local government and teachers, with the aim of engaging in national projects and promoting best practice. Following this, in 1979, following economic downturn and an initial reluctance towards a core national curriculum, Mark Carlisle (Conservative Secretary of State) abolished the Schools Council and replaced this with the School Curriculum and Development

Committee. In 1985, the 'Better Schools' white paper made recommendations for the introduction of a national curriculum. Following this, Parliament passed the 1988 Education Reform Act (HM Government, 2002), which provided a framework for the National Curriculum with a focus on key principles including 1) promoting social, moral, cultural, mental, and physical development of pupils 2) preparing pupils for adult life. This led to the introduction of 'key stages', the expectation that both core (English, Mathematics and Science) and foundation subjects (art, geography, history, music, physical education, and technology) would be studied and the introduction of programmes of study (a specific syllabus for each subject at each key stage). (James 2018)

This original National Curriculum was brought into primary schools in 1989 but has since seen several iterations. Shortly after its introduction in 1993, the curriculum was refined in response to school's describing it has 'unwieldy' and a revised version implemented in 1995. Around the same time in the early 90s, Ofsted, was established. Ofsted was established in response to continued criticism of the quality of schools in the UK and are an independent body who report directly to Parliament. They are responsible for inspecting and regulating education and training.

In 1996, poor performance in statutory tests sparked fresh concerns and curriculum reforms, this time under a Labour government, focused largely on improving literacy and numeracy in schools. This prompted the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. Following this, the National Curriculum underwent further revisions in 1999, with a focus on the purpose of the National Curriculum itself. (UK Parliament, 2019)

Fast forward to 2007, following the Jim Rose review of the primary curriculum, changes were announced that meant less prescription for school curriculum and allowed more flexibility for teachers. The Conservative/Liberal Democratic coalition

in 2010, led by the then Secretary of State Michael Gove, instigated yet another National Curriculum review. Michael Gove's agenda was influenced heavily by the establishment of free schools and academies (introduced by the Labour government to replace failing schools) and his school's minister Nick Gibb's attention was largely focused on developing a knowledge-rich national curriculum. Michael Gove and Nick Gibb, supported by an expert panel including Tim Oates and Dylan Wiliam, conducted a review and drafted new programmes of study, heavily influenced by the work of E.D. Hirsch's 'Core Curriculum Knowledge'. (Sloan 2017) Hirsch's work on the 'Core Curriculum' in the US was underpinned by the belief that if pupils acquire communal knowledge (as shared by wider society) they this will maximise their life chances. He refers to this as being 'culturally literate'. (Hirsch 1987)

This historical context provides a valuable backdrop to understanding the role and influence of educational policy, firstly in shaping educator's views on the purpose of education and secondly in guiding curriculum development at school level. Jennings (1977) 6-step linear model of policy development describes the process of policy to practice as: 1) evidence of problem emerges 2) opinions about the problem lead to specific options 3) policy options are presented formally 4) further discussion around options take place 5) policy makers select the key policy options 6) administrative procedures are established to operationalise the policy. Bell and Stevenson (2006) offer a pithy definition of the process of educational policy asserting that 'policy is about the power to determine what gets done, or not done'. Both Jennings' model and Bell and Stevenson's definition broadly reflect the evolution of the National Curriculum from the 1960s to present day, as described above, and reinforce the idea that national policy, in and of itself, is a significant factor influencing the curriculum design and development process leaders engage with at school-level.

Many of the initial challenges highlighted in the report of the expert panel for the National Curriculum review in 2011, appear to be just as relevant in schools today.

These include: the balance between the national curriculum and the local needs of an individual school, the balance between knowledge and skills within the curriculum and mixed messages about teacher agency (James, 2018)

Despite its various states of being historically, the National Curriculum in its existing form has served the UK well in terms of its impact on young people and their academic achievement. Recent PISA findings (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development programme for international assessment used to benchmark performance of young pupils globally) revealed that UK students have higher than average levels of maths, reading and science compared to our international counterparts. (Department of Education, University of Oxford 2023) Teacher advocacy groups argue however, that in light of an emerging picture of poor teacher recruitment and retention, it has come at too great a cost. The 'Teacher Retention and Recruitment Report' produced in 2023 by the Gatsby Foundation, found that only 59% of teachers are expected to be teaching in three years' time, a drop from 72% in 2019 and that fewer senior leaders aspire to become headteachers (43% down from 56% pre-pandemic). (Allen, Ford and Hannay 2023)

Curriculum change, it appears, is not a new concept for schools both at a national and more local level. However, the complexity of the curriculum change appears to have endured and perhaps grown, in light of broader political policy. The structure of the current education system operates in almost a nested fashion with macro, national curriculum guidance and more micro, academy trust curriculum guidance at play simultaneously. (Priestley 2021)

Priestley et al. (2021) further explores this interplay between the education system and school-level curriculum development in his work on 'curriculum-making' and teacher agency, highlighting the challenge that leaders face in moving from policy to practice.

"Curriculum work involves highly dynamic processes of interpretation, mediation, negotiation, and translation, across multiple layers or sites of education systems. For example, official curriculum texts – that is, government prescription – are already products of interpretation when committees or bodies developing them try to operationalize them into forms usable in schools for subsequent enactment into practice. (Priestley et al. 2021)

Priestley highlights the role of 'interpretation' in the process of moving from macro development of curriculum policy to micro school-level curriculum making, with the addition of a proposed 'meso' middle ground, involving leadership, production of guidance and resource production at a subject level. This might occur through, for example, expert teachers, district authorities or textbook production. Priestley also highlights the delicate balance between a top-down approach connecting policy and practice that may lead to a lack of ownership, and a bottom-up approach that may conversely lead to lack of direction. He points to global examples of success of meso systems being implemented and places meso-curriculum making in the centre of balancing top down and bottom-up approaches, proposing that teacher networks, researchers and guidance and funding must be wrapped around this curriculum making in order to provide sufficient support for teachers to connect national policy to practice.

The notion of the curriculum operating at multiple 'sites' and serving multiple purposes is built upon from the work of Goodlad et al. (1979), who defines the various forms of the curriculum planning and the various stakeholders that influence it:

1) The ideological curriculum- referring to a curriculum that captures the ideas of teachers and scholars
2) The formal curriculum- approved by the government and local authorities

3) The perceived curriculum- what teachers and stakeholders think the curriculum is
4) The operational curriculum- what actually happens in classrooms hour after hour
5) The experiential curriculum- what learners actually experience day to day

Although these multiple definitions recognise the different demands set at both national and school-level, they less readily examine the interplay between them, unlike Priestley's (2021) work which places this interaction front and centre. In addition to this, multiple terms of reference as asserted by Goodlad et al. (1979) may be cumbersome and overcomplicate what is evidently an already complex system.

Glatthorn (2000) further developed Goodlad's (1979) work around the different forms the curriculum can take and claimed that there are 7 types of curriculum that are that need the attention of school leaders. These are: the recommended curriculum (recommended by scholars), the written curriculum (as it appears in national policy documentation), the taught curriculum (as delivered by teachers), the supported curriculum (as supported by additional resources), the learned curriculum (the curriculum that pupils actually learn and remember) and the hidden curriculum (the unintended curriculum from the physical environment and school-level policies). Glatthorn (2000) goes on to, similar to the work of Priestley et al. (2021), consider the interplay between these types of curricular as they interact with each other and suggests that some types of curriculum have more influence on the actual taught curriculum. Additionally, Glatthorn (2000) explores practical ways in which these different types of curriculum can be aligned. This contrasts with the work of Priestley et al. (2021), who emphasises the shift away from 'curriculum products' or 'levels' to the multiple sites in which they operate and how teachers can, with more agency, become curriculum-makers.

Goodlad et al. (1979), Glatthorn (2000) and Priestley et al. (2021), all show an appreciation of the various influences that shape the taught curriculum on the ground. However, even outside the broader educational landscapes, schools are organisations within their own rights. Inherent in this is the complexity that exists on the ground in all organisations, outside of demands of national policy, inclusive but not limited to school culture. The concept of 'schools as organisations' highlights the commonalities between organisations more broadly and schools. (Johnson, 2018), who states that 'to ignore this organisational context and environment is to limit our collective ability to make sense of what is and should be occurring in schools' (pg. 10) Based on this body of research, it could be reasonably argued that optimising the school environment is an entirely distinctive challenge.

2.2 Organisational Culture and School Culture

Despite decades of research on the subject, the definition and meaning of culture remains a contentious topic (Newton and Knight 2022). Considered to be the father of organisational culture, Edgar Shein provides this seminal definition of culture from his body of prolific research in this area: 'culture can be thought of as the foundation of the social order that we live in and the rules we abide by. The rules of the social order make it possible to predict social behaviour, get along with each and find meaning in what we do' (Shein 2010, pg. 3). Shein's definition of culture emphasises the role that culture plays in social order and offers a direct link between culture and social cohesion.

However, the word 'culture' itself and its multiple meanings in different contexts has led to great variation in it's understood meaning. Therefore, Shein's (2010) definition may appear abstract and too broad a definition. Spencer-Oatey (2008) definition recognises the challenge of the abstract nature of culture and attempts to build on Shein's (2021) definition further: 'Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures, and

behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour.'

Moving towards a definition of 'culture' that can apply both to society more broadly and organisations, Matsumoto (1996) describes culture as '... the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next'. This idea of culture, in contrast with Spencer-Oatley's, more strongly highlights the contrasting interpretation we may see within an overarching culture, leading to what is sometimes referred to as sub-cultures, where groups of individuals with shared interests and challenges form a culture within a culture. Whereas sub-cultures were previously thought to detract from strong, overall organisational culture (Martin 1992), it is now proposed that sub-cultures can actually strengthen overall culture of an organisation, as they may provide an opportunity for specific groups facing a challenge to respond appropriately within the wider context of the organisation. (Boisnier and Chatman 2002). Boisnier and Chatman 2002 argue that if the overall organisation's culture is strategically well aligned, then it is not disrupted by these sub-cultures but rather allow for them to adapt to challenge within their wider social norms and values.

The theoretical notion of 'schools as organisations' defined by Johnson (2018), is deeply considerate of what he describes as the 'organisational grain' of schools. It recognises the characteristics that render schools similar to any other organisation, be it a small independent business or a large-scale national organisation such as the NHS. However, schools may be distinct from other organisations in that they are, according to Gilbride, James and Carr (2020), optimal breeding grounds for what Rittel and Webber (1953) define as 'wicked problems.'

A wicked problem is a problem that cannot be solved with a set blueprint, are often a symptom of multiple problems and have no true or false extremes, but rather a good/bad outcome. These wicked problems are often thought of in very different ways by different people, making them notoriously difficult to solve. (Gilbride, James and Carr 2020). An example might be challenges around timetabling of the primary curriculum. National curriculum expectations demand the delivery of a broad and balanced curriculum offering a wide range of subjects. How this is then translated into a working timetable in primary schools, is often reliant on and influenced by a) staffing (and by default- funding) b) resources c) PPA (planning, preparation, and assessment time) for teachers d) local expectations for delivery of the curriculum e.g. trust-wide policies or frameworks. e) wellbeing considerations for teachers. Different schools adopt different approaches in addressing this problem and therefore there is no 'right' answer. This example satisfies the definition of a 'wicked' problem and demonstrates the multiple constraints and conditions that exist around curriculum development. Arguably, based on Gilbride, James and Carr's 2020 definition of what makes a problem 'wicked', the work of curriculum development for school leaders is a wicked problem involving both national policy constraints and more local challenges.

Robinson's, work supports Gilbride, James and Carr's (2020) assertion that school improvement is deeply complex and challenging. In addition, her research points to the relational conditions that are necessary for school improvement, supporting the Shein's 2010 definition of culture emphasising social cohesion and providing further steer on the importance of school culture. She describes the leadership of school improvement as challenging and 'requiring capability in: using relevant knowledge to 2) solve complex educational problems while 3) building relationships of trust with those involved.' (Robinson, 2017) Robinson's research emphasises the importance of leader's approaches when engaging with their teams. She points to the work of Bryk and Schneider (2002), who demonstrated a causal relationship between the degree of trust among members of a school team and the degree of

improvement in school outcomes, as evidence that school improvement requires a dual focus on both the improvement efforts themselves and the way in which these are delivered by leaders. This finding, in particular, offers a strong sense of the influence that relationships and ways of working, at a local school-level, may also have on curriculum development in schools.

Although Robinson's work offers useful frameworks for considering relationship building as an embedded part of school improvement, it does not explicitly focus on school culture. Deal and Peterson (1990) offer a domain-specific definition of school culture as: 'complex webs of traditions and rituals that have been built up over time as teachers, students, parents and administrators work together on establishing a culture of collaboration focussed on student achievement' (pg. 7). This definition is consistent with the broader definitions of the term explored earlier, recognising the role of rituals and behavioural 'norms' amongst groups of people. It also helpfully links culture and student achievement, allowing leaders to see the direct link between these two entities.

In an attempt to simplify the notion of 'school culture', Bennett (2017) describes it as 'this is how we do things around here and these are the values we hold'. This definition, although simplistic, seems to evade the nuanced nature of school culture and provides little by way of clarity around what the component strands of school culture actually are, making it difficult for leaders to intentionally and deliberately develop these.

Other researchers have however, offered helpful definitions providing more specific reference to elements that may build positive and strong team culture. For example, Solomon and Flores (2003), regard 'trust' as critical to navigating any and all relationship, including those in the workplace. 'The companies that function best are almost always those that have trust and harmony at the top…' (Solomon and Flores 2003) Edmondson (2003) discusses the notion of 'psychological safety',

distinguishable from interpersonal trust. She describes trust as 'the expectation that others' future actions will be favourable to one's interests', whereas psychological safety is the conditions and climate in which people are comfortable being themselves. She suggests that although both of these things require vulnerability towards another, they are in fact conceptually distinct. This distinction offers a potentially useful lens through which we might consider 'culture' and what it really consists of. Perhaps it is more useful to consider culture as 'the conditions or states of being' e.g. psychological safety, rather than identifying culture as the outputs of these conditions e.g. trust.

A particular caveat that is of note, is that more recent research on these conditions, including that of psychological safety, has been popularised by psychologists applying these ideas to fields outside of education e.g. business or medicine. Johnson (2018) work on 'schools as organisations' would perhaps more strongly support Edmondson's (2003) research, recognising that schools too are organisations facing the same challenges as other fields. However, education leadership development organisations such as 'Ambition' have challenged the idea of 'generic leadership skills', arguing that these skills are often underpinned by domain-specific knowledge. They suggest that although some things might be transferrable across fields, this is potentially problematic due to abstract ideas, poor definitions and questionable research bases (Barker and Rees 2021).

Coe and colleagues (2022), decided to address this issue of reliable and relevant research in educational leadership, by conducting a synthesis of the best available evidence in the field. Their report 'School Environment and Leadership: Evidence Review' offers significant findings, specific to the field of education, that could helpfully shape leaders' thinking on how culture might influence school improvement and what conditions within school teams are optimal. There is growing consensus that teacher quality is the single-most important variable influencing student achievement. (OECD 2005) But what Coe et al (2022) synthesis

interestingly finds is that there is also good evidence that the professional environment or conditions that teachers work in can also affect student's learning in a range of ways. The responsibility to create these conditions, lie with school leaders. This research addresses two challenges related to the body of research in culture related to school leadership: 1) that it is too nebulous to be actionable 2) that there isn't sufficient evidence from the field of educational leadership for us to reliably act upon. The research conducted by Coe et al. (2022) also highlights school-level characteristics, for which there is good evidence that they are linked to student outcomes. These team-level factors are defined as follows:

1) Supportive working relationships e.g. trust, safety, openness
2) Improvement Mindset e.g. drive and belief for potential to be better
3) Delivery e.g. resourcing, removing barriers
4) Staffing e.g. recruiting and retaining high-quality staff, training/support

The presence of 'supportive working relationships' as a team-level factor, amplifies the findings from Bryk and Shneider (2002) on the causal relationship between trust and the degree of improvement in school outcomes and thus offers further support for Robinson's (2017) research on the relational elements required for school improvement.

Coe et al. (2002) research synthesis is a significant step forward, in unearthing the 'best bets' for school leaders in cultivating the right conditions for sustainable school improvement and for more clearly detailing what 'strong school culture' actually consists of. According to this research, school culture and conditions play a significant role in school improvement, in service of good outcomes for pupils. All if not most of the school-level factors identified however, disregard the wider national expectations and policy constraints at play. This is recognised by Giles, Hargreaves 2006; Kohm and Nance (2009) who find that other factors that affect school culture include policies, procedures, and expectations for teaching, learning and student achievement. It is also a significant feature of Priestley's (2021) previously

mentioned research exploring the link between curriculum development and the wider educational landscape.

2.3 Hybridising Curriculum and School Culture Development

The complexities of curriculum development alone, as described in the outset of this literature review, are rife. To now fold in and consider not only the 'what' but the 'how' of curriculum development and implementation, means that leaders are faced with a multi-faceted challenge that requires innovative and new ways of thinking, being and leading.

In an attempt to address these challenges, the National Professional Qualifications (NPQs), a suite of professional development courses offered to teachers and leaders in the UK, launched in 2021. Although these offer comprehensive domain-specific knowledge around key areas of school improvement and include modules on 'culture', they are heavily weighted on theoretical domains of knowledge directly linked to student achievement e.g. assessment and behaviour. It could be argued, in light of the more recent research on the impact team conditions have on student outcomes (Coe et al. 2022), that further emphasis on the more relational side of leadership is required for leaders to truly hybridise school culture development and curriculum development, in a manageable and impactful way. What emerges, is a picture in which school leaders are required to shape bespoke educational 'ecosystems', conducive to school improvement, that address both national requirements and local challenges/opportunities; a very difficult task. Stanier (2020) suggests that the NPQs fail to teach developing Headteachers about how best to manage and motivate their staff; a skill that is arguably rooted in strong school culture. Conyard (2023) reinforces this stance to a certain extent, asserting that the NPQs provide little by way of progression and that there is too much repetition in the evidence base from the Early Career Framework. Perhaps further thinking on the more specific challenges that leaders face, one of which may be how

to cultivate and sustain the right conditions within their teams, could potentially offer this progression.

Goode, Hegarty and Levy (2018) share a case-study that could be useful in identifying how leaders might adopt a dual focus on organisational and curriculum development but offering a different take on how explicit leaders need to be in developing culture. Their research, found a shift in organisational culture due to a curriculum redevelopment, involving a collaborative learning design process. This research sees culture building as a natural by-product of a well-designed, intentional curriculum redevelopment programme, rather than as a result of 'culture building' actions in and of themselves. The research involved the 115 vocational and degree programmes being refined to improve the success of learners participating in these courses. Previous redesign attempts had led to varying outcomes and support from staff involved. However, there were some differentiating features in the successful D4LS (The Designer for Learning Success Project), including expert-domain specific guidance made available, team preferences being considered and effective communication through a staged process of healthy dialogue.

This research highlights the interaction between curriculum development and establishing strong team culture and, to some extent, supporting the previously mentioned stance from Ambition, that domain- specific knowledge lies at the heart of effective educational leadership.

Senge (2014) supports this notion of building an effective culture through change itself. Senge (2014) in describing and summarising the nature and impact of the curriculum change, asserts:

'In profound change there is learning. The organization doesn't just do something new; it builds its capacity for doing things in a new way… it builds capacity for ongoing change' (Senge 2014, pg. 15).

This approach to curriculum change, relies more on engaging specifically with the process and knowledge-building required for curriculum redesign; culture change is merely the output. These findings offer a valuable vignette into the importance of the 'work itself', putting into question whether a dual focus for curriculum development and culture building is required at all.

Robinson (2017) definition of capabilities requires to lead improvement, however, explicitly points to both knowledge and relational trust as two distinct aspects. Her research reinforces the notion that leaders need to have both strong, evidence-informed knowledge of the school improvement challenge and the capability to cultivate trusting, collaborative teams, as almost a different type of knowledge.

Robinson (2017) defines three capabilities required to lead improvement in her research:

1) Using knowledge- making decisions informed by quality research
2) Solving complex problems- communication, causal inquiry, leaders able to test their own beliefs
3) Building relational trust- 'building relationships whilst addressing the difficult issues that are central to leading improvement'

This research offers a potential framework, with which leaders might begin to hybridise school culture (and in particular the condition of trust) in their curriculum development work. It is important to note however, that the researcher herself recognises the need for a normative theory that moves away from describing leadership behaviours and moves towards more of a robust means of leadership intervention. She also states that further research is required to draw out the

relationships between leadership cognition and behaviour, as found by Mumford et al. 2015. Without this it is very difficult to, with any confidence, identify behaviours as genuine indicators of certain capabilities. For example, leaders could appear to be showing behaviours of listening to differing opinions, but this may not necessarily mean they genuinely test their own beliefs and stress-test their thinking. Despite these limitations, Robinson's (2017) capabilities provide leaders with a theoretical framework, with which to consider how leaders might meaningfully bring together the work of school improvement and culture building.

In considering how we might develop the practical tools to bring these leadership capabilities to life, Ancona (2012) as cited in Snook, Noharia and Khurana (2011) offers deeper insight into Robinson's second capability of 'solving complex problems.' Ancona offers a suggested approach to sensemaking as a leadership tool, that may help leaders more practically navigate the challenges associated with this-sensemaking. Carl Weick, considered the father of sensemaking, describes the process as 'the making of sense'. (Weick, 1995, p. 4) This simplistic definition is expanded upon by Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) 'Sensemaking is the activity that enables us to turn the ongoing complexity of the world into a "situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action' (p. 409)

Ancona (2012) asserts steps to effective sensemaking:

1) Explore the wider system- working with others to observe what's going on e.g. seeking out as many data sources as possible
2) Involving others as you try to make sense of a situation
3) Move beyond stereotypes and simplifications
4) Learn from those closest to the front line
5) Do not simply overlay your own existing framework of understanding onto this new situation

6) Use images, metaphors and stories to capture the existing situation
7) Learn from small experiments before broadening into widespread action
8) Be aware of how your own behaviour is shaping the environment you work in

And barriers to sensemaking:

1) Rigidity-threat and fear lead to rigidity and often protecting the status quo and inertia
2) Erratic behaviour- in a panicked state, leaders may frantically search for a solution

Ancona provides active ways in which leaders may be taught how to sense-make effectively e.g., through assignments, studying role models or action learning. One key factor, however, is leaders understanding of sensemaking itself. Ancona (2012) suggests spending time working with leaders on the concept itself so that they truly understand the purpose and process of sensemaking, before adopting it as a practice.

Ancona's (2012) framework for sensemaking however, is not explicit about the type of knowledge that exists within it. As mentioned earlier, Barker and Rees (2021) argue against a generic approach to leadership development and promote domain-specific knowledge being of utmost important when solving complex challenges in schools. They do however, later go on to recognise seven persistent problems that underpin Ambition's leadership development programmes, of which 'school culture' is one. Considerations around 'culture' seem less explicit in Ancona's (2012) model, with its focus appearing to be more about identifying the needs within a school, rather than how to create the right conditions to address them.

2.4 Summary

Stepping back from the literature and the varying theoretical perspectives on the nature of curriculum development and the role of school organisational culture in school improvement efforts, there appears to be emerging consensus around the following ideas:

1. Curriculum development is complex and is influenced by multiple factors.
2. Relevant/domain-specific knowledge is required to solve complex educational challenges in schools.
3. Considerations around the conditions and culture of school teams are essential to school improvement efforts.
4. Educational leadership programmes are faced with the design challenge of including sufficient domain-specific knowledge and the knowledge of how leaders can cultivate the relational conditions required to mobilise that knowledge.
5. The education sector is, relative to other sectors, less engaged in the research and thinking around culture and the relational side of leadership, in comparison to Medicine or Business.

Having considered the existing literature on this topic, I will be exploring the following research questions (RQ) in the school-based element of this project:

1. What factors influence the complex process of curriculum design and change?
2. How might school culture influence the school improvement work undertaken by leaders?
3. How might school leaders hybridise school culture and curricular development in service of strengthening their school improvement efforts and what might help them achieve this?

I have selected these research questions because they will allow me to explore curriculum development and culture as two separate entities, as well as the overlap

of the two. In addition to this, I will explore how leaders might go about developing curricular and culture simultaneously and what tools might support them in doing this, offering a novel design principle, by way of the theoretical framework 'CCK' (Impact, 2024). Most importantly, these research questions will enable me to gauge, in practice, how curricular development and school culture is perceived by teachers on the ground in the context of their day-to-day lives as educators.

3. Theoretical Framework

The above research describes some of the theoretical frameworks and tools that currently exist to support leaders in the complex work of school improvement and allows us to consider how leaders might practically and usefully hybridise their strategic planning and thinking time to incorporate both considerations around: what needs to happen and the how those they lead can be supported in achieving this, by way of the conditions they operate within. These tools, however, predominantly focus on school improvement and culture building in isolation. More current thinking on this from the likes of Robinson (2017) and Coe et al. (2022) however, highlight something important; that both of these things are required for overall school improvement to be achieved. In order to build on their work, I propose a theoretical framework that that recognises the two types of knowledge that is most likely to bring about school improvement for the purposes of this research: curriculum knowledge (encompassing the evidence-informed best bets that will improve quality of education) and cultural knowledge (the knowledge of the wider school culture and conditions that are required to deliver on these best bets). By considering both in tandem, much in the same way teachers can be developed both in their understanding of the content and the pedagogies that best support delivery of that content, leaders may be able to engage with school improvement more successfully.

With a view to capturing this notion more succinctly, I refer to the work of Shulman (1986) who developed a theoretical framework for teacher knowledge, termed 'pedagogical content knowledge'. Pedagogical content knowledge (or PCK) refers to the dual knowledge required by teachers to effectively teach a given concept- the content itself and the pedagogy best employed to deliver the content. In bringing these two types of knowledge together, Shulman suggests that teachers are more likely to be successful in securing learning. I propose an adapted version of Shulman's model, entitled 'cultural curricular knowledge'. (See Fig. 1 below).

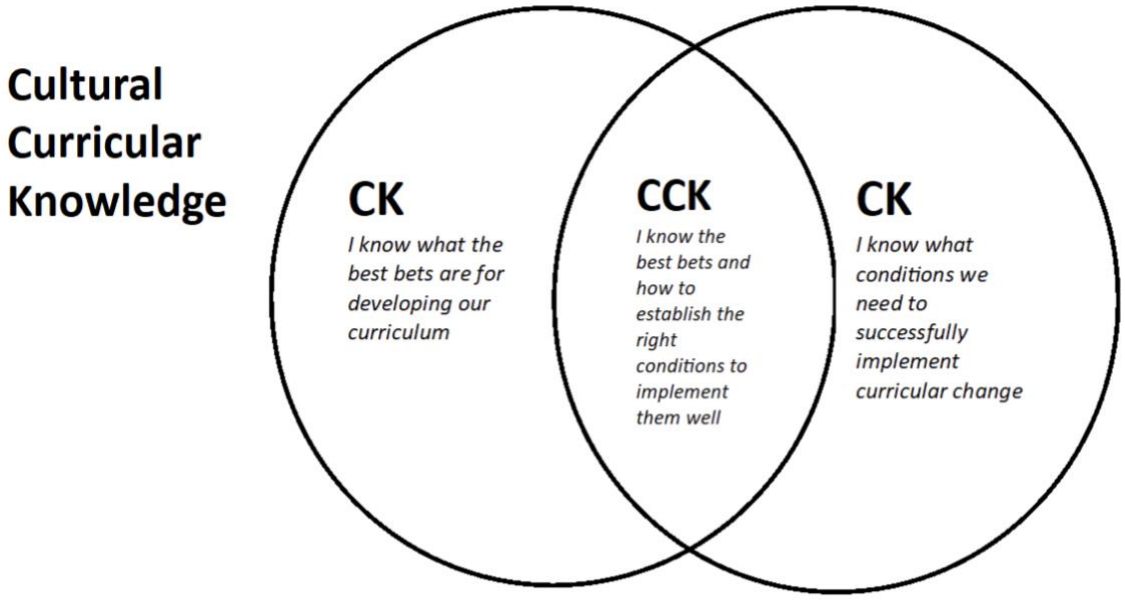


Fig. 1

This theoretical framework will form the basis for my intervention with school leaders, which will be discussed further in the methodology section of this project.

This framework recognises the delicate balance of domain-specific knowledge vs understanding of persistent problems such as school culture, as defined by Barker and Rees (2021), whilst also building on the strong relational focus asserted by Robinson (2017). Much like Shulman's (1986) model, it repositions considerations around school culture as a 'type of knowledge', taking notions of culture out of the abstract and into the concrete. For example, the understanding of psychological safety (Edmonson 2003) would be powerful knowledge for a leader to be equipped with, before then considering how they could go about refining their leadership practices to cultivate a culture of psychological safety.

The difficulty with any such framework, is that although it conceptually reinforces the importance of culture in school improvement efforts, it potentially oversimplifies quite messy concepts and doesn't detail clearly enough what, for example, would

constitute as 'Cultural Curricular Knowledge' for a leader. In order to mitigate against this, I suggest a focus on sensemaking, as explored previously, as a golden thread to address both curriculum challenges and shifts in organisational culture. After all, without having a clear and defined understanding of the 'state of play' of both of these, leaders will struggle to form a stress-tested plan of action rooted in evidence and to subsequently know what specific conditions to cultivate within their teams to see this plan to fruition. This will also allow for context considerate knowledge of these two areas to be curated locally by school leaders, dependant on the needs and challenges that exist. Although some areas e.g. trust, have come up across multiple contexts as integral to strong, organisational culture, it may be the case that due to the context of an individual school, a culture of establishing purpose or high expectations, is more pertinent. Sensemaking in both areas, therefore, provides leaders with a lens with which to explore these two areas before making commitments to any given direction of travel, thus supporting leaders to steer school improvement in the right direction and focus more on the right things.

Of particular note in this framework is that it specifically cites 'curriculum' as a key focus. Although this has been chosen intentionally, to recognise its value and importance in fulfilling the purpose of education (Wiliams 2013) what is deemed to be the 'substance of education' (Ofsted 2019), it may not pay enough credence to the wider more operational scope of a principal's role. E.g. recruitment. This will no doubt have an impact on curriculum design and delivery but may not be considered a 'curriculum' issue. It is therefore important to note that 'curriculum' in this theoretical framework, not only refers to the curriculum itself, but anything and everything, however upstream it may be e.g. site management, that may impact curriculum.

4. Methodology

This project poses three research questions that have been deliberately selected to unearth the relationship between school culture (inclusive of leadership behaviours that might determine this) and teachers' experiences of curriculum change, as well as exploring potential tools that might support leaders. In order to address these specific research questions, I needed to select a suitable qualitative approach that would recognise 'the school as a social world because humans live in it' (Waller 1932, pg1). Waller's methods embodied that of a 'cultural anthropologist'; a term that has evolved into what we now know today as a qualitative researcher. (Bogden and Biklen 2010 as cited in Lutrell 2010) However, the guiding principle that underpinned his approach more specifically recognises 'the complex maze of social interconnections' (Waller, 1932 pg. 1) that teachers (and students) belong to.

Waller's tradition focusing on creating insight into the social reality of school life, fits well with addressing my research questions around teacher's lived experiences and therefore feels like an appropriate qualitative research tradition to draw from.

Some argue about the legitimacy of this qualitative approach to what is sometimes referred to as educational sociology, which prior to Waller, was addressed by quantitative methods. (Bogden and Biklen 2010 as cited in Lutrell 2010) and was clouded by a focus on empiricism and quantification. (Cronbach and Suppes, 1969, p.43). However, based on the nature of my research questions, it seems only fitting to broadly adopt an approach which values the sociality and nuance inherent to school culture.

I recognised that the most apt approach to answering all three of my research questions was applying a phenomelogical perspective and collecting data from a focus group of class teachers within the school. Given that all my research questions were interested in unpacking teacher's view of school culture, this would truly allow me to embrace 'what people do, what people know, and things that people make and

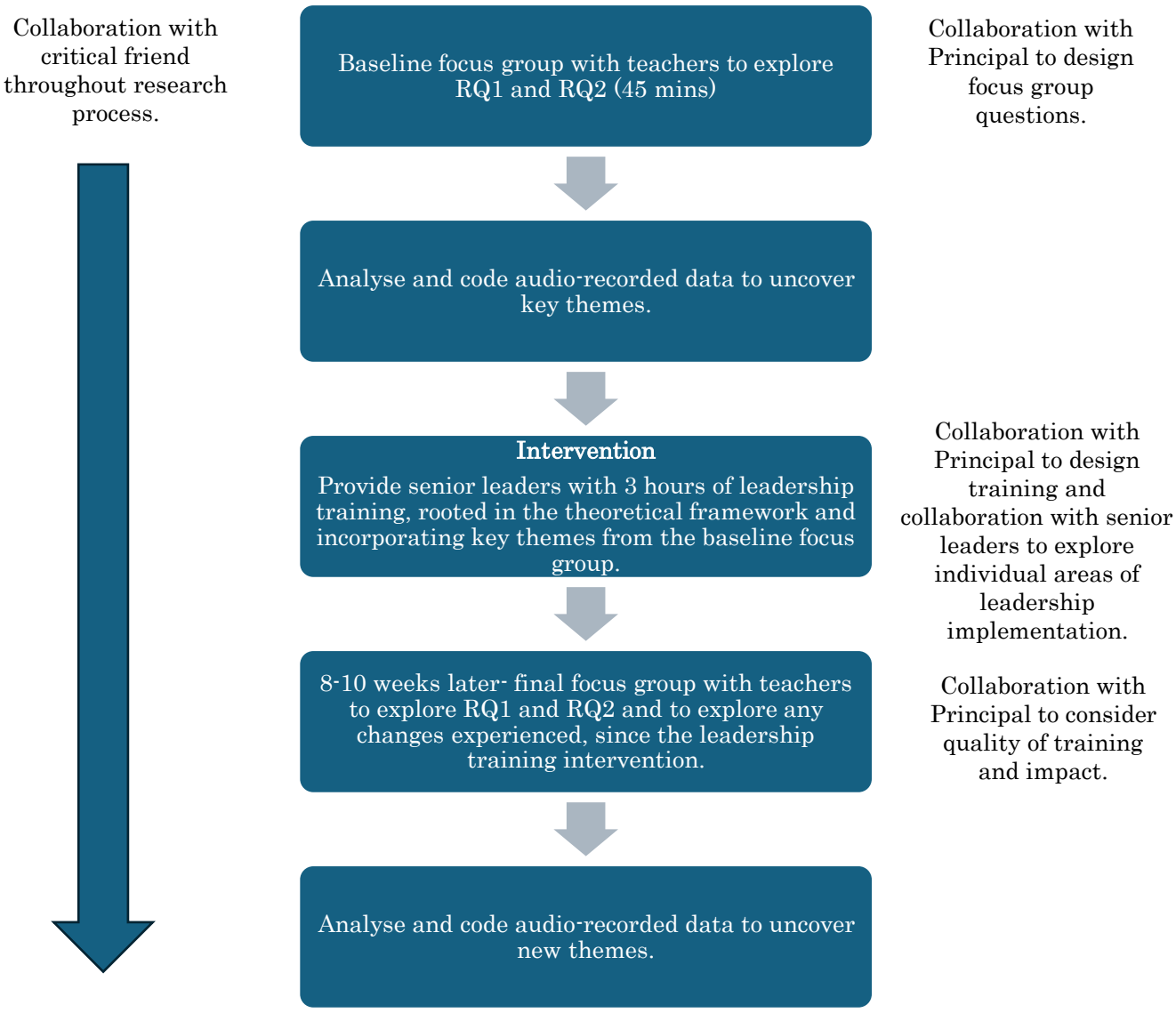
use' (Spradley 1980, pg.5). I felt this would be a particularly powerful approach, due to the contentious nature of the definition of 'culture' itself, as highlighted in my literature review. Culture presents itself, in a way, as an abstract phenomenon and therefore a phenomenological approach may make some headway in truly identifying how leaders can create effective cultures. It also allows us to explore how teachers interact with the curriculum and how leaders' actions either help or hinder this process, justifying it's use in this particular study.

Phenomenological approaches have typically been conducted in the context of 1:1 conversation, ideal to unpack the 'essence' of a particular phenomenon. More contemporary thinking on the subject, however, argues that it can also be applied to group contexts in the form of focus groups. (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook and Irvine 2009). Their findings support the use of phenomenological approaches in group settings, suggesting that group discussion bring about multiple perspectives and therefore evoke richer discussion but that it's still important for researchers to be critical of this approach if applied.

One such way to carry out my research through group discussion, would be the use of 'focus groups'. 'Focus groups are an important way of discovering what interviewees think about a concrete theme-what feelings, attitudes, reactions, and doubts they have concerning it-in a situation in which they can contrast their opinions.' (Gilflores and Alonso 1995) As mentioned previously, this qualitative research method would enable me to unpack individual's experiences of the curriculum change and the leadership within the school, whilst getting a sense of the overarching feelings or mood of the team, which might more helpfully support my understanding of the role that school culture has played at large.

4.1 Overview of Research and Intervention

Having considered the most appropriate approach and research method to address my research questions, I mapped out the overarching research process, including my intervention with senior leaders. The flowchart below contains an overview of my research project, as well as the various points of collaboration with colleagues.



In order to explore my three research questions, I worked in collaboration with the school principal to craft questions for the focus group that: addressed the research questions, were appropriate to the context of the team and were respectful of the

senior leadership team (who weren't to be present during the focus group). The questions posed in the focus groups are captured in Table 2 below. The same questions were also used in the final focus group, to frame the conversation around curriculum change and culture and to measure any potential impact from the intervention.

Research Question for Focus Group	Focus Group Questions
What factors influence the complex process of curriculum design and curriculum change?	1) How would you describe the 'curriculum'? 2) As a school you've recently been experiencing a curriculum change. What factors do you think have influenced that curriculum change? 3) What factors do you think matter the most when a school is trying to successfully implement a curriculum change?
How might school culture influence the school improvement work undertaken by leaders?	1) How would you describe the school culture here? What do you think are the strengths? Areas for development? How has it changed/developed over time? 2) Do you think the school culture makes a difference during a time of curriculum change? 3) What elements of school culture do you think need to be really strong to successfully navigate a time of curriculum change?
How might school leaders hybridise school culture and curriculum development in service of	1) Can you share some concrete examples of things that have helped you through this

strengthening their school improvement efforts?	curriculum change? Which of these activities have been most helpful to you? 2) What advice would you give to a senior leader who was about to embark on a curriculum change in their school? 3) What has helped/hindered during this curriculum change? 4) Are there specific behaviours/actions that have made the curriculum change easier? Harder? 5) What next steps might you suggest for senior leaders here in terms of how best they might support you in your role?

Table 2

The training offered to leaders was rooted in the theoretical framework of Cultural Curricular Knowledge (2024), mentioned earlier in this paper (see Fig 2) and featured both theoretical knowledge around concepts such as 'psychological safety' or 'motivation' but also opportunities to utilise sensemaking frameworks of thinking to consider the leader's specific strategic goals. I used key themes from the baseline focus group, to inform this training, so that it was tailored to the individual school needs and how teachers were experiencing the school culture on the ground. I also emphasised Ancona's (2012) stages of sensemaking, as a framework for thinking, so that leaders could consider their area of responsibility in the context of the school.

It is important to note that the two subject leaders, also participated in the focus group upon request of the principal, as a professional development opportunity for them. Please see Appendix F for sample materials used to deliver the intervention to the Leadership Team.

To summarise, I would conduct two 45-minute focus group sessions with 17 teachers in the school, 8-10 weeks apart. I would audio record these and code the data using

thematic analysis to derive key themes. The selection criterion for the focus groups would be: qualified teachers teaching in the school (either part-time or full-time) who provided informed consent (see Appendix G) for the focus groups. After a baseline focus group, I would deliver a leadership development training intervention with leaders within the school, focusing on embedding the key notion of 'cultural curricular knowledge' from the proposed theoretical framework, adapted from the work of Shulman (1986) on 'pedagogical content knowledge.' I would embed key themes from the baseline focus group into this training, derived from thematic analysis, so that the training was geared towards key themes which emerged from discussions with teachers. In doing so, I hoped to shift leaders' perspectives on how they lead their respective areas, focusing on the relational element of leadership and how their day-to-day leadership behaviours may contribute to how school culture is perceived by staff. I would also emphasise sensemaking stages (Ancona 2012) as a framework for thinking, allowing leaders to practically consider their areas of responsibility and how to navigate the individual challenges they faced. I would then carry out a final focus group with teachers to consider whether their experience of their school leaders had changed following the intervention, again using thematic analyses to derive key themes. My hypothesis, therefore, is that training with leaders with a dual focus on curriculum and school culture, would lead to tangible changes in leadership practices and therefore positively influence the school culture and conditions.

4.2 Participants

The project involved 17 class teachers holding Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), both male and female, with varying levels of experience as teachers. (See Table 3 below for profile of participants).

Participant Number	Profile
P1	Experienced (+10 years)

P2	Experienced (+10 years)
P3	6th year (Subject leader-participated in intervention)
P4	4th year
P5	7th year (Subject leader-participated in intervention)
P6	8th year
P7	7th year
P8	Experienced (+10 years)
P9	6th year
P10	7/8th year
P11	Experienced (+10 years)
P12	8th year
P13	7th year
P14	5th year
P15	Experienced (+10 years)
P16	Teacher Trainee
P17	3rd year

Table 3

4.3 Data Analysis

Another key consideration in my methodology was how I would approach the analysis of the data collected, in order to draw out the key themes that arose from the two focus groups. Having considered multiple ways in which I might do this, I decided that conducting a thematic analysis appeared to be the most appropriate way to analyse the transcripts from the focus groups. Thematic analysis 'involves

the identification of recurring patterns that are presented by researchers as overarching statements or themes' (Lochmiller 2021). Although there is much contention about the definition of thematic analysis and very little agreement about how it should be carried out (Lochmiller 2021), there are some definitions that may helpfully shed light on the nature of it. Braun and Clarke (2006) define it as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79) The frequency of a concept within the transcripts, would enable me as the researcher to define 'codes', allowing me to highlight commonality of viewpoints and perspective on the curriculum change experienced by teacher and the role that school culture has played in that felt experience. Codes are "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 4) It was important to recognise as the researchers however, that frequency alone would not be sufficient in identifying these 'codes.' I would need to carefully consider the relevance of these themes, in best answering my research questions.

There are multiple approaches to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) but given the particular relevance of positionality for this research and my desire to apply my own theoretical framework of 'cultural curricular knowledge', I decided to adopt a reflexive thematic analysis approach which would involve the following 6 step process, as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2021):

1. Familiarising myself with the data through immersion and re-reading.
2. Coding the data based on interesting segments of the dataset.
3. Generating initial themes to identify 'shared pattered meaning across the dataset'.
4. Developing and reviewing the themes to consider the relationship between them.
5. Reflecting, defining, and naming themes to write a brief synopsis of each theme.

6. Writing up my themes to weave together the narrative.

It was, however, important to recognise how my interpretation of the data at these individual stages, as a researcher, would impact the identified themes and conclusions drawn. As mentioned previously, positionality was one of these considerations. TA is often perceived as being a singular method for qualitative data analysis, there are multiple ways of approaching it. Given the strong influence of my adopted 'position' on building culture in teams in relation to curriculum implementation and my role at the trust, I decided to adopt 'reflexive' thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021). This approach to thematic analysis, integrated the practice of critical research into the process itself, essentially 'nudging' me to be critical of my interpretation of the data at every stage from data collection to analysis. In order to achieve this critical interrogation of the research process, I maintained a researcher journal throughout the research process in order to keep a self-critical account of the process, enabling me to, as much as possible, critique the decisions being made at each point in the process. (Tobin & Begley 2004).

The flexibility of reflexive thematic analysis, as well as my desire to understand and even contradict my own existing notions of culture more deeply made this an ideal approach to data analysis. However, despite the flexibility of this method, that allows for the analysis of similarities and differences between accounts, as well as unexpected insights (King 2004), TA does present other difficulties in that, relative to other approaches such as ethnography, there is limited literature on how to conduct a thematic analysis in a rigorous manner. In addition to this, thematic analysis does not allow the researcher to make claims about the use of language (Braun & Clarke 2006). More widely, analysis of the data and good coding simply cannot be objective. It can however be weaker e.g. underdeveloped or superficial or stronger e.g. nuanced and complex. (Braun and Clarke 2021). This then, would become my aim when analysing my data and in turn coding the data into relevant

themes; to capture the nuance and richness of the conversation with teachers in a way that avoided a reductionist or weak conclusions.

I have chosen to organise the findings from the data analysis sequentially, for ease of understanding. I will therefore engage with the 6-step process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) as detailed above, firstly for the baseline focus group, followed by the final focus group. After coding these individually, I will be able to look at the two datasets in relationship to one another, in order to identify themes which may have evolved from the baseline focus group, or indeed new themes which have emerged in the second focus group, as well as considering evaluating the impact of the training provided to leaders between the two focus groups.

4.4 Limitations of Methodology

Having considered the broad research approach and process, I was aware of the importance of considering the limitations of my methodology as a whole.

It is important to recognise, for example, the contradiction that adopting this methodological approach that collects data from a group of participants. Phenomenological approaches have typically been conducted in the context of 1:1 conversation, ideal to unpack the 'essence' of a particular phenomenon. More contemporary thinking on the subject, however, argues that it can also be applied to group contexts in the form of focus groups. (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook and Irvine 2009). Their findings support the use of phenomenological approaches in group settings, suggesting that group discussion bring about multiple perspectives and therefore evoke richer discussion but that it's still important for researchers to be critical of this approach if applied. One such way to carry out my research through group discussion, would be the use of 'focus groups'. This would allow me to explore my research questions, with data generated from group discussion with teachers in the school. 'Focus groups are an important way of discovering what interviewees

think about a concrete theme-what feelings, attitudes, reactions, and doubts they have concerning it-in a situation in which they can contrast their opinions.' (Gilflores and Alonso 1995) As mentioned previously, this approach would enable me to unpack individual's experiences of the curriculum change and the leadership within the school, whilst getting a sense of the overarching feelings or mood of the team, which might more helpfully support my understanding of the role that school culture has played at large.

I would also need to acknowledge the potential impact my positionality (in relation to my research questions), might have on the patterns I see emerging from the focus group with teachers. This was particularly pertinent to me, due to my broader interest in school culture, which includes a publication of a book for school leaders. Perhaps more importantly however, my role and the position in the trust would undoubtedly influence the data I obtained. This further necessitated the need for reflexivity in this body of research. 'Simply stated, reflexivity is the concept that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their selves in their research, seeking to understand their part in it, or influence on it'. (Cohen et al., 2011) This recognition alone alongside the use of a reflexive research journal (Braun and Clarke 2021), would be a measure to mitigate against the potential influence my interest in school culture would have on the outcomes of the focus group, or more broadly this research. A reflexive research journal (see Appendix E) would be an opportunity for me to critically reflect on the research process throughout and allow me to lean into the subjectivity of the method, valuing rather than seeing subjectivity as a challenge. (Braun and Clarke 2021) This would ultimately help me to 'reduce bias and partisanship (Rowe 2014) and would involve three considerations, as identified by Savin-Baden & Major (2013).

- Locating myself about the subject- this would involve acknowledging my personal view that school culture is a particularly powerful lever in school improvement.

- Locating myself about the participants- this would involve recognising my relative position within my school trust and how this might impact how participants view me, as well as recognising my own pre-conceptions of class teachers (in my capacity as the education improvement partner for the school).
- Locating myself about the research context and process- this would involve acknowledgement that my 'lens' would no doubt influence my findings in the study.

In order to further mitigate against any undue influence, I would adopt the help of 'critical friends'-someone who would be able to advise me as a teacher-researcher. (Stenhouse 1975). I would meet with my critical friend on a fortnightly basis throughout the research process, virtually to discuss my research, my evolving understanding of the themes that were emerging, to stress-test the rigor of my research and to ensure that I was considering the biases that might be shaping my research.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

I used the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research published by the British Educational Research Association (2024) to ensure strong ethical considerations were made throughout this research. Once I obtained CUREC approval (see Appendix G) and given that I was going to be carrying out focus groups with teachers in the school, I was particularly interested in exploring the ethical considerations related to this research method.

Although focus groups, allow ideas to evolve amongst participants through 'sharing and comparing their lived experience' (Morgan 1997), one of the main strengths of the use of focus groups, there are also some ethical considerations around the use these, in a school context. In the context of this particular research, where teachers (who are also peers) would be collectively discussing their lived experience of the

school culture, this was a particularly pertinent consideration. The 'public' nature of the conversation may have, for example, inadvertently impacted individual perceptions of the school culture or the senior leadership team and altered the collective view on this. A practical strategy suggested to address this is for the moderator (myself) to redirect the conversation, should there be over-disclosure (particularly of the negative of personal kind). (Sim and Waterfield 2019) My role as the moderator or facilitator of this conversation, therefore, had to be carefully considered ahead of conducting the focus group. Some key questions to consider were:

1. How would I ensure the conversation with sufficiently structured to avoid it becoming a 'gripes' session?
2. How might I redirect the conversation, should it become overly negative towards the school leadership team?
3. In what way, might I encourage teachers to consider the role of culture in the curriculum change they experienced, in a way that was fair to their colleagues?
4. How would I ensure participants knew what the nature of the conversation would be ahead of time, should they wish to opt out of these?

The first three of the above questions, necessitated what I felt was a need to carefully script my questions for the focus group, in relation to my research questions as set out early in this research paper. This felt fairly straightforward, however I also wanted to ensure there was enough flexibility to add in additional questions, where I wanted to further explore meaning. Allowing for spontaneous questions to respond to thoughts shared, therefore, seemed like a reasonable compromise in terms of how I would approach designing the questions for the focus group. It was also of crucial importance to collaborate with the principal on the question set (see Table 2), to ensure they were comfortable with the line of questioning and were able to contribute in terms of shaping the questions. This was

one of many examples of how collaboration with colleagues played a central role in this research.

The fourth question led me to consider the notion of 'informed consent'. Informed consent is an important ethical consideration in any research and most people agree that navigating informed consent is not time-limited to the beginning of the research process but rather relevant at every stage of the research process. (Van den Hoonaard 2002). As discussed earlier, the characteristics of the selected research participants, would be, teachers (who held a teaching qualification) from across the schools. Informed consent, therefore, had to respond to the circumstances of these teachers, considering their specific context, particularly in relation to how experienced they were as teachers. Newer teachers to the profession, for example, may be relatively unaware of how 'culture' shapes school life and therefore may not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts on this. Essentially, I had to ensure that when seeking informed consent, I was able to put in simple terms, what it was I was researching and why. In addition to this, I had to provide participants with assurances about who would have access to the data collected, especially so that there wasn't resistance due to the fact that participants thought that their views would be shared back to their senior leadership team. This was something that could potentially foil my research entirely. Confidentiality, therefore, became another key ethical consideration in my research. Ensuring that participants knew that they would be referred to in anonymised terms in the transcripts and that any recordings or electronic transcripts would be safely stored and then destroyed after the research had concluded, was key. Because I was speaking with schoolteachers, who relative to the leadership team they'd be referring to, had less 'power', I would need to ensure more 'safeguards' to ensure their informed consent throughout the entire process. (Van den Hoonaard 2002). Informed consent, confidentiality and privacy would therefore be ongoing considerations throughout the course of my research. For me personally, these considerations were of the utmost of importance. If I were to contribute to a body of knowledge on something as deeply personal and

relation, it was important to me that this was done in an ethical and respectful manner to those willing to vulnerably share their candid thoughts and feelings on what might otherwise remain hidden in the story of a school.

In addition to this, it was important to recognise that two subject leaders who would be engaging in the intervention provided, would also be participants in the focus group as they are class-based. This would undoubtedly impact the lens through which they considered the issues, particularly in focus group 2, after the intervention had been delivered.

5. Results and Discussion

Having carried out the stages of thematic analysis as described in the methodology for both focus groups; some key themes emerged. (See Appendix A & C for key codes). Below I describe these in turn, beginning with the baseline focus group, exploring how each theme that emerged from this project addresses my three RQ's and how it connects to the existing literature on the subject.

5.1 Baseline Focus Group: Findings in light of the RQs

<u>Psychological Safety</u>

The notion of 'Psychological Safety', popularised by the work of Edmondson (2003) was strongly supported and emerged as a key theme. This idea resonated with multiple participants and was either expressed explicitly or more implicitly (underpinning their reflections about a particular topic). Psychological safety or the feeling that teachers felt emotionally 'secure' in their interactions with leaders in the team, was referenced frequently.

P9: '…there's a lot of honesty and transparency there so I wouldn't hesitate to go up to him and say I feel good about this and I feel uncomfortable about this. In terms of

him walking in and out of my classroom, I would not care…I like the approach he is taking.'

P16: 'I can go to anyone and everyone is in the same boat'.

These contributions from participants in focus group 1, expose a vulnerability and a deeply felt sense of emotional safety, with no fear of repercussion (Edmondson 2003). Although these comments showcase the positive elements of the conditions within the school team, psychological safety was also discussed as a need that goes beyond simply 'feeling' like you can speak your truth. Participants also shared the need for psychological safety to be baked into the fabric of school-life, for example in coaching of learning and teaching.

P14: '…feedback was, that then made me reflect that really does come across quite 'judgy' it's like you're trying to assess or judge me like you're trying to catch me out.'

This particular contribution speaks directly to my second research question around how school leaders influence the school improvement work undertaken, particularly in relation to feedback cycles. The participant appeared to be more focused on *how* feedback was given, than the idea of coaching itself. This was an idea that was touched upon at multiple points during the focus group:

P3: 'A lot of it isn't what they say but how they say it. It's lots of encouragement, it's not judgmental because that's true- if all of us saw the same lesson, we'd come up with different ideas so it's more about building our bank of ideas or strategies so sometimes this might work.'

Psychological safety, therefore, appears to be not only a pre-requisite, static condition e.g. having the precedent of consistently safe interactions with leaders, but also a more ongoing active engagement, ideally baked into systems and

structures e.g. live feedback communicated in the moment. This further develops the definition of psychological safety shared by Edmondson, in that it re-conceptualises the term, in a way that recognises the need for psychological safety to be developed holistically through a regular 'drumbeat' of safe interactions, as well as a lens with which leaders can consider their strategic planning for implementation.

However, other contributions from colleagues in the focus group, link the feeling of 'safety' with 'clarity of expectation' or 'clarity of purpose'- captured in the overarching theme 'purpose and impact'. This supports findings from Coe et al. (2002) in their leadership synthesis, highlighting team-level factors such as an improvement mindset and clarity of implementation solutions, as essential for the effective functioning of any organisation.

P4: 'the change I can see is we were led by example. Like we've been told to manage our tasks, but we've been given examples of how to do that. And some of those many of us would have already been doing anyway but getting that sort of acknowledging that particular technique as a good one it gives you wings. Oh, I'm doing it right or I never thought of that so either way being led by example is game changing.'

Teachers expressed their desire for reassurance and acknowledgement of good practice and valued knowing exactly what the expectation was, in order to avoid falling short, thus impacting their perceived sense of safety. It could therefore be argued that 'psychological safety' is created both through and around school systems, rather than as a 'condition' of strong teams alone, as asserted by Edmondson. This will be discussed further, later in this paper.

Purpose and Impact

There was a definite sense of dissatisfaction with the amount of autonomy teachers have on the content of the national curriculum, as captured here:

P8: 'It isn't our role to make the curriculum. We can adapt the curriculum, but we can't take that decision- it's the government that takes it for the whole country. We are just basically deliverers but modify to suit the need of our pupils'

This participant's view was quite extreme in terms of the perceived sense of autonomy, describing teachers almost as a 'delivery service', contradicting the more nuanced views that capture the interaction between the macro, national curriculum and the micro, school-level curricular, as described by Priestley et al. (2021) earlier in the literature review. Whereas Priestley et al. (2021) describe an interaction between macro policy and micro school-level implementation, Participant 8, clearly did not perceive an interaction at all. Rather, they felt that the national curriculum was dictated to them, and it was their job to simply deliver it. This speaks to the work of Goodlad's (1979) who explores the multiple versions of curriculum, with the 'formal curriculum' being distinct from the 'ideological curriculum' (considering the teacher's interpretation of what the curriculum should be). This perspective could reflect the 'felt' context of the school, which historically has had multiple versions of the curricular, which can bring about a sense of cynicism. Other participants, felt more optimistic about the curriculum change and highlighted the impact on pupil learning, suggesting a clarity around Tyler's (1957, pg. 79) definition of 'curriculum', describing it as 'all the learning experiences, planned and directed by the school to attain its educational goals'. For example, Participant 12 shared the sense of having more of a curriculum entitlement that came from a coherently planned curriculum.

P12: 'Sometimes people do things for the sake of doing it. Like 'Egyptians' sounds like a nice topic. That was kind of there- lots of gaps. People actually know what the students are learning throughout their journey now.'

This may indeed imply, that a curriculum entitlement (akin to the formal national guidance on curriculum), is actually less problematic for both teachers and pupils, ensuring an equity of provision for pupils that the school serves and less ambiguity about the role of the teacher in the curriculum development process. This speaks to the assertion made by Bell and Stevenson (2006) that educational policy is 'about the power to determine what gets done, or not done.' Policy therefore, may be helpful in supporting teachers in deciding what to teach, as opposed to a impediment to teacher autonomy.

Similarly, other participants referenced pupils directly, in relation to leadership behaviours of the senior team and their sharp focus on pupil learning and outcomes.

*P14: 'And like you know ***** is here for the children, **** and ***** they're doing it for the children not to catch you out.'*

This appears to be a sentiment that is frequently referenced by participants throughout the conversation, suggesting that this is a common and shared idea, that has permeated throughout the team and has potentially 'anchored' staff during this time of curriculum change.

P14: 'We want to be focused on the children then feedback should be given live or direct in the moment, if possible, where just if they receive that after the fact.'

In this particular contribution, a teacher shares how keeping students central to the purpose of the work undertaken in schools might inform the structures and systems around coaching and feedback. This links directly back to the teacher's sense of

wanting 'live, in-the-moment' feedback, which indicates a 'dual' desire to feel psychologically safe and to feel purposeful in the work that they do. Again, this theme supports the work of Coe et al. (2021); another team-level factor highlighted in their research for highly effective organisations is a strategic focus on the core activity. If the core activities, are therefore closely tied to the purpose of the organisation, as expressed by participants, this is more likely to elicit a feeling of purpose and collective endeavour.

5.2 Final Focus Group: Findings in light of the RQs

Psychological Safety

The theme of 'psychological safety', which also emerged in the initial focus group, was a strongly identified theme in the final focus group. Participants continued to feel that they could share their thoughts and feelings openly with the senior leadership team and were confident that they would be heard.

*P4: 'It's more open isn't it, it's like *headteacher* not just *headteacher*, more the SLT team, take into consideration what our thoughts and feelings'*

Participant 4 was consistently positive about this element of their lived experience across both focus groups and was particularly vocal about the role that being heard and 'led by example' played in their overall positive experience of the culture of the school, in light of the curriculum change.

Other participants shared an improved outlook around the ability to share challenges openly and transparently with senior leadership, in the face of particular challenges around delivering a highly saturated curriculum.

P1: Letting us explore it. I think we took the risk and not any pressure that you didn't do this correctly or that correctly. So since we're all on the same journey I think, we were all adapting it and we were all together in it so there was no expectation that you did not do this or you did not do this. We were trialling it in our class as we understood it.

This tension between the national requirements of the curriculum (inclusive of the more unique curriculum subjects adopted by the trust) and the school-level leadership of curriculum delivery was particularly strong and shared by multiple participants. This theme reinforces the work of Priestley (2021) emphasising the role of social interaction in curriculum development and Edmondson (2003) research on psychological safety. Teachers felt safe in 'playing' with new curricular products and there was a collective social understanding that this, and 'getting it wrong', was an essential part of 'getting it right'. However, teachers did express the toll this took and one particular participant, referenced a perceived gap between theory and practice in the education sector.

P2: Teachers are like magicians we have to do everything. And that's not taken into consideration, that's what I've always thought. Someone is sitting somewhere in Cambridge or Oxford or something, you know coming up with all these…are they really talking to teachers to find out if it's fit for purpose.

Interestingly Participant 2, who is an experienced teacher about to retire, was very vocal about the 'doability' of these national expectations and recognised this as a recurring theme throughout her career as a teacher. She also shared concerns that perhaps, training was not allowing teachers to move out of the classroom, into leadership positions (the assumption being these are more 'doable' and sustainable in the long term).

P2: If I can uh…I'm at the end of my career, I'm just thinking about teachers think that the school is not developed enough to move up to greater things so…you're stagnant here. So, I think that's something they need to work on.

This may however been in the context of wider conversations with this particular participant regarding the conditions around the retirement, a conversation which was live during the time of the focus group and shared by the principal in one of our collaboration sessions to discuss any individual participant issues that may influence teacher engagement in the sessions or that I as the interviewer needed to be sensitive to.

As discussed in the literature review, Edmonson's (2003) recognises the interconnection between psychological safety and trust, whilst also recognising the distinction. She describes trust as 'the expectation that others' future actions will be favourable to one's interests', whereas psychological safety is the conditions and climate in which people are comfortable being themselves. These two distinct areas, were merged into the overarching theme of 'psychological safety' because the trust described by participants in both focus groups, appears to lay the foundation for the psychological safety teachers felt, particularly in relation to piloting curricular material during the change. For example:

P8: I think it's just small steps…not like a major…ok why don't you try this next time so next time you think let me try and incorporate this.

This was evident, not only through leadership behaviours that encouraged risk-taking but also through the strong systems and structures that establish in place that both established trust and the ability to grow the curriculum through collective knowledge building.

*P9: Hi, so I'm not a leader but I think *headteacher* and *SLT* are giving members the opportunity because they've come up with you know making these new teams for next year so they are putting out the opportunity for members who are interested and would like to try out something new and it's nice because you get to work with other team members in the school and there is something that's coming up.*

By establishing 'subject faculties', inclusive of all members of staff regardless of experience, the leadership team were able to emphasise continuous improvement in the context of both individual interest and social cohesion. This points to a broader sense of belonging and brings into play the notion of self-esteem within the wider construct of psychological safety.

P12: So I was going to say we do weekly bulletins where we do shout outs so recognise what we do which I think was quite nice and there was this activity we did where they put out our names and across the wall and we went around writing something positive for each member and I thought that was really nice and she laminated it and gave it to us to put it in our classroom and I think that's really nice. It's a nice positive boost.

<u>Purpose of Education</u>

A theme that emerged strongly in the final focus group was purpose of education and teachers feeling a strong sense of wanting to move beyond 'curriculum compliance' to providing their pupils with an education that would stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives.

'P8: you spoke about advice to the government; I'd say life skills. I think we should teach children more life skills so that they're ready for the outside world. Like we had a question yesterday about what we want for a child at the age of 40 and we

came up with some wonderful answers we need to teach those skills first and adapt it to our own learning and our own subjects where we're teaching, and it'll benefit children so much to make them all-round.'

This tied in closely with the previously mentioned tension that exists around national requirements for the curriculum and teacher's view of what their role is and what an effective 'education' really means. However, it disputes definitions of curriculum that emphasise knowledge acquisition. For example, Tanner's (1995) definition of curriculum as 'the reconstruction of knowledge and experience that enables the learner to grow in exercising intelligent control of subsequent knowledge and experience', doesn't explicitly reference the types of knowledge or experience pupils may benefit from. It could therefore be argued that teachers, with the contextual knowledge of the pupils they teach, are best placed to shape these knowledge and experiences, which ties closely with participants questioning their own sense of autonomy in the curriculum development process.

Similarly, other participants referenced feeling a stronger sense of purpose, which aided the stresses associated with the curriculum change.

P5: I think it's quite exciting because a lot of the things we're doing is research based and there's a purpose behind it so before it was dictating what we should do, no real purpose as to what we're doing. I think having a purpose to our professional makes it more worthwhile.

Participant 5 specifically references 'research-based' practices and the purpose that this added to their experience of the work they undertake. This, in the context of the new knowledge rich curriculum, suggests that this 'stance' on what the curriculum should be, was well accepted by the staff. This 'knowledge-rich' stance, however, held up less well in relation to leadership training, which will be discussed in the next section.

Growth

Growth is a theme that emerged in the final focus group. Although aspects of professional and personal growth were mentioned by participants in the first focus group, it more strongly features as a point of emphasis in this final discussion. Participants shared how they were open to the idea of coaching', something which hadn't formally been offered at the school and shared that the pilot coaching model, which involved a few members of staff, was received positively.

*P8: Myself and *other colleague* we started coaching with *SLT*, sees a lesson, feedback meeting, next step and then we embed into our next lesson and I find that for me, I find that really useful for my teaching and development so I'm really seeing the benefits of it…*

The manner in which the coaching was taking place, appeared to be particularly instrumental in how the coaching pilot had 'landed' for staff.

P8: I think it's just small steps…not like a major…ok why don't you try this next time so next time you think let me try and incorporate this.

*P6: And also like it's an open conversation so like if we disagree or and like *colleague* was saying the things she picks up on as a third person as another perspective and I know where I've been in situations where I'm like 'how did I not pick that up' but it does take like, someone to come in and say that to you and I can incorporate into my lesson..so like it's had positive impact…*

Given that there was a strong emphasis on developing a culture of continuous improvement in practice in the intervention training sessions with senior leaders between the two focus groups, it was encouraging to hear how green shoots of this were being experienced by teachers. Specifically, how best practice was being shared and disseminated amongst staff.

P12: So I was going to say we do weekly bulletins where we do shout outs so recognise what we do which I think was quite nice…

It is interesting to note that perhaps the strength of the approach lied in both the structure of coaching and the mechanism for recognising best practice being implemented in tandem. Participant 12 recognises the shout outs as 'being nice' but the coaching being piloted alongside this, amongst other mechanisms and structures for continuous improvement e.g. deliberate practice in CPD sessions, and individual conversations about personal growth, appear to form a constellation of activities that seem to translate into a felt sense of a culture of growth.

However, the literature on culture shifts, particularly the work of Senge (2014), supports the notion that the structure of the coaching approach itself, was more likely to have made the difference in the perceived shift in culture around this. Senge's (2014) assertion that culture occurs by 'doing', appears to be resonate when hearing how participants felt in relation to the coaching pilot and implementation of coaching more broadly.

*P4: It's more open isn't it, it's like *headteacher* not just *headteacher*, more the SLT team, take into consideration what our thoughts and feelings are about things and we have that dialogue if we think it's working for us as individuals, what we want to strive for what inspires us, so we're having those conversations because you need to have inspiration and of course we all have some passion but what inspires us and you know, what makes our cup full…he wants to know about that…*

However, this overarching culture of continuous improvement did not mean that teachers felt entirely satisfied with the professional learning offer.

P15: The CPD session that are delivered, it doesn't necessarily have to be that you just sit there and listen and it having to be a cognitive overload…and then having to go through a CPD nuggets and another one on a Friday. Speaking to teachers and asking them what more effective.

P1: So there are quite a few if people are aspirational but they have to invest themselves, they have to be proactive. So the point over here is there are opportunities but from then there what happens…that's my problem. We've done all this, now where do we go? We keep doing all these courses and where are we? We're still in the classroom…

Professional growth was clearly linked to a more evidence-informed educational landscape, however as participant 1 highlights above, there are challenges associated with professional learning, dominated by domain-specific knowledge. This points to a potential discrepancy between 'knowing' and 'doing' as a leader, echoing criticisms of the NPQs and the potential 'doing' gap that exists in their delivery. Other participants, however, contradicted this view, citing the internal mechanisms of professional development:

*P9: Hi, so I'm not a leader but I think *headteacher* and *SLT* are giving members the opportunity because they've come up with you know making these new teams for next year so they are putting out the opportunity for members who are interested and would like to try out something new and it's nice because you get to*

work with other team members in the school and there is something that's coming up.

Participant 9, for example, saw other opportunities such as being a part of faculty teams, as an opportunity for professional growth. Perhaps this system, addresses the potential challenge of bridging the gap between theoretical leadership learning and more practical, hands-on development towards leadership positions. It is interesting to note however that P9 was a relatively inexperienced teacher, who belonged to a particular 'generation' of staff within the school, aspirant subject leaders. The senior leader's emphasis on building the infrastructure for curriculum development, particularly during the time of curriculum change, therefore, may have influenced this participant's views on pathways forward.

Flexibility

Flexibility was a theme that emerged strongly from the final focus group. In particular, the leadership behaviours that enabled flexible approaches to developing and delivering the curriculum were referenced as a helpful approach in a time of curriculum change.

*P4: It's more open isn't it, it's like *headteacher* not just *headteacher*, more the SLT team, take into consideration what our thoughts and feelings are about things and we have that dialogue if we think it's working for us as individuals…*

This flexibility also appeared to transcend the approach to curriculum development and moved into other systems, for example that of coaching.

P6: And also like it's an open conversation so like if we disagree or and like *colleague* was saying the things she picks up on as a third person as another perspective and I know where I've been in situations where I'm like 'how did I not

pick that up' but it does take like, someone to come in and say that to you and I can incorporate into my lesson..so like it's had positive…

Where it's flexibility in how the curriculum was shaped and delivered or flexibility of thinking about pedagogical approaches, this appeared to have a strong impact on teacher's lived experience.

P1: …there's a flexibility in the approach as well. It's not constrained like you gotta be there you have to do this so it's like kind of I love the flexibility and the whole approach.

This flexibility speaks to the social lens with which Priestley (2021) views curriculum development, as explored in the literature review. Teacher's lived experience of having the flexibility to influence the curriculum, appears to serve multiple functions, including acting as a means for social cohesion within the team. This was evident from multiple participant's view on the value that the social elements of the 'work' held for them.

*P9: Hi, so I'm not a leader but I think *headteacher* and *SLT* are giving members the opportunity because they've come up with you know making these new teams for next year so they are putting out the opportunity for members who are interested and would like to try out something new and it's nice because you get to work with other team members in the school and there is something that's coming up.*

Even beyond curriculum development, the social aspect of team building is highly valued:

P7: I like the fact that they've introduced on a Monday morning the time to play a game with everyone, I really appreciate that because I don't get to spend a lot of time with other teachers in other parts of the school and just connect and have a laugh.

This perhaps points to flexibility being a mediator of social and psychological safety, enabling participants to feel a strength in their togetherness but also feeling they are afforded the right of flexibility on an individual level also.

5.3 Summary- Revisiting the research questions

1. *What factors influence the complex process of curriculum design and curriculum change?*

   This proved to be an interesting question with multi-faceted answers. The national expectations set out around curriculum delivery was evidently a key influence in shaping curriculum design and delivery for teachers. This dominated much of their thinking on the substance of the curriculum, and they recognised that curriculum change, was to a certain extent, a function of the need to be compliant with these expectations. It was widely agreed that teachers should have a role as 'curriculum makers' (Priestley 2021) and this supports Priestley's research, suggesting that there is a role of 'interpretation' from moving to macro curriculum policy and micro school-level curriculum development. There was also an acceptance that the school trust played an important part in this interpretation. School systems such as faculty curriculum teams, clearly helped catalyse this and therefore teachers' ownership of this.

   Leadership behaviours and the professional conditions that leaders create, were certainly a factor that influenced teachers work on curriculum design,

corroborating with the work of Coe et. al (2021) around professional environment does indeed impact student provision and outcomes. However, it was, as expected, quite difficult to isolate individual activities, actions or approaches that more helpfully facilitated the curriculum change. Rather it was a constellation of these elements that led to a broadly felt sense of, for example, psychological safety.

On this point, it was interesting to note that systems and structures, often anecdotally considered as less likely to influence team culture, played an important role in establishing a sense of psychological safety. For example, the structure and approach to coaching. Therefore, psychological safety could be described as operating best in an educational context, as a) through systems e.g. shared language around coaching.

2. *How might school culture influence the school improvement work undertaken by leaders?*

As mentioned above, school culture appeared to have a strong influence on the school improvement work conducted by leaders in the school. Teachers referenced how the strong school culture, feelings of transparency and openness, contributed positively during a time of curriculum change and uncertainty.

More broadly, valued-led leadership was crucial but this again, consisted of multiple elements, as well as elements that were more/less important to individual members of the team. This supports Spencer-Oatey (2008) definition of culture as: 'Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures, and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do

not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour.' Conceptually therefore, this may warrant a shift in perspective towards culture for school leaders, which will be discussed further in the conclusion and recommendations section of the report.

Linked to the first research question, there seemed to be a real tension between the constraints associated with national policy and what could be done at school-level to make the job more 'do-able'. In this context, where culture was relatively positive and supported work on the curriculum, it was likely less pronounced, but this begs the question about where team culture is less considered and the impact this may have on retention of teachers to the profession itself.

3. *How might school leaders hybridise school culture and curriculum development in service of strengthening their school improvement efforts?*

The theoretical model proposed in Fig 2 was a useful starting point to provide an intervention for senior leaders in the school. By exploring the substance of 'what' needed to change alongside the 'how' it gets changed, leaders were able to more deeply consider the cultural aspects of implementation in their areas. Whether the model underpinning the training itself, was a factor in the successful curriculum implementation at the school is very difficult to ascertain. It is unlikely, for example, that the training alone can be isolated as the reason why in this case, school leaders were able to successfully hybridise school culture and curriculum development. However, leaders having training which explicitly references school culture in relation to implementation, drawing these two things together, may have been conceptually helpful for leaders in considering how they led in their individual areas. The emphasis on 'celebrating best practice' for example

which was a particular objective covered by the training for leaders, came through clearly in the final focus group, suggesting that perhaps leaders having training which has a clear action step following it (followed up by a coach or mentor figure for example) might be useful in encouraging leaders to consider how to hybridise school culture and curriculum development, more practically. This supports Stanier's (2020) assertion that the existing means of leadership development e.g. NPQ's fail to teach developing headteachers about how best to manage and motivate their staff.

5.4 Evaluation of Intervention

The training intervention I delivered to SLT was tailored to the key themes from the baseline focus group and reflecting the theoretical model 'Cultural Curricular Knowledge' (Impact, 2024) (a dual focus on culture and domain-specific knowledge on curriculum). As mentioned earlier, there were encouraging green shoots emerging, that might indicate the intervention was helpful in supporting leaders to implement initiatives in their areas. Particularly in relation to coaching and the pilot of a coaching approach, it was clear to see how a senior leader had considered the theoretical framework in designing the approach to coaching, as seen in Participant 8's reflections.

*P8: Myself and *other colleague* we started coaching with *SLT*, sees a lesson, feedback meeting, next step and then we embed into our next lesson, and I find that for me, I find that really useful for my teaching and development so I'm really seeing the benefits of it…*

This approach integrates both the culture of continuous improvement, as well as the sharp focus on developing curriculum delivery.

Similarly, participants recognised the acknowledgements being made by leaders, of their efforts towards the school priorities. Participant 12, in the final focus group, remarked:

P12: So I was going to say we do weekly bulletins where we do shout outs so recognise what we do which I think was quite nice and there was this activity we did where they put out our names and across the wall and we went around writing something positive for each member and I thought that was really nice and she laminated it and gave it to us to put it in our classroom and I think that's really nice. It's a nice positive boost.

The appreciation and acknowledgement of teaching staff was a key focus in the intervention, in response to a strong sense of 'cognitive overload' and a recognition of feeling 'seen and heard', from the baseline focus group. Reinforcing this positive feeling was a key focus of one of the leaders, when discussion strategic priorities post-intervention.

These 'green shoots' appear to have emerged due to an explicit focus on developing and sustaining the positive culture reported in the baseline focus group, as well as an integrated approach to further developing strategic priorities of individual leaders. The theoretical framework underpinning the intervention, captures this integration and therefore may have potential in supporting leaders thinking around the development of both school culture and curriculum.

More specifically, the theoretical framework was a useful conceptualisation in exploring the relational elements of school improvement work and enabled me to shift leaders' attention towards the role that this plays in the longevity and sustainability of their implementation efforts. In and of itself, it may not have had impact but combined with feedback of key themes from the focus groups of teachers, it enabled leaders to consider their next steps in addressing their strategic priorities

for their area. The intervention also allowed me to play the role of a 'coach' and offer leaders the safe space to share their thinking, the challenges associated with leading in there are and to collectively problem-solve.

Anecdotal conversations with this leader suggested that the sensemaking elements of this training, referencing Ancona (2012), supported in crystallising the implementation process. Having said this, the very nature of culture being the conditions established within an organisation over time, means it was very difficult to ascertain the true impact of the training and whether it had any tangible effect on the school culture.

In reflecting more broadly on the intervention as a whole then, it appears that it was a 'constellation' of factors that led to the 'green shoots' of perceived positive school culture that emerged in the final focus group with teachers. The component parts of this seem to be:

-an explicit focus on school culture as a significant factor in school improvement efforts
-the opportunity for leaders to 'sensemake' with a peer or coach
-baking 'cultural' considerations into strategic priorities and implementation e.g. when I introduce the coaching model, I will create a best practice forum to positively reinforce the efforts of teachers
-a recognition of the lived experience of teachers and how our school improvement efforts are 'landing' for them.

In reflecting on these components, I was able to consider the implications to future practice.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Having explored the themes in light of the research questions and the existing literature on this topic, it was clear to see the interconnections between themes. Approaching the data in a reflexive manner, allowed me to compare and contrast the literature and my own theoretical framework, shared earlier in the paper, with the themes that emerged from the dataset, with a critical eye. The live 'data-stream' of the elements of 'team' that matter most to this particular group of teachers, at this particular time was helpful in supporting leaders' thinking of developing their area of responsibility, as well as considering how to make sense of their strategic priority. The intervention provided to leaders, following the initial focus group, aims to address this by offering a bespoke training series that focused on the above key themes. However, having analysed the themes and revised these, it certainly raised the question about whether psychological safety would be as prominent in the dataset, one or two years down the line when the school had emerged from early implementation of the curriculum change.

In reflecting on the research questions, I initially set out to explore, I am reminded of the work of David Dunning and Justin Kruger of the University of Cornell. Their work into individual's inability to recognise accurately their own competence in an area, termed 'the Dunning Kruger' effect (Kruger & Dunning 2002), reminds me of the sheer size of the 'unknowns' in the research base on school culture and implementation. Despite my personal ongoing fascination with the topic, I'm instantly humbled when considering just how complex and interconnected school culture is and how it is deeply rooted in 'the doing' of school improvement, as opposed to an entity that sits outside of this.

The nature of culture is such that longer-term research may need to be undertaken to truly unpack the various strands that contribute to a school team's culture and consider how leaders can best influence this, whilst simultaneously engaging in meaningful school improvement in service of their pupils.

Another consideration that emerged is the fact that all humans, including leaders, are susceptible to this type of cognitive bias and that existing leadership programmes for educational leadership, perhaps do not take this into consideration. Although they provide domain-specific knowledge to support leaders in making decisions, they don't necessarily provide leaders with sufficient knowledge and skill to successfully navigate the messy relational elements of leadership, as explored in this research.

What does this mean for me personally in my existing role? Having carried out this research, I hope to apply some of my learnings to developing a leadership programme for middle or subject leaders that address the gap in provision that has emerged. I will intentionally target middle leaders in this work, as to meet the problem upstream and perhaps, even if it's for a handful of colleagues, encourage them to stay in the profession and progress to senior leadership. I also hope to continue advocating for this element of learning for leaders nationally, until such a time where national programmes of study for leaders more strongly reflect, what I consider to be the trickiest part of the job of being a senior leader; keeping those we lead fulfilled, aspirational and ultimately, in the profession.

My recommendations more broadly therefore are:

1. A national programme of study for leaders at all levels that deeply considers the relational element of leadership and implementation, with sensemaking as a golden thread throughout. This entitlement would be inclusive of a coaching/mentoring entitlement for all leaders to a) more accurately gauge the impact of their work b) act as a support mechanism for leaders, in what is a highly challenging role.

2. For trusts and groups of schools to consider how, at a systems level, they can support schools in developing their young leaders. E.g. modelling sensemaking and cultural considerations in their strategic thinking.
3. For my trust to implement a middle leader programme to support subject leaders in gaining the necessary skill and knowledge to be successful in the role, rooted in the CCK (Impact, 2024) framework.

There is evidently much to still learn about the role culture plays in school improvement, and I would like to express my deep gratitude for having an opportunity to make a dent, as tiny as it may be, in researching this phenomenon with colleagues who have been incredibly open to learning. I am optimistic that this research, amidst the existing body of research around school culture, will begin to cast further attention on what it is clearly an important topic and arguably the key to keeping teachers and leaders within the profession in the long-term.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A- Baseline Focus Group Coding

Data from Participants (P)	Codes Generated
P8: 'It isn't our role to make the curriculum. We can adapt the curriculum, but we can't take that decision- it's the government that takes it for the whole country. We are just basically deliverers but modify to suit the need of our pupils'	Lack of control or autonomy of taught content. Operational role of teacher. Acceptance of macro system at play.
P12: 'Sometimes people do things for the sake of doing it. Like 'Egyptians' sounds like a nice topic. That was kind of there- lots of gaps. People actually know what the students are learning throughout their journey now.'	Tension between personal and purpose. Recognition of 'bigger picture'. Curriculum coherence as a key purpose. Recognition of need for a deliberately planned curriculum. The benefits of standardisation of curriculum structure.
Having flexibility in EYFS P4: 'empowered and inspired. Because there is a big difference between being a follower so if you just blindly follow you can but there's no room for	Autonomy being valued. Professional trust in teacher judgement in EYFS.

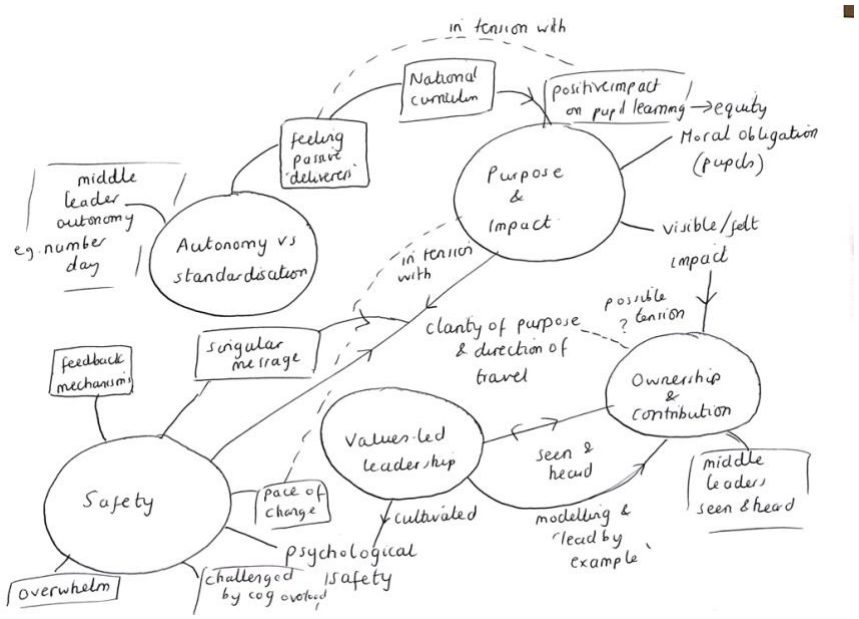
adjustment for class or year group. But I think with early years and *curriculum programme* it's a whole different ball game.'	Starkly different curricular approaches in different phases.
P7: 'I think right now it's a lot of cognitive overload- we've got so many changes happening at once and it's really hard to keep up with everything so there are places where we have to slip up a little bit and it's trial and error'	Workload and wellbeing considerations. Recognition of need to 'play' with implementation. Justification of *initially* varied practice. Personal discomfort and overwhelm.
P3: 'there's more discussion, we get asked things…'	Feeling seen and heard. Recognition of the individual amongst the larger team.
P5: '…they're listening to our input as well. It is open conversation, and your opinion is being respected and listened to.'	Integrity of interactions. Feeling seen and heard. Active listening.
P4: 'the change I can see is we were led by example. Like we've been told to manage our tasks but we've been given examples of how to do it.'	Clarity of end goal. Scaffolded support. Sharing WAGOLL (what a good one looks like).

*on Headteacher P15: 'he can show empathy because he's been in that position'	Values-led leadership. 'Walking the talk' Expertise and credibility of leaders.
on the leadership team P3: 'it's the buy-in- so the leadership team, they're a unit and you can to any one of them and they're singing on the same hymn sheet and we've never had that. It's not go to mummy go to daddy which is what it used to be and that's a culture. And then that moves down to teams'	Clarity of expectations. United front amongst senior leadership team. Safety in one singular message. Desired behaviours modelled.
*on the Headteacher P9: '…there's a lot of honesty and transparency there so I wouldn't hesitate to go up to him and say I feel good about this and I feel uncomfortable about this. In terms of him walking in and out of my classroom, I would not care…I like the approach he is taking.' P3: 'they're not out to get you…'	Psychological safety acutely felt. Feeling seen and heard. Trust and reliability in leaders.
P14: '…feedback was after the fact, that then made me reflect that really does come across quite 'judgy' it's like	Feedback is best 'in the moment'. Feedback being developmental not judgmental.

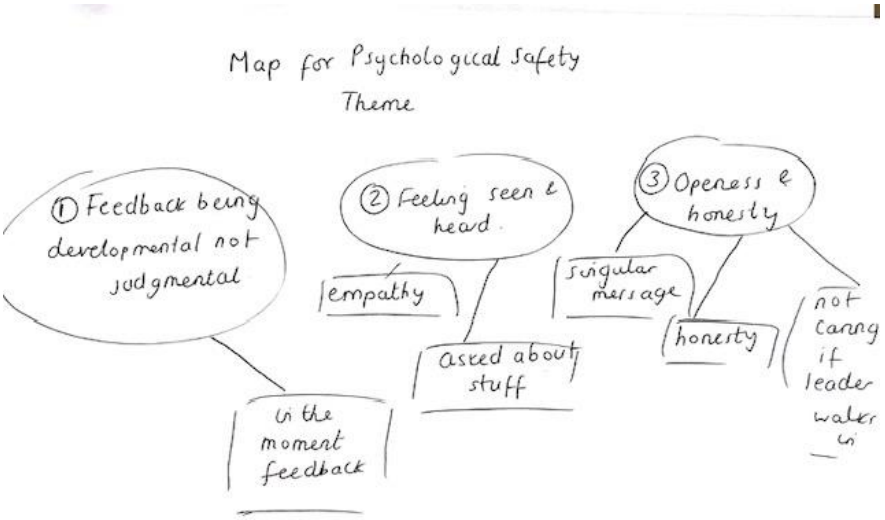
you're trying to assess or judge me like you're trying to catch me out.'	Teachers feeling tested or 'assessed'.

Appendix B- Visual Map for Baseline Focus Group

Initial Visual Map



Refined Thematic Map for Theme 'Psychological Safety'



Appendix C- Final Focus Group Coding

Data	Codes
P2: 'I like the pitch of it, they pitch it quite high for the children, the vocabulary and all so the children are forced to learn new vocabularies- very rich that's what I like about it. All the texts that we are using and reading and writing they are forced to learn. Because I teach Y2's and when they throw the words, we've discussed back at me, I'm like wow.' P3: 'More consistent and uniform so it's good for a universal offer'	Consistency and quality of curriculum post-change Sense of raised ambition of curriculum
P2: 'Teachers are like magicians we have to do everything. And that's not taken into consideration, that's what I've always thought. Someone is sitting somewhere in Cambridge or Oxford or something, you know coming up with all these…are they really talking to teachers to find out if it's..if it's fit for purpose' P3: 'Primary, as *participant* said, you have to teach French, music- no	National requirements being unrealistic Macro systems influencing 'do-ability' of job

one has that knowledge. We're not oracles we don't have that amount of knowledge' P5: 'And more training…like you said we're counsellors. I don't have the knowledge to be counsellors. I don't know whether I'm doing a good job or not. I try to love these children and show them that someone cares about them but we're not trained and are we doing it to a good standard?'	
P7: 'More funding for SEND.' P6: 'Give staff more time to plan. Bigger budget.'	In light of General Election, a desire for more time as teachers. Desire for more funding.
P8: 'I think we should teach children more life skills so that they're ready for the outside world. Like we had a question yesterday about what we want for a child at the age of 40 and we came up with some wonderful answers' P4: 'To build on that I once heard someone say that in a secondary school, you teach a subject, in a	Purpose of education. Primary/Secondary distinction and nuance.

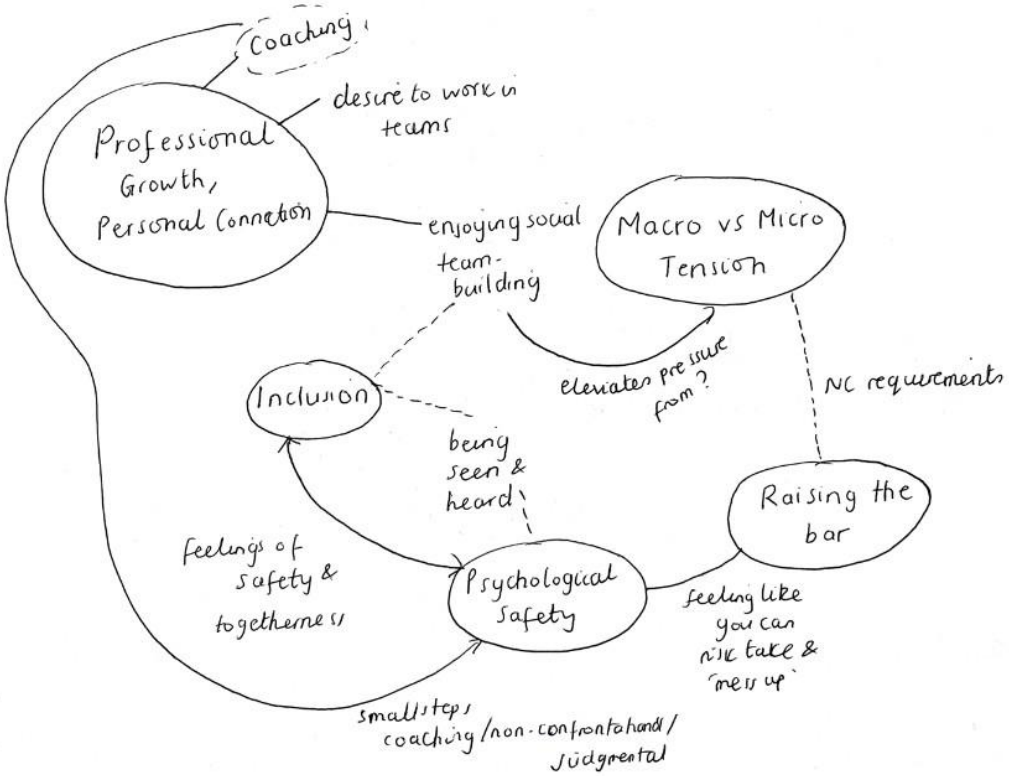
primary school you teach a child. And I think there's a lot of wisdom in that saying. We're not just teaching subjects…we're teaching that particular child.'	
P1: 'I think it's more transparent now. What's happening up there is being shared down there and down there. Like I said, it's more inclusive now and feedback is taken on by the leaders so they're acting on…' P3: 'I think wider than the school culture I think as a MAT, we feel more included. I don't know if that's because I've been here longer but like I feel like more a part of the academy trust and I think we have a lot to do with the academy, we have people coming in…'	Inclusion and a sense of belonging. Sense of wider belonging to trust.
P4: 'It's more open isn't it, it's like *headteacher* not just *headteacher*, more the SLT team, take into consideration what our thoughts and feelings'	Feeling heard Psychological Safety
P1: 'those opportunities so if people were aspirational they can do it…and	Professional development providing avenues for growth

then the excellence leadership programme they provided…*teacher* and them lot can support that there are NPQ courses right now…' P9: 'I think *headteacher* and *SLT* are giving members the opportunity because they've come up with you know making these new teams for next year so they are putting out the opportunity for members who are interested…'	
P7: 'I like the fact that they've introduced on a Monday morning the time to play a game with everyone, I really appreciate that because I don't get to spend a lot of time with other teachers in other parts of the school and just connect and have a laugh.'	Social aspect of school team
P3: 'I think wellbeing has improved…it's not just a buzz word. I think it's as simple as they really do kick us out at 5 o clock' P8: 'Myself and *other colleague* we started coaching with *SLT*, sees a lesson, feedback meeting, next step and then we embed into our next lesson and I find that for me, I find	School systems that nudge wellbeing School systems that support growth

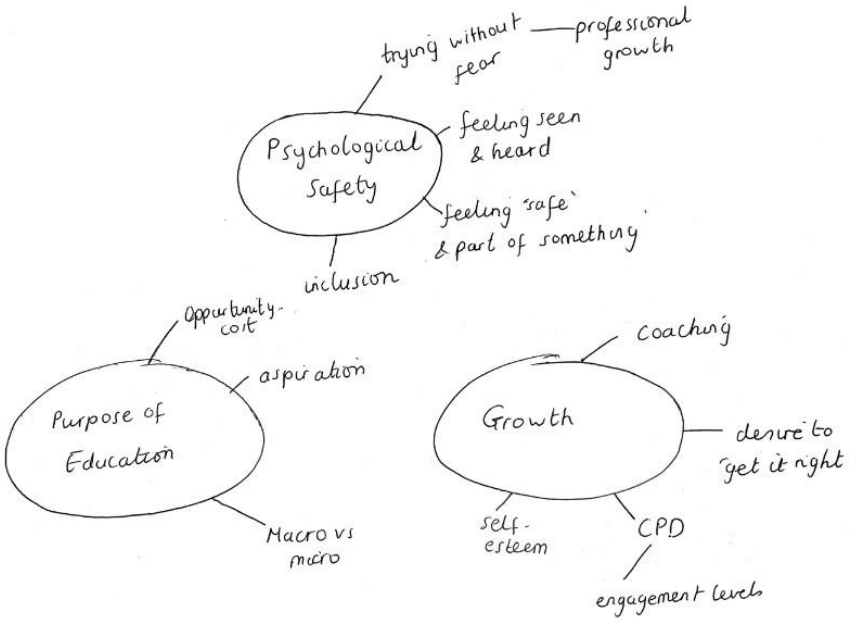
that really useful for my teaching and development so I'm really seeing the benefits of it…'	
P12: 'So I was going to say we do weekly bulletins where we do shout outs so recognise what we do which I think was quite nice' P5: 'I think *headteacher* going around saying 'you're doing a really good job' and like to me I wasn't very confident last year but this year I feel like I've grown so much just from these simple things that make me think I do know what I'm doing'	Recognition of effort Development of self-esteem
P1: 'Focused CPD because certain teachers might be on a certain path and others need…I know reinforcing and coming back sounds good. But sometimes I end up just doodling and being silly' P9: 'So maybe a different style to CPD because I'm personally…I'm like shattered by the end of the day so going to a meeting, I'm like 'oh great I've got a meeting' sitting there so I'm like not fully attentive'	The desire for bespoke, engaging professional development

Appendix D- Visual Map for Final Focus Group

Initial Visual Map



Refined Visual Map



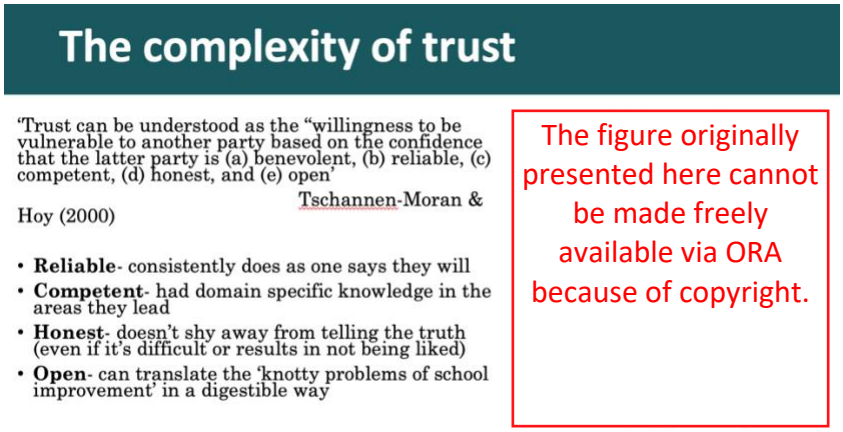
Appendix E- Sample of Reflexive Research Journal

I have an interesting relationship with the research I am undertaking and thus the dataset I am interacting with. As a senior leader in primary schools by trade, I've experienced first-hand the influence that school culture can play on school improvement efforts and particularly curriculum development at school-level. School culture can be the difference between teachers willingly co-constructing a path forward and teachers feeling entirely indifferent to any form of change. Having worked in schools, where the latter condition was the case upon my arrival, I am acutely aware of how hard it is to shift culture over time and equally aware of how joyous it is to see a school where colleagues are apathetic towards growth, suddenly become keen to be part of the conversation. Seeing that small spark of teachers wanting to invest, co-construct and 'be' (in the active sense), I am strongly of the belief leaders need to focus on developing school culture, as much as they do in subject knowledge, resourcing and more broadly, teaching and learning. Taking on the role of a qualitative researcher, feels like I'm 'taking off this hat' and putting on a new one where I approach the dataset I have with fresh eyes, that perhaps don't hold 'building culture' in such high esteem. After all, my personal experience has led me to have this perspective on the role school culture plays. And it might be the case that teachers' lived experience differs to that of the contexts I've worked in. The analogy of 'changing hats' helps me, at every stage of the research process, to recognise the different roles and spaces I occupy. It's also got me thinking at a more macro level about the broader positions I occupy e.g. that of a position of social marginality as a south Asian, women and consider how this 'lens' has helped and sometimes hindered how I make sense of the world. I feel that qualitative analysis, particularly the reflexive thematic analysis I'm engaging in, allows for this

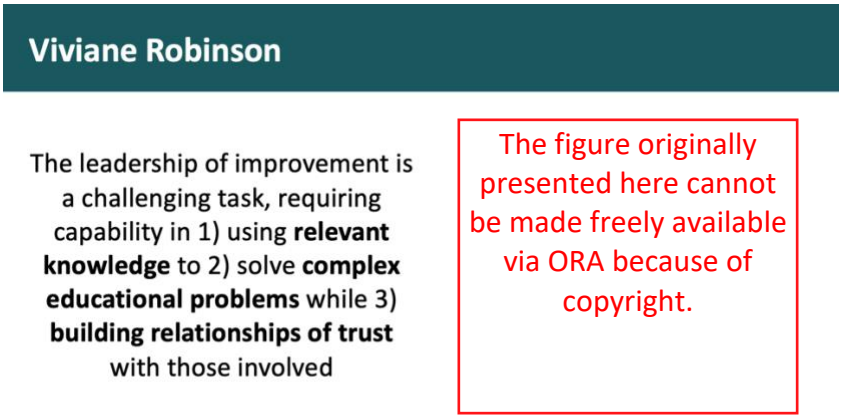
'messiness' and sees these different hats as a strength rather than a hindrance. (Braun and Clarke 2021).

Appendix F- Sample Material from Intervention

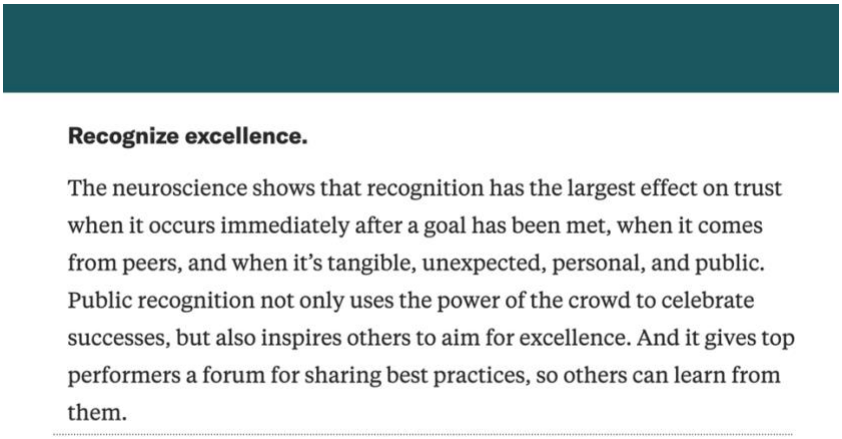
The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright.



The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright.



The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright.



Appendix G- Ethical Approval

Research ethics approval
Research title: 'It ain't what you do it's the way that you do it' – School Culture and Curriculum Development: Exploring an integrated approach to leading curriculum change.
Research ethics reference: EDUC_C1A_23_321

Dear _____,

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.
I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study (see additional point below).

Please ensure that you state the research ethics reference on relevant supporting documentation, for example, consent forms.

One additional point:

- In Section E Question 5 you have identified that you will be sharing your data but I wanted to check that this was definitely the case. You will be reporting and disseminating the results (as identified in Section E Question 6), but do you intend to release the data for other researchers to utilise? Please review this question and determine whether 'No plans to share the data' is a more appropriate answer here. If you are planning to release the raw data then your consent forms will need adjusting accordingly and new DREC approval sought. In granting approval I am assuming that the answer is 'No plans to share the data'.

This project looks really interesting. Good luck with your research!

Yours sincerely,

Jenny
DREC member

Dr Jenny A. Wynn
Departmental Lecturer in Science Education (Biology)
Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy

Appendix H- Informed Consent Form

CONSENT FORM FOR TEACHERS/LEADERS

'It ain't what you do it's the way that you do it' – School Culture and Curriculum Development: Exploring an integrated approach to leading curriculum change.

		Please initial each box
1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐

2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or penalty.	☐
3	I understand that research data collected during the study may be looked at by authorised people outside the research team. I give permission for these individuals to access my data.	☐
4	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.	☐
5	I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
6	I understand how this research may be written up and published.	☐
7	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐
8	I understand that researchers will observe lessons and other aspects of my teaching, as detailed on the information sheet, and discussed and agreed with the researchers.	☐
9	I consent to being audio recorded	☐
10	I give permission to be quoted directly in research outputs against a pseudonym **OR**	☐
11	I give permission to be quoted directly in research outputs but only fully anonymously **OR**	☐
12	I do not wish to be directly quoted	☐
13	I agree to take part in the study	☐
Optional:	I agree that my contact details can be retained in a secure database so that the researchers can contact me about future studies.	YES/ NO

	dd / mm / yyyy	
Name of Participant	Date	Signature

	dd / mm / yyyy	
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature