# How does autonomy in curricular design impact on teacher agency?

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**Abstract:**

For my part 3 MSc project, I have conducted scale practitioner research in regards to the impact of autonomy in curriculum design on teacher agency; this study has been exploratory, aiming to understand why and with what means teachers make decisions regarding curriculum. Studies show that teacher's autonomy are often constricted by pressures of accountability and performativity measures. My current school, however, offers a curriculum framework that is school-based and teacher driven. Given a 'blank slate,' what decision do teachers make regarding curriculum design and why? Based on the premise that agency deals with action, I decided to use Mische and Emirbayer's three-dimensional model of agency to guide my methodology, data collection and coding. Accordingly, I deployed a mixed-methods qualitative approach, including both structured and semi-structured interviews, along with observational methods (of each teacher planning a new unit) to explore my research question. I chose to use selective sampling, with six participants, half of whom have had more than five years' experience teaching in the current Middle Years model, and half in their first.

The findings suggest that previous experience and specific contextual factors have a greater influence on teacher decision making than autonomy. Whilst many of the participants perceived autonomy in curriculum design as 'freedom' during their initial interview, observations during planning revealed that a teacher planned in accordance with how he or she had been trained and took few risks in regards to innovating for a different future. This suggests that the iterative dimension of agency strongly influences the practical-evaluative (contextual). Also, whilst teachers articulated educational aims, the majority of teacher talk during planning dealt with the practicalities of the classroom and of specific students; thus, whilst the projective element featured during the initial interviews, these aspirations were not articulated during the planning process. As the literature suggested, autonomy cannot be viewed as an independent variable. Educational leaders should not assume that giving teachers autonomy will empower them to take risks and imagine alternative futures. My study revealed that each school must carefully consider the opportunities that teachers have to engage with the intellectual theories and debates involved in curriculum development and provide the time and support for teachers to develop strong horizontal relationships with their colleagues.

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1. **International rationale:**

Curricular debates over the past decades have centred around several key issues, namely "what should count as knowledge" (Deng and Luke, 2008 :71), "whose knowledge is worth knowing?" (Apple, 1990: 35) and power relations in the dynamics of designing curricula. Stemming from these debates are concerns that there is a seeming absence of curriculum theory in modern policy (Priestly, 2011). Additionally, the notion of where the role of the teacher fits into each of these has been present in literature for decades. Both Stenhouse (1975) and Schwab (1983) emphasise the role of curriculum developer is central to a teacher's role. With the failure of attempts to develop 'teacher proof' curricula (Taylor, 2012) with teachers located at the bottom of a hierarchy whose role is simply to execute the curriculum plans of those considered to be more knowledgeable (Webb, 2002), there appears to be a global trend in curriculum development that places the teacher as professional designers of curriculum (Goodson, 2003; Priestley et al., 2012). Policies in regions such as North America, Australia and the Baltic states are reclaiming increased autonomy for teachers in regards to curriculum ownership with educators at the heart of the design (Mikser et al., 2016). Another example of this trend is Scotland's *Curriculum of Excellence* in which teachers are positioned to be change agents, believing that teacher agency is an 'indispensable element of good and meaningful education' (Biesta et al., 2015: 624). There is clearly a tension that exists between policies that are driven by accountability agendas, and research suggesting advantages for teacher involvement in the curriculum design process; while in some regions policies reflecting this process are uneven (Day, 2007). With increased prescription, inspection and outcome steering, teacher agency has been considered a weakness, being replaced by data-driven approaches (Ballou, 1998; Biesta et al., 2006). Whilst it would be easy to discount the apparent loss of teacher agency

as victim to these systems, teachers and their ability to make decisions are undisputedly more complex than the influence of accountability (Buchanan, 2015).

Increased ownership, freedom and autonomy are necessary factors for teachers to develop curriculum that are context and culturally specific (Kelly, 2009). However, in order for this to occur, there must not only be an exercising of teacher agency, but also recognition of its importance as a crucial component of teacher professionalism (Priestley et al., 2012b). Additionally, increased teacher agency has a critical role in fuelling teacher's professional development and fostering confidence that the decisions that are being made are professionally meaningful (Tao and Gao, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to understand the complexities of teacher agency and the elements that contribute to its advancement and enrichment. Whilst there is a rich body of literature which explores theoretical perspectives of agency, there is a gap in the literature in regards to how teacher agency manifests itself during the curriculum design process.

**1.1 School rationale:**

Given the context of my current school, I have a rare opportunity to gain insight into the intuitive decisions that teacher's make when designing learning for the classroom (Boschmann et al., 2014). In the final two years at Mountainside* school (name changed to protect anonymity), students complete the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, a two-year educational programme that affords an internationally recognised qualification for entrance into university. In Mountainside's early years, school leadership decided to design a school-based middle years curriculum with both the structure and design given over to teachers to develop. Such a decision was reached in an attempt to embody the school's mission to 'inspire a love of lifelong learning' and to foster a culture

where the process of learning was at the heart of education, not just the product (McKernan, 2008). Whereas other teacher-driven curriculum models mentioned above possess similar aims, this school is unique in that it is not situated in the confines of a state system. Having worked as a teacher at this school for the past seven years in close collaboration with my colleagues, we have been provided with the opportunity engage in autonomous decision making and to use discernment in the interest of both ourselves as learning and for students (Campbell, 2012). However, whilst one of the benefits of school curriculum autonomy is the empowerment of teachers (Erss et al., 2016), many teachers have chosen to adapt a curriculum that closely mirrors the national curriculum of their home country and were hesitant to adapt any major changes to curricula in their respective subject area(s). These concerns expressed through both informal conversations with my colleagues and in my role as the Professional Development Coordinator raised many questions for me. Both my immersion in the literature on teacher agency within the context of curriculum experience and the autonomy given to teachers within my current school served as the basis for my research question:

***How does autonomy in curricular design impact on teacher agency?***

This particular question is valuable because it brings two current debates to the forefront of consideration, namely, what is the role of a teacher, but also debates about the process of curriculum construction, who should be involved, what should be included and the extent to which teachers should be autonomous. Additionally, it has implications both on how new teachers are trained as curriculum developers and also on the nature and the content of opportunities for professional learning. Conducting practitioner research into this question will also provide valuable insight that can strengthen the level of support provided to teachers and provide opportunities for dialogue to enhance collaborative learning.

Although explored in more detail in my literature review, this study conceives of agency as teachers' *actions* and is explored throughout this study by analysing the kinds of curricular decisions each teacher took within his/her context of design. Examining agency involves the focusing on their actions of an individual in design and trying to understand through how he or she articulates their judgements, intentions and evaluations as they interpret and plan (Edwards, 2015). This approach encompasses the both the structure of my research design, methodology and data collection, along with what I am aiming to find out about my sub-research questions which were derived from both my school context and from readings conducted in both Year 1 and 2 of my Master's programme. These include:

1. What does it mean for teachers to be 'active' in their work?
2. How do teachers perceive autonomy in curriculum design?
3. What contextual factors affect teacher decision making?
4. What motivates teachers in their curriculum design?

## 2. Literature Review:

### *2.1 Teacher's as 'active' agents*

#### 2.1.1 How is active defined?

I am making a choice in regards to definition of what the variable of agency entails in the context of my small-scale exploratory research. Since I am concerned with the actions teachers are taking in designing curriculum, I have approached it from both an ecological (contextually inspired) and action-oriented perspective. Whilst there is extensive literature that explore agency from a sociological perspective, criticisms of such an approach include that such a point of view either takes either over-individualistic view of agency seeing it as a capacity or a possession (Fuchs in Priestly et al. 2012a) or from a macro perspective which is over-socialised and takes no account of local, context specific factors (Priestly et al., 2012a).

Several social scientists have attempted to find common ground in the debate on agency, including Bourdieu's (1986) idea of 'habitus,' Gidden's (1984) theory of structuration and Archer's (1995) social realist theory. Whilst this 'dialectical interplay,' the ongoing debate about the role of the agent and structure, attempts to *describe* actions; what is of more concern to me is explaining *how* agency is achieved in a particular setting through the lenses of specific cultural conditions (Biesta et al., 2015: 630). These theories are also criticized within the sphere of education as their models either diminish or misrepresent teacher agency (Leander and Osbourne, 2008).

Agency cannot be an independent variable within the context of schooling as it is subject to both the influence of particular circumstances; therefore, a more pragmatic or action and reflection oriented philosophy, such as that of Dewey, is most appropriate when exploring how teachers can be 'active' agents (Miettinen, 2000). Accordingly, Biesta and Tedder (2006) see agency as the power of actors to critically mold their reactions to challenging situations; this includes awareness of the complexity of the change process (van der Heijden et al., 2015). Such a definition is ecological in nature in that it infers that teachers are not just acting as a result of circumstance in which they are in, rather making decisions by means of their environment in such a way that hints at a dynamic interplay rather than a passive one (Biesta and Tedder, 2007). This complex form of problem solving involves decisions which are result of judgement on the part of the teacher, there those are spontaneous or deliberate (Jonassen, 2012). Therefore, the realization of an agency of action results from individual choices made possible by structures and available resources, but is always inimitable (Biesta and Tedder, 2007). Archer (2000) adds on to this definition by including the dimension of autonomy and casual efficacy. Another way of seeing it is that agency is as sociocultural mediated action whereby a teacher is neither completely free

to act nor are simply products of pre-determined social conditions (Ahearn, 2001). It is essential to avoid the perception of agency as a fixed capacity, as an agency of action is concerned with the quality of engagement with a set of circumstances, not the value of the individuals themselves (Priestley, 2011).

Some educational researchers have gone further to equate active agency with change. In this sense, a change agent is a professional who must be a life-long learner and develops more refined pedagogies to be effective (Fullan, 1993: 16; Snell and Swansen, 2000). Interestingly it was concluded that one of the main general characteristics present in teachers as change agents is a willingness to take risks and to innovate, namely taking action to change education (van der Heijden et al., 2015). A limitation of van der Heijden's research, however, was both that it was small scale data that could not necessary be applied in a different context and his findings were based solely on participant's perceptions. From this perspective, the impact of agency extends beyond personal development and works towards an active involvement of improving the overall quality of education (Goodson, 2003; Nieveen, 2011; Priestley, 2011). Such a position has more recently been reiterated by Hattie (2012) who sees teachers as needing to see themselves as change agents in order to make significant impact on student learning.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998), in an attempt to avoid a one-sided approach to the achievement of agency, constructed the 'chordal triad' model (see Table 1) that accounted for the interplay between an actor's past (iterational dimensions), present (practical evaluative dimensions) and future motivations (projective dimensions). It is clear that agency needs to be conceptualised as multifaceted with a dynamic interplay between context (ecological) and individual actors.

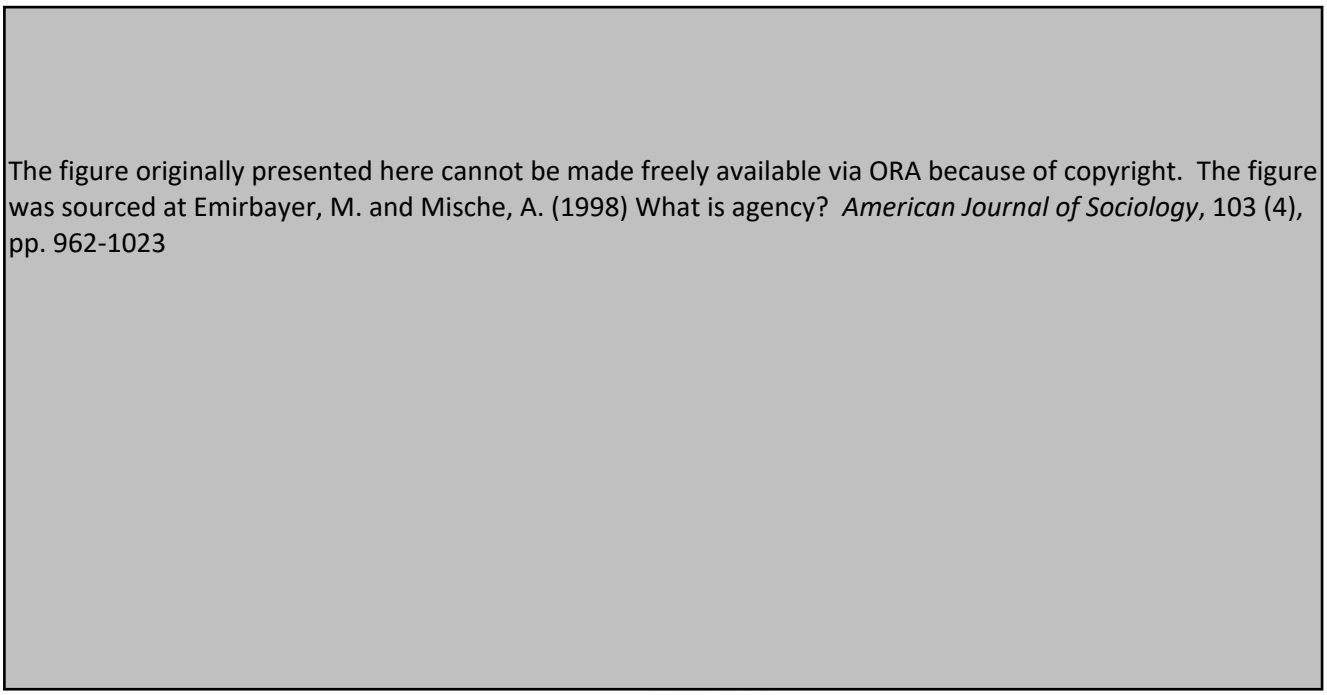



**Table 1: Emirbayer and Mische's Chordal Triad Model of Teacher Agency (1998)**

This model offers breadth beyond the context (relational and material) to include past and future orientations and highlights the importance of the discursive. Admittedly, 'all three dimensions resonate as separate but harmonious tones' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 963), meaning that there is considerable degree of difference in terms of the role each dimension play. This model has become an invaluable tool to better understand teacher actions in my practitioner research. It should already be noted that both the nature of my interview questions and the coding of talk data are done in accordance with the dimensions of this model, taking into account the complexities of the decision making with a clear lens through which to identify the areas are most impacting teacher's agency in action.

In summary, active agency is ecologically contextual and takes into account the interrelationships of the three dimensions in the chordal triad model of agency.

### 2.1.2 How do a teacher's decisions reflect past experiences?

As both the practical-evaluative and projective elements of teacher agency are developed later in the literature review, it is important to consider how a teacher's past can make him or an active agent. According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), the iterational dimension of agency includes:

> the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions and institutions over time (971).

This definition ensures that we understand that agency does not occur in a vacuum, but is fueled by past repetitions of action, both personally and professionally. This reactivation of habit by the actor provides a sense of stability, allowing s teacher to preserve their identity (Priestley, 2011). To be an active agent is to bring both practical knowledge and skills (Boschmann et. al., 2014) in addition to beliefs and values to the forefront of decision making. It is essential to understand that an active agent is **not** bound to the impulse of the moment or governed solely by environment, a teacher's previously formed beliefs and motivations are a crucial factor to a teacher's decision-making process (Biesta et al., 2017). What the model fails to include, however, is that is not simply an individual's background that should be considered in the iterative dimension, but also an individual's collective development in wider school culture and educational discourse (Biesta et al., 2017).

### 2.1.3 How do resistance and collaboration factor into a teacher's actions?

Another criticism of Emirbayer and Mische's model (1998) is that it posits agency as one of positive participation. The idea of resistance, or adapting a critical stance, is featured throughout literature as manifesting the early forms of agency and beginning of a path towards empowerment (Sannino, 2010). In this way, teachers are not viewed as 'pawns in a

reform process,' but as active agents whether they decide to take action or to respond passively (Lasky, 2005: 900). The conceptualisation of resistance in decision making has also be dialectically repositioned as having 'repertoires for maneuver' (Priestly et al., 2012b). Engagement in resistance can be the fulcrum that eventually moves an individual towards participation (Sannino, 2010). This perspective is important in order not to dismiss teachers as rejecting change and protesting further action, rather as experiencing dissonance within the iterative dimension of his/her agency and potentially needing more time to come to terms with a new initiative (such as autonomy in curriculum development, the focus of my research).

In addition, to be an active agent is not only about making decisions and taking action but considering the collective effect of expressing one's agency. There has been criticism of the above model of agency, having been viewed as too individualistic, 'what I will do,'' rather than being related to ''the collective autonomy of agentic professionalism' (Edwards, 2015: 738). Previous research (Coburn and Russell, 2008) strongly suggests that teacher agency in enacting reform are highly dependent upon the nature and quality of professional relationships experienced by those teachers and the social structures in which they are situated. In other words, making strong evaluations, understanding complex problems and deploying the best supplies is possible through working relationally (Edwards, 2015). This definition of agency also draws upon iterative dimensions by considering the development of educational direction and discourse ad also a moral dimension by connecting to the common good (Edwards, 2015).

Overall, the literature presents a multi-faceted definition of what being an active agent in and of their work. Emirbayer and Mische's chordal triad model (1998) prevents a one-sided

approach to pragmatic agency. Additionally, considerations such as being a 'change' agent, the importance of not separating action from past experiences and habits of planning, as well as consideration of both resistance and collective action are essential to creating a multifaceted and working definition of agency.

### *2.2 Perceptions of autonomy in curriculum design*

#### 2.2.1 What is autonomy? What enables or inhibits it?

Whilst I am adopting the chordal triad model of agency to gauge teacher agency; central to my question is impact of autonomy on curricular design. This reaffirms my decision to adopt Emirbayer and Mische's model due to the interplay between actor and a unique set of circumstances. This dimension in important to my particular school context, given that the Middle Years model is school-based and relies wholly on teacher development. It is therefore important to consider what autonomy means and, perhaps more importantly in light of this study how autonomy is perceived by teachers. In the context of recent curricular shifts, the role of the teacher has been transformed from a deliverer of knowledge to a facilitator of learning (Priestley, 2011). By repositioning the teacher at the heart of school curricular design, autonomy is both meant to encompass freedom and empowerment (Biesta et al. 2015). Also, autonomy in the literature has been equated to ownership (Mikner et al., 2015), in that teachers have the power to make decisions and solve problems related to the curriculum without fear of institutional intrusion. In this sense, curriculum autonomy is seen as a psychological disposition and encompasses the extent to which a teacher feels that the design is truly his or her own (Pierce et al., 2003). Therefore, autonomy is not only something is gifted by the organisation who holds the power, but has just as much to do with the perception of the individual taking on the ownership. According

to the self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2006), teachers who embrace curricular goals are also the ones who see themselves as possessing greater autonomy.

In accordance with this definition, there are many benefits attached to the conception of autonomy as freedom and ownership that enhance the definition of autonomy. Research has shown that job-related stress is better handled by teachers who perceive themselves as having autonomy (Pearson and Moomaw, 2005) and fulfills a basic emotional need that increases motivation and professional satisfaction (Vansteenkiste and Ryan, 2013). Autonomy also offers both a sense of empowerment and the possibility to exercise professional expertise (Pearson and Moomaw, 2005). On a more practical level, teacher designed curriculums could help take into account immediate classroom related problems (Sloan, 2006). Westbury (1994) concludes that it is essential for teachers to own curriculum for 'freeing the energy necessary for effective, collaborative curriculum problem solving' (p.40). This corresponds to the above notion that agency is best enacted when there are strong collaborative networks (Coburn and Russell, 2008). Nonetheless, autonomy as freedom and ownership does not necessarily translate to teacher agency as this may indirectly be limited by an organisational narrowness of vision and purpose (Biesta et al., 2015) or by an unhealthy popularity and influence of short-term educational trends (Wermke, 2012).

However, the literature shows that even with this sense of freedom, the autonomous 'freedom' to design curriculum has not been widely welcomed by teachers and there is nervousness about being required to be autonomous in their work. Previous studies have found that due to the fact that teachers on a whole do not have clearly define philosophical beliefs, they often find the process of curriculum design to be frustrating (Livingston et al. 1995). Autonomy does not suddenly cause a change, but instead required a major shift in

established practices, values and structures. Teachers are also reluctant to welcome autonomy as there has been an overall lack of clear guidance on the process of curriculum development and available time to make sense of the complexities that curriculum development entails (Priestley et al., 2014).

Priestley (2011) posits curriculum trends as being 'theoretically agnostic' and contradictory, with both a simultaneous inclusion of both a top-down and bottom up approach, further leaving confusion as to how 'free' teachers are within the confines of the system. Consequently, at a time when teachers have been given autonomy is also a time when the theoretical underpinnings of curriculum theory are largely absent (van der Heijden et al. 2015). Another 'invisible trend' which greatly influences the impact of granted autonomy is 'proselytising rhetoric' of curriculum policies that are presented in a way of doctrinal mandates to which all must closely adhere (Priestley 2011: 221). As a result, teachers lack any theoretical framework from which to begin the design process.

Teacher autonomy does not simply mean freedom (Wermke and Höstfält, 2014). Whilst autonomy can inspire teachers in their work as professional practitioners conversely an individual can be dedicated to a system of principles and laws (Ballou, 1998). In a critical examination of the conditions that best enable teachers to work effectively, there are strong correlation between a teacher's sense of agency and a willingness to embrace opportunities for autonomy (Erss et al., 2016); interestingly, this enthusiasm was higher for primary teachers with the lowest engagement with autonomy being shown by teachers in high-school settings (Westbury, 1994). Another significant factor that gauged a teacher's willingness to embrace autonomy and resist external influence is the decision-making process is strong pre-existence of strongly held philosophical beliefs (Erss et al. 2006). Another factor in the reluctance of teachers to embrace autonomy is how time consuming

the process is (Erss et al., 2016). An OECD study (2009) concluded that teachers spent around half of their non-contact hours completing administrative tasks; the report also revealed that teachers spent twice as much time working in isolation as they did in working collaboratively with colleagues. For example, in New Zealand teachers initially reacted positively to increased professional ownership granted by the national curriculum; however, the same teachers reported low levels of confidence in the implementation phase as thy felt they did not have the resources to meet the demands placed on the school (Sinnema and Aitken, 2013). As such, autonomy can be both *restricted* with regulated application of both the content and resources of schooling or *extended* by freedom of choice of content and application of resources (Wermke and Höstfält, 2014). A limitation for me in my study is that all of the above cited research has all been conducted in systems that on one hand pay lip-service in terms of granting teacher autonomy, but are still situated in a strict accountability, data-driven system. Such structures are not in place in the school where I carried out my intervention, thus potentially limiting the applicability of the findings to my particular context. Therefore, autonomy conceived is more than the notion freedom or ownership, it is also a choice made given the complexities of a situation and availability of resources to adapt change. It is just as much a personal realisation as it is a granted opportunity.

### 2.2.2 How realistic is 'full' autonomy?

This question was one that has been my mind since Year 1 of my studies at Oxford and is not the most obvious when considering the notion of autonomy. Even if teachers are considered to be free in regards to the curricular decisions that are making in their respective subject area, there are deeper debate that occur about the historical

structuration and content of the disciplines themselves. Bernstein (1971) suggests that disciplines have been subject to both classification (the string the of the boundaries separating subjects) and framing (the strength of the educational rules in place in a given setting). He suggests that these strongly impact and limit teacher agency in the decision-making process. Before a teacher attempts to design a curriculum, the historical precedent of how a society has selected, divided, given out and transferred public education knowledge, has already set parameters that in turn reinforces the distribution of power and the assertion of social control (Ball, 2013). Whilst curriculums have partly been designed to give students the opportunities to understand subjects at a conceptual level that has universal applicability, they have also to be constructed in a way to preserve the interests of those creating them in order to preserve societies intended social stratification (Young, 1998). Unfortunately, there are no studies of how the framing and/or classification of subjects enhance or encroaches upon teacher agency; these curriculum issues remain in the theoretical domain. Given the complete autonomy of my current school, I wondered whether teachers took both substantive and conceptual disciplinary debates in designing curriculum for their subject areas.

### *2.3 Contextual factors in teacher decision making*

#### 2.3.1 How are contextual factors defined in reference to teacher agency?

This question, one that I strive to examine as a part of my methodological design, is derived from the practical-evaluative dimension in Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) chordal triad model of agency. In accordance with the ecological definition of agency; this dimension explores and places value on environment, not as the determiner of actions but the means through which individuals exercise their agency (Biesta and Tedder, 2007). I find the phrase

'practical-evaluative' effective as it considers not only the tangible concrete decisions made, but also the 'evaluative,' the way in which estimates both the issues and the range of possibilities for action in that specific context (Priestley et al., 2012a:90). There must be a recognition, that each situation presents its own pressures, problems and uncertainties (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

There is certainly not an educator who would not indicate both time and resources as necessary factors in carrying out their day to day workings in the context of at their school (Day and Gu, 2007). However, these entities alone cannot be responsible for satisfying the contextual factors necessary to instill confidence in teachers to design curriculum autonomously whose profession is rife with ambiguities (Helsby, 1999). It is about the quality of engagement that requires a degree of flexibility and repositioning on the part of the teacher to add meaning to them (Priestley, 2011). Additionally, autonomy, as explored above, would additionally be considered one of the factors that teachers would have to come to terms with before committing to further development. The practical-evaluative dimension of the chordal triad, therefore, emphasises that context is not limited to the physical and material dimensions of a setting, rather one that reflects the dialectical nature of actor and circumstances. In reviewing the literature, two contextual factors that appeared to make the biggest impact on teachers are the strength and structure of hierarchal relationships in schools and the public discourse surrounding policy.

A key finding across the literature was that the nature of organizational hierarchies in a school influenced teacher decision making. This can either be at a macro level, which involves standards (Boschmann et al., 2014), or on a micro level including both school leadership or even the implicit influence of colleagues (Yerrick et al., 1997). It is not so much about the structures in place, rather the nature of relationships that were shown to have

the biggest impact on enhancing or limiting teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2012c). When considering contextual factors that influence a teacher's decision making, it is essential to remember that teachers are highly relational and research shows the important of considering dynamics of power and the degree of autonomy within this particular structure of hierarchy (Pantic, 2014). This is illuminated through qualitative research into two secondary school in Scotland who both were implementing the new Curriculum for Excellence (Priestley et al., 2014). The first school had formal structures with strong vertical channels of communication. In addition, meetings were focused on dissemination with little opportunity for dialogue and little time devoted to working in horizontal teams across departments. Conclusions reached on this school were characterized by calling it an opportunity missed and a place where agency had been weakened due to both the rigid nature and scope of professional relationships at the school (Priestly et al., 2014). In contrast, the second school who were adapting similar measures showed participants who considered their school to be a place of innovation and risk-taking. They were appropriated time to develop shared ideas and build educator expertise through working with a range of educators in the school network (Priestley et al., 2014). This 'autocatalytic process' had a tremendously positive impact on teacher's orientation towards designing curriculum (Priestley et al., 2014:187). These findings were based on teachers' perceptions and are limited to the context in which they occurred; however, they serve to illustrate on how strongly relationships can affect the capacity to act (Hökkä et al., 2017). Especially when it comes to an encounter with autonomy, teachers may be less likely to take risks and to depart from the habitual if they are not supported by school leadership (Le Fevre, 2014).

### 2.3.2 What is the impact of public discourse on teacher decision making?

Schools are subject to many changes, especially when it comes to improvement initiatives. What research has shown is that for teachers to be willing to exert both a high level of commitment and energy an organization must be willing to place a high degree of trust in a teacher's agentic decision making (Priestly et al., 2011a). Accordingly, school should consider the means and level to which pedagogical support can be provided to build teacher's confidence (Priestly et al., 2011b). Although implicit in the data analysis, the level of actual support in coming to terms with change initiatives was deemed to play a significant role in teacher's apprehension to embrace opportunities to design curriculum (Mikser et al., 2017). The nature and rate of the initiatives themselves could also be a factor that erodes agency (Helsby, 1999) as teachers are having to cope with demands for constant change. Not only this, a teacher's work is also subject to external cultures of planning where one feels they can succeed only if it matches other's definitions of what a successful curriculum should be (Day, 2007). This brings us to a consideration of the public discourse of policies and the impact that language can have on teacher's autonomy and decision-making power. Several studies (Priestly, 2011; Priestley et al., 2014) conducted on the Scottish *Curriculum for Excellence,* concluded that nature and extent to which a school is willing to innovate rests upon educators being able to come to terms of often ambiguous and vague ideas. This is very much in line with Priestley's (2011) notion that modern curriculum policy is 'theoretically agnostic' (347). Examples of such rhetoric are ideas such as personalization, choice and learning; however, whilst it would be difficult to criticise such lofty aims, often there is a systemic lack of sense of making that leaves teachers confused about their role (Priestley, 2012b). On top of this, a study done on teachers' interpretation of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (Priestly et al., 2012a) indicated that many teachers only possess a

superficial understand of policy language and it is the 'absences of a robust professional discourse about teaching and education more generally - teachers are tied to the beliefs that circulate their practice and this prevents them from locating such beliefs in wider discourse' (Biesta et al., 2015: 636). In reference to the chordal triad model, policy could have an effect on teachers being able to imaging different futures as they are tied to this language (Biesta et al., 2015). This can be detrimental to a teacher's sense of professionalism that it limits a teacher's opportunities to change the theoretical underpinnings by having them focus on the mandates of reform (Yerrick et al., 1997). Overall, the practical-evaluative dimensions of agency are crucial to understand a teacher's decision making. Whilst practical considerations, such as resources and time, definitely impact on planning, this dimension also takes into account the nature of hierarchical relationships and the impact of public discourse on a teacher's confidence to either embrace or to show reluctance towards autonomy granted in curriculum design. It is important not to view contextual factors that affect teachers in a list-like manner, rather to consider how each is interconnected to the others with the specific context of each environment. Whilst the literature cited above conducted research into a dimension of the practical evaluative, there was a gap in considering the interrelationships and influences of local contextual factors on each other. As each school is unique in this sense, it would be difficult to find universal applicability.

### *2.4 Teacher motivation and curriculum design*

#### 2.4.1 What short-term factors motivate a teacher's planning?

The consideration of both short and long-term factors in a teacher's planning highlight the projective dimension of Emirbayer and Mische's model (1998). In regards to short-term

factors, one of the most prominent findings from the literature (Boschmann et al. 2014; Biesta et al., 2015, Brown and McIntyre, 1993) was a teacher's concern for student welfare and wellbeing when planning a unit. These would concern practical issues such as students' relationship with learning or making subject matter understandable and manageable (Boschmann et al. 2014). Accordingly, Brown and McIntyre (1993) refer to these as the "naturally desired state" in the classroom (281). Whilst teachers do inherently have held beliefs about students, teaching and the purpose of education, findings do show that teachers most often plan for the short-term and these expressions often embody the language of current policy (Biesta et al., 2015). In accordance with these findings, both abstract concepts of disciplinary thinking or concerns about learning for the long-term are wholly absent from curricular design decisions about classroom practices (Handelzalts, 2009). In accounting for potential reasons why the practical drives teacher motivations, one possible explanation could be teachers needs more professional development to think more deeply about the abstract issues of education, whether that be learning about the more theoretical sides of curriculum frameworks or developing expertise on the substantive nature of one's subject area (Boshmann et al. 2014). These findings will allow me to the consider the relationship between the iterational on short-term projective dimensions in the chordal triad model of teacher agency.

Care should be taken not to perceive these practical aims as being driven by altruistic motivations. In fact, research shows the danger of teachers 'playing the game' (Gleeson and Gunter, 2001: 139). In doing this, teachers attempt to correctly implement the rhetoric of the day into their planning in order to be perceived as being more successful by their peers (Valli and Chambliss, 2007). Departing from a genuine focus on future orientations and student wellbeing, there is a danger of using language in curriculum design to fabricate

reality through a process of careful image management (Keddie et al., 2011).

Interesting, in a study on the main responsibilities of a teacher as a curriculum designer (Salomon, 1992), it was concluded that in addition to being responsible for both carrying out the role of a teacher and bearing responsibility for the learning processes and outcomes of students, teachers should also be 'giving serious consideration to the desirable and less desirable long-term effects of the constantly improvised learning environment' (pg. 46). Unfortunately, few studies indicate that this final responsibility plays a major role in the curriculum design process. The projective dimension should not be considered in isolation; careful examination should be done into how both personal factors and environmental context drive the ways that teachers act and exercise their agencies (van der Heijden et al., 2015).

### 2.4.2 What does the projective element of the chordal triad entail?

This question emerges out of the natural progression of the literature review; after examining both how past experiences and contextual factors, along with perceptions of autonomy, it is the project dimension that brings these a sense of connectedness as it encompasses "the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971). This dimension is crucial for planning as agency is always motivated with an aim of making a difference for the future by avoiding past pitfalls or current obstacles (Priestley et al., 2011b). According to the model, the projective includes both short (practically orientated) and long-term (purpose driven) motivations Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). There is a danger is considering these that the other two dimensions fall by the wayside; in

fact, teachers' beliefs and habitual practices have a strong influence over how teachers frame this dimension into their planning. I made reference to Schulman (1986) earlier who makes the distinction between varying types of knowledge that teachers possess, including substantive, general, pedagogical and relational knowledge, along with roots in educational philosophy. The degree to which a teacher activates each type could influence both the articulation of a curriculum but also greatly determine the means and the ends to which one is planning. Again, each of these would carry a certain impetus depending on a teacher's personal and professional experience along with the contextual dimensions in which one works. In addition to knowledge, the influence of a teacher's beliefs on future orientations can also be a motivating force in acting upon opportunities with agency (Biesta et al., 2015). These beliefs are crucial at the start pointing of the curriculum design process (Boshmann et al., 2014).

**Summary:**

Reviewing a myriad of sources on agency helped me to come to a definition that was appropriate and fit for purpose for my study. The debate surrounding what agency is led me to be cautious of not over-simplifying teacher agency. The chordal triad model (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) did help in providing a framework in considering how agency worked in a temporal way. Additionally, by considering the notion of autonomy, both in regards to how teachers perceive it and the encounter between teacher and historical traditions of disciplinary classification and framing of subjects, and how these affect teacher decisions making in regards to how a curriculum should be designed.

I feel like a looking at factors spatially and temporally is a useful way of conceptualising this interplay; agency is determined by both the specific, the context, but also by the histories

and projections actors are bringing into that context. As such this has methodological implications and linking to my research design in section 3.

## 3. Methodology

I start with a discussion of my selected methodology and sampling, dimensions of collaboration as well as data collection tools. Additionally, these raised ethical implications which I detail and how I accounted for them in my research design and through the CUREC approval process. Against this backdrop I present and discuss the findings from my research for each step in my methodology using my four sub-research questions. In the discussion section, I explore what this reveals about the impact of autonomy in curriculum design on teacher agency. From the outset, I acknowledge that there are certainly methodological challenges of capturing enacted teacher agency.

### 3.1 Research design

The purpose of my exploratory, case study based research is to be 'illuminatory' (Buchanan, 2015: 702) in nature. A case study is an empirically based inquiry that enables careful study of a phenomena within a real-life context (Travers, 2001). I am aiming to gain insight into the decisions that teachers make and why and how they come to these curricular decisions with the intent to use the findings to help refine the focus of professional development and to further support the school's mission to be a community of life-long learners. By emphasising autonomy in curriculum development as the desired direction of teacher agency this enabled me to use the research evidence to identify concrete areas within the selected model detailed below; thus, I was engaging with potential factors that support or impede such agency within the given context of my school. The aim in my design is to more closely explore the issues raised in my literature review, including the dialectical nature of

agency (Biesta et al., 2015), the role of the iterational, practical and evaluative dimensions of the chordal triad model (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) and how teachers both perceived and acted out extended autonomy (Wermke and Höstfält, 2014). The design is also important because of my current school context and the opportunity teachers have to plan without any externally mandated prescription or exam structures (Buchanan, 2014). Therefore, I have selected for this to be a qualitatively motivated study and have intentionally decided not to include quantitative data. My reasoning for this lies in the fact that I hope to acknowledge the complexity of teacher agency in the interplay between the 'chordal triad,' and to understanding teachers' perceptions and actions and understand the 'why' behind the decisions. Since I have carefully selected a definition of agency that is pragmatic in nature I wanted to avoid quantifying so as to circumvent isolating teachers and by intentionally making an effort not to rank and compare their effectiveness. Additionally, this choice is also tied back my ethical considerations; having establish the relationship of both context and time in my literature means the nature of what I am investigating is both context specific and related to individual biographies in such way that quantifying it would not pick up on this nuance.

I am focusing on what teachers say and the justifications and reasoning they offer while curriculum planning; as a result of the case study approach, I will be helped in gaining a rich understanding of curricular approaches in a 'talk' rich environment (Milson and Earle, 2008). Again, the dialectical was illuminated throughout my literature as crucial to understanding the relationship between the teacher and context and how sense is made both of the tangible and the invisible world in which he or she works (Biesta and Tedder 2007). Lastly, I intentionally chose to have a selective sampling that would both enable me to engage with

teachers from a range of backgrounds and with varying levels of experience and would also allow the data collection to be manageable and meaningful.

I have chosen both pre-observation closed question interviews, participatory observation and a mid/post-semi structured interview as the instruments for data collection. The pre-observation interviews were structured in order to pose the questions to teachers that incorporated the three elements of the chordal-triad model of agency. Although closed interviews are often considered to be too impersonal or mechanistic (Cohen et al., 2007), I chose this tool so that teachers did not feel guided by what they thought I wanted to hear and I could avoid prompting a particular response. On a practical level, structured interviews also enabled me to easier code the transcribed responses as all questions were exactly the same for participants. Following this I did a participatory observation with field notes, watching to see and hear things that otherwise I might have subconsciously missed (Cohen et al. 2007) as each individual teacher planned for a future unit of study. What I found as both a challenge and an opportunity was that previous studies I have read on observations have always been done in the context of the classroom; I had no precedent in the literature of observations of a teacher planning. I choose 'observer as participant' at this stage of the intervention to put the teacher at ease and make the setting feel as natural as possible, yet still being able to keep a level of objectivity and distance (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:93). As none of the teachers who were involved had ever had anyone observe their planning, it was essential for me to attempt to account for this in my selection of data collection tools. The final stage of the intervention involved an informal mid/post-observation conversational interview. Teachers were informed that I would be a participant observer whilst he or she planned a unit and were given the option of speaking as they

planned or to work in silence and then to engage in a post-observation interview which involved me posing questions based off of what I observed. I wrote have a pre-determined list of possible questions to ask if the teacher chose not to speak, but depending on the immediate context, questions emerged from the natural course of the observation and could be matched to the individual (Cohen et al., 2007). Although this leaves room for getting different information from different people, I accounted for this in the research by ensuring that the pre-set list of questions was answered either during or after the observation.

### 3.2 Participants

The sample included 6 teachers who design curricula for the Middle Years from three different faculties. There were two participants from each faculty, one who is in their first year at the school and the other who has taught at the school for 5 years or more. The reasoning behind the sample is due to the choice to apply Emirbayer three-dimensional model and to consider how increased time within a context might enhance a teacher's sense of agency (linking back to my third sub research question). I also wanted to stay true to purpose, intentionally using a small sample to not lose their voice in a vast ocean of data. In my findings section, each teacher will be referred to according to a letter, such as *Teacher A*, assigned based solely on the order in which I interviewed them. I did this to protect their anonymity in accordance with BERA guidelines (2011) and also to enable me to be organised and consistent throughout the phases of the intervention.

### 3.3 Dimensions of collaboration

Given that dialogue and the interplay between actor and environment (Biesta et al., 2015) were emphasised continuously throughout my literature review, collaboration was an intentional part of my study in attempting to understand how agency is enacted by means of a particular context. In dialogue with each participate in explaining the ethical implications, I was also able to highlight my aims as a researcher to use the findings and discussion to better focus future opportunities for professional development. An unintended outcome of my research was that several teachers who participated expressed interest in continuing to speak through the process of their planning with myself or another colleague. This certainly helped me in carrying out my intervention; teachers were more at ease during the interviews and saw the benefits of articulating their planning with another colleague. This supports the collective dimension of agency I explored in my literature review, namely that agency occurs in the context of strong professional relationships and ongoing dialogue (Edwards, 2015). It also validated my intentions for collaboration in that the purpose behind conducting this study is to directly influence my learning context and to contribute to the wider public discourse surrounding the role of teachers.

One of the senior leadership members at the school also served as an informal mentor to me having just completed a post-graduate degree in educational research. This dialogue about both the substantive focus and the design of my research was useful throughout the process of my dissertation. I used my findings in determining the course of our professional development sessions in staff meetings and was able to provide more focused and supportive training to teachers. Lastly, I committed to collaboration through presenting at the Oxford Poster Conference (see Appendix H); this encouraged me in that the questions I was asking were pertinent to other teachers in different educational settings. Giving a more

formal presentation of my findings to Year 2 students led to a deeper reflection on my own journey and how each year had impacted the direction I decided to take for my dissertation.

### 3.4 Ethical considerations

This small scale exploratory study adheres to the research guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (2011). The process for CUREC approval was invaluable in giving careful consideration to my methodology and the ethical implications that this would have for the teacher participants in my study. I sought consent of both the Principal (see Appendix A) to conduct my research and asked teachers for written consent following a careful overview of my responsibilities as a researcher and the guidelines to which I adhered.

Although teachers are not considered 'vulnerable' as would research with younger pupils, I have come to realise just how personal the process of the curriculum planning is for each teacher. Due to experience with an appraisal process, teachers are accustomed to lesson observations; for many, this was the first time having another individual watch them plan a unit. I accounted for this potential conflict of interests in terms of professional relationships. The information provided to participants reiterated both the exploratory nature of the study along with the measures taken to provide identity. I have made only generic reference the teacher role and have anonymised both the teacher name and their subject area due to the small-scale context of the school.

Another issue I have identified is the perceived nature of my current position as Professional Learning Coordinator and the potential ethical issues this may hold when asking teachers about contextual factors that influence their approaches to and decisions made during curriculum planning. Given that my position is non-evaluative, I am not involved in the school appraisal structure and all interactions I have with teachers are confidential, teachers will not feel pressured to respond in a particular way. It is a support position, thus avoiding any potential conflict that power dynamics could play. As an unintended outcome of the planning observations as the second part of my methodology, teachers responded positively and expressed willingness to continue talking through their unit designs with me. This is a potential indicator that the way I conducted my work put them at ease.

In regards to data protection, all recorded interviews will be saved on a password protected USB stick that will be locked in school desk (I have the only key).

### 3.5 Enquiry and Data collection

The data collection occurred during the last term; the reason for this was that many teachers in the Middle Years programme also teach the IBDP students who take their final exams at the start of this term. Each teacher had begun the process of planning their final units or had begun to design units for the following academic year. This was a time indicated by teachers through informal conversations that they felt like they had most time to focus on planning. The data collection timeline can be seen in **Table 2.**

| End of April | Early-mid May | Early June | Late June |
|---|---|---|---|
| Conduct structured interviews with each participant based on preset list of questions | 20-minute observation of teacher designing unit of study; this included mid/post informal observation interview | Data transcription, coding and findings | Share findings at poster conference and with staff at profession development staff meetings |

**Table 2: Timeline of data collection and analysis**

Central not only to my exploration of the literature, Emirbayer and Mische's chordal triad model (see Table 1) was fundamental to my research design tools and a means through which I could better code and analyse the data with the aim of bringing a rich understanding of how agency is achieved by specific teachers in a specific context (Priestley, 2011).

My data collection involved three steps:

**Structured Interviews**: Each interview lasted approximately twenty minutes and were audio recorded with consent of each teacher participant. To ensure participant responses were as authentic as possible, teachers were free to respond with interjections to a minimum. This interview aimed at exploring each teacher's background with curriculum, how they perceive autonomy under the current school context and lastly to ascertain what motivates each teacher in regards to curriculum design. Again, these questions were guided by the categories of the chordal triad model of agency (see Appendix B for interview questions). This particular set of data is useful in regards to evaluating continuity or differences in terms of what teachers articulate and how they approach planning 'in real time.' Interviews were transcribed and coded through an iterative process based on Emirbayer and Mische Three-Dimensional model (see Appendix C and Appendix D and E for a sample of transcription with

coding and analysis). In addition, direct quotations were collected in line with categories provided in order to provide a descriptive narrative (Cohen et al., 2011). I continued with this process until a point of saturation in which any new data would not significantly impact what had already been collected for each of the different categories (Creswell, 2013).

Interview data is valuable as it is not pre-meditated and is likely to be a true representation of what a teacher is thinking at the moment (Morrison, 1993). In this way, an abundance of talk data enabled me, as a researcher, to make judgements on what each participant is saying. These statements would later be cross-referenced with the actions and justifications given during the next phase of the intervention. Admittedly, in seeking to understand and gain insight into what a teacher is thinking, this benefit of a more informal type of interviews is not necessarily utilized in a structured interview; but, I did not want my initial questions to involve probing and make the participate feel uncomfortable. To ensure participant responses were as authentic as possible, teachers were free to respond without re-direction from the researcher. Questions delved into teachers' backgrounds, creating a profile so that teachers' decisions and insights could be analysed as manifestations of teacher agency. Overall, this step put value in teacher talk, with a strong focus in coding on teacher discourse. This method has previously been used by social scientists (Gee, 2000) to suggest that language expressed in a particular setting can capture whole worldviews and epistemologies unique the specific time and place.

**Observation of planning:**

During this step, I observed each teacher participant plan a unit for an average time of 20 minutes. Each teacher informed me of where he or she would like to plan in order for this process to be as natural as possible.

This aspect was crucial to the study because of the pragmatic, action oriented perspective of agency. Conducting an observation allowed me to observe teachers in *action.* This enables the researcher to witness what happens first hand (Cohen et al., 2011). An acknowledged disadvantage, of course, is that the participant alters their behavior with an observer present. In order to account for this, I did not audio or video record, instead making observation notes that both represented the flow of planning as well as an analytical commentary. Additionally, I took on the role as 'observer as participant;' this means that I could naturally interject questions at the moment teachers were verbally expressing reasoning behind a particular decision. Each teacher was provided with the option of articulating the process audibly, or designing the unit in silence with explanations to be given during the post-observation questioning. To further back up my reasoning for adapting this method, I followed the explicated design process (Boschmann et al., 2014) in which reason is articulated through thoughts and actions are influenced by past, practical and driving motivations. As mentioned above, this approach, whilst based off the principles guiding the 'observer as participant' (Cohen et al., 2011) had no empirical studies wherewith I could gain guidance on the one to one planning process.

**Mid/Post-Observation through semi-structured interview:**

Teachers were asked to respond to a series of questions stemming from actions and articulated considerations during the unit planning observation (see Appendix B). The participants were encouraged to describe their perceptions, reasoning and inspirations openly, without strict guidance from the interviewer. Whilst the observation was to capture a 'live reel' of action, questions about these actions gave me insight into the 'why' and was able to probe deeper into the decisions that teachers made. Due to the fact that I was not

audio recording the observations and wanted to ask questions when most appropriate, I took detailed notes and provided an analytical commentary in order to facilitate theme based coding in order to cross-reference data with the structured interviews (for a sample of this analysis see Appendix F).

This step was informed by how teachers decided to proceed with their planning, whether articulating thoughts as they went along or rather having a preference to plan in silence and to speak with the researcher following the interview. This was a crucial step for the research because it gave me valuable insight into 'real time' thinking on the part of the teacher and provided a means whereby I could compare their design process with the approaches they articulated during the initial interview. In the analysis, I would then be able to match perception with reality and locate any consistencies or discrepancies between the talk data from the pre and post interview.

Below is a summary of how the data collection method aligned with examining my sub-research questions.

| **Sub-research question** | **Data collection method** |
|---|---|
| What does it mean for teachers to be 'active' in their work? | Pre-observation structured interview, observer field notes and mid/post observation interview |
| How do teachers perceive autonomy in curriculum design? | Structured interview, literature review |
| What contextual factors affect teacher decision making? | Structured interview and mid/post observation interview, observational field notes |
| What motivates teachers in their curriculum design? | Pre-observation structured interview and mid/post observation interview |

**Table 3: Methods of data collection for exploring research question**

Limitations: Even with the range of methods available, accessing the teacher as they unravel, respond and negotiate is tremendously difficult; it is impossible to access the 'self' that is so frequently alluded to in reference to agency (Edwards 2015).

## 4. Findings:

Whilst admittedly, small-scale and context specific study with subsequent limitations, a number of interesting themes emerged from the research process. I have organised the findings using an inductive approach; namely that I have discussed my findings from each step of my methodology (as seen in Table 3) above could provide insight to all four of my research questions. I did not want information from each step in the process to be lost along the way; thus, I took an inductive approach. However, as each step does give insight into my four sub-research questions, I used these to guide the structure of response (positivist elements). Another justification for separating the two although they seek to answer similar questions is that the pre-observation interview questions deal with teachers' perceptions, and the observational and post-interview field notes are based on how each teacher goes about their planning, focusing on the justifications each gives for the decisions reached. This will enable me to uncover whether intention and 'real time planning' share any similarities or whether are clear discrepancies.

As stated in my research aims, I am seeking to understand teacher decision making in the context of autonomy. Given that I wanted to be able to record both teacher perceptions in accordance with their actions, I found this to be the most suitable way to present my findings. In my analysis, I then return to my research question to provide overall

conclusions. The findings derived from the pre-observation interviews, complemented by notes, reveal a wide spectrum of each agent's choices and actions.

### 4.1 Pre-observation structured interviews:

#### 4.1.1 What does it mean for teachers to be 'active' in their work?

By coding the interviews in line with the dimensions of the chordal triad, I was able to more precisely analyse each teacher's agency in regards to curriculum design. I found through my interview questions on the nature and quality of prior training in curriculum development an array of experiences expressed by the teachers. Active agency differs based on strength of iterational dimensions a teacher brings to each context in terms of prior education and the depth of professional learning opportunities in regards to theoretical approaches to curriculum development each had received. Teacher A and Teacher B both had considerably more experience in curriculum planning due to design of their learning at university. Both had completed a four-year course receiving a Bachelor Degree in Education. Teacher A also had the opportunity to put the 'Learning by Design' framework to practice in her first position, one that gave her the confidence to adapt this approach given the current school context. In contrast, Teacher E, who just completed her teacher training said that she 'felt wholly unprepared' to activate her prior learning as she had a strong content background in one area; whereas she had never had experience or training in approaching learning at a more conceptual level which is what her current department was undertaking. In a similar way, Teacher D and F had only ever had curriculum training that was focused on the specific ways of planning content to match a prescriptive curriculum model, such as the GCSE or the International Diploma. Interestingly, none explicitly referenced having had any training in regards to the theory of curriculum design. This links back to Section 2 where I

found that a lack of discourse surrounding curriculum theory could indicate little exposure to the more theoretical dimensions of curriculum design (Biesta et al., 2017).

### 4.1.2 How do teachers perceive autonomy in curriculum design?

Teachers were directly asked as a part of the interview how they perceived the nature of autonomy in curriculum design when they arrived at the school. A strong discourse was found in the structured interviews transcripts in the high frequency in terms like 'freedom,' when asked how each perceived the current curriculum design. Many participants gave an overall a positive response. Teacher D, who was new to the school, said it was 'liberating' and reiterated that he thought that schools do not have to 'straight jacket' teachers when it comes to curriculum planning. Additionally, teacher C enjoyed having a 'blank slate' and was for the first time able to spend more time thinking about the overall curriculum model in his subject area. The opportunity also afforded him with opportunities for creativity and design a vertical curriculum model that spiralled a thematic approach. Not all teachers, however responded with such positivity and enthusiasm. The following extract reveals how Teacher A initially lost her confidence when face with autonomy:

> **Teacher A:** When I came here and I realize we were so individual in terms of planning, umm, I lost a lot of my confidence because I felt, you know, how could everyone be so secure in what they are planning, all by themselves. Umm, and then I realised what the issue was that everybody else was just using what they had used in their previous schools here and because there was nothing, there was no common curriculum plan or anything like that, there was no need to share with anyone else. There was no need to pool together or make anything interdisciplinary, which was a complete (complete), umm, change for me from what I was accustomed to.

When cross-referenced with her actual planning later, she was able to overcome contextual factors, but she said this process of gaining back her confidence occurred over several years. This excerpt relates back to the chordal triad model in that she was greatly influenced by

the lack of opportunity for professional dialogue. In my literature reviews in that agency occurs in the context of strong professional relationships and ongoing dialogue (Edwards, 2015). Teacher A, who had significantly more training in curriculum development than the other participants, experienced a change in her confidence by means of her new environment. This highlighted the dialectical nature between the iterational and context.

Teacher B's interview revealed that he views every single day as a 'form of ongoing professional learning in curriculum design…every single minute in the classroom is professional development and a means that informs my curriculum planning.' Similar to Teacher A above, this comment highlights the impact of the practical-evaluative dimension; given the 'same' set of circumstances, he responded with resilience seeing the new school environment as an opportunity for learning and professional development; according to my findings in Section 2, the teacher felt empowered due to the autonomy granted (Pearson and Moomaw, 2005).

A contextual factor that posed a potential limitation of agency, even with the freedom to innovate, was the physicality and reality of classroom spaces. This was of most importance to teacher B and E who both would have required more space to carry out their designed learning outcomes. Interestingly, teacher B made a statement on this that demonstrates how the practical-evaluative dimensions can be a means whereby teachers can activate their agency (Priestley, 2011):

> Teacher B: Oh man, um, one thing that is interesting here is the physical constraints on my planning. This has, um, been a positive motivator…. I often wonder if I had come to a place with better facilities if I would have developed the curriculum in the way I did…because there was a necessity to develop something new because I couldn't rely on what I had traditionally done.

In this sense, these words are illustrative of the practical-evaluative dimensions of agency; one the one hand he considered the practical and what was possible in a given situation, on the other the evaluative in that he evaluated the possibilities for action in these concrete set of circumstances (Priestley, 2011). Autonomy for him was the factor that gave him ownership to reach decisions that were appropriate and fitting to the unique setting in which he found himself. Interesting when asked how confident he felt in designing units in his subject area, he responded that he was 'comfortable in being a beginner.' In cross referencing this with the notes from the observation of his planning a lesson, he was demonstrating qualities of what van der Heijden (2015) and Hattie (2012) refer to teachers viewing themselves as change agents. The literature revealed that innovation was a central characteristic present in teachers who work proactively towards influencing education.

### 4.1.3 What contextual factors affect teacher decision making?

This question appeared almost verbatim on my list of pre-observation interview questions. Coding shows reference to a range of unique factors that influenced their decision making. The most mentioned issue was time. On one hand, they were referring to the balance between classroom planning, teaching and an array of other duties beyond the classroom. The teacher sampling included individuals who are also currently on the school leadership team, who are involved in guiding student leadership, who have pastoral responsibilities in a boarding house and/ or who are involved with coaching. There were also administrative tasks referenced include report writing, assessment marking and involvement with accreditation paperwork. Another factor with timing involved the day and time of day of the staff meeting, Friday afternoon. Teacher A, B and C all recognised that this was not an effective time to ask teachers to engage with professional dialogue at the end of a long

work week. Despite this, themes from these professional learning sessions did appear in teacher's responses on the day to day factors that either enhanced or hindered their approach to curriculum design. For example, Teacher D had taken on 'new' discourse when describing how he went about his planning:

> Teacher D: I suppose, um, thinking all of the time of, as you've often said this year in Friday meetings of the kind of questions you think of, especially what makes this more interesting?

In this case he was referencing professional development sessions that had occurred throughout the year on an inquiry based approach to unit design. Several other teachers referenced fertile questions (Teacher C and Teacher A), evidencing that the prevalent language was also affecting the discourse that teachers applied to their own curriculum planning (Priestly et al., 2012b). According to Section 2, policy could, however, have an effect on teachers being able to imaging different futures as they are tied to the language of reform (Biesta et al., 2015).

Also, Teacher F, who had revealed in questions about her background a strong disposition towards a more prescriptive format of unit design was certainly more critical of the openness and the 'lack of direction' given to teachers in their planning. She stated that "there are a lot of things that seem great, but in practice they don't really seem to be that helpful." In this case, there is almost implicit reference that what she had done previously was central to her planning and that the new context in which she found herself did not provide stability or enough support in terms of what she had been used to previously.

In each case, the findings highlight the strength of a teacher's previously held beliefs on how they perceived autonomy in their current context. For some, habits of the past caused a reluctance to embrace an opportunity to innovate and envision a different future. I am

taking care not to assume these teachers were not articulating their agency; Sannino (2010) suggests that resistance could make an eventual participatory shift possible.

### 4.1.4 What motivates teachers in their curriculum design?

Each teacher was asked what motivated them in their curriculum planning. Coding shows a predominate discourse centred around the short-term projective dimensions of the chordal triad model; a finding that was also prevalent in the literature (Boschmann et al. 2014; Biesta et al., 2015, Brown and McIntyre, 1993). Although each offered a slightly different response, each included student welfare and engagement in interview. For instance, Teacher C said that conceptual understanding was central to how he designs units. He spoke about always incorporating them into his unit planning and questions are now 'front and centre' so that after completing a unit of work students can 'loop back' to prior learning. In this way, he was motivated to incorporate the ideas of creative assessments that would enable and inspire students to demonstrate their learning in unique ways. The motivation for Teacher C was for students to enjoy the learning process. As seen in the findings of the observation, this discourse was less evident during his actual planning in which he focused in on the more practical elements of how to get students to carry out a case study.

Teacher B echoed these sentiments of the student being at the heart of his motivation:

> Curriculum planning should start with a vision, but then be innovative thereafter. Um, the destination doesn't have to be, I mean you have to some sort of an idea where you are heading, but what that looks like when you get there… you need to be open, you need to be flexible and um, reflexive to the students. What motivates me is the experience of the kid. That's the only thing, um, it's what I can do to help them grow.

In a similar way, Teacher F also focused on student engagement and enjoyment as a motivation for her curriculum planning. She expresses this clearly as seen through the following extract of her interview:

> I try and imagine that I am a student and in terms of the pace of the lesson, the activities, so it's kinda trying to drawn them in and get them interested… and yeah something that is not boring… and get them to do the thinking and the discussion work.

From a slightly different perspective, Teacher A found motivation in knowing that what she had done previously had made a difference:

> This colleague inherited…students from my class who I had over two years…and the colleague said that these students were the most competent students that he'd had in years. They knew they could analyse a text and they could confidently discuss it…. And, for me, that was the greatest source of satisfaction and then those two years I had worked with them were two years well spent and two years of planning that were worth it.

The pride she took in her work with students has clearly provided motivation for her to continue to invest in her planning and makes her feel that the time she devoted to creating the unit was worthwhile. In this sense, her projective aims were directly motivated by her previous experience with this particular group of students highlighting the interdependence of the dimensions of the chordal triad model (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) on influencing a teacher's decision making.

What was striking from the transcripts and coding process was the elements that were wholly absent. There was no explicit reference made to the more long-term considerations of education. The literature reviewed would suggest that this could either be the result of adhering to the popular discourse of the day (Biesta et al., 2015) or the absence of strongly rooted philosophical beliefs in regards to educational purpose (Erss et al., 2016).

These interview transcripts provided invaluable insight into perceptions of teachers and their agency in regards to curriculum planning. In reflection, this method was a fit-for-purpose way to authentically capture what teachers were thinking without any premeditation (which would have possibly occurred through a written questionnaire). It is through the dialectical that teachers give insight into how they are interpreting and shaping their responses to meet the challenges of their current practice (Edwards, 2015). These are exactly the outcomes I sought in designing my innovation. Although purely quantitative, each teacher provided deeper insight into the complex nature of enacted agency. Given a similar school context, each responded in a different way with varying degrees of influence from past experiences and future motivations. Insight from these findings can directly shape the future of professional learning opportunities in encouraging teachers to work collaborative and to be change agents through innovation.

### 4.2 Planning observation and mid/post observation interview

Each teacher chose a setting in which they typically planned at school for the observation. Interestingly, each teacher decided to verbally articulate the process of his or her planning. Although initially nervous at the outset, it seemed that as soon as teachers began planning, each become more relaxed during the observation. From the outset, there were an array of methods as to how teachers went about their planning. Teacher A and D started typing away as they talked, Teachers B and C sketched it out on a piece of blank paper and Teacher E and F brought up a unit they had taught at a previous school as a template to modify slightly in considering their specific units (again, the influence of the iterational dimension of agency).

### 4.2.1 What does it mean for teachers to be 'active' in their work?

Teachers did not respond to autonomy or evidence agency in predictable or unidimensional ways. Each teacher starting planning from a different starting point. Both teacher D and teacher F started with the assessment in mind and continued to plan backwards from this point. Interestingly both justified this by referencing a previous school system that they had worked in. Teacher D frequently reference the role of her mentor in her first school and the passion that she had for planning lessons. This had an effect on her and she had continued on planning the same way since. In contrast, teacher A took a more deductive approach and started her planning with the big ideas. This is consistent with her pre-observation interview as she made strong reference to her university background with an emphasis on planning with design. Teacher C was the only teacher who really took his time in musing about what his intended outcome would be. He implied that student enjoyment was central to his planning and sat doodling, drawing out how he envisioned them months after the unit was completed.

As seen in the analysis of my field and mid-observation interview notes, a teacher's background in terms of the curriculum were highly influential on the way each approached planning, a finding that correlated to Section 2. Teacher A, who had significant training in regards to conceptual design took far more liberties in her planning, than teachers who modeled their unit after one taught under a national system such as Teacher D. Furthermore, teachers made design choices that were not only linked to their previous experience in teaching, but also in regards to the professional learning opportunities each had been afforded. Not surprisingly, there was little mentioned in regards to more theoretical dimensions of curriculum. This may be an indication as to the way in which

professional learning is structured, much too geared to instrumental side of teaching (getting the job done) and has been moved far away from a more intellectual approach of engaging teachers with current debates present in educational research, school pedagogy and society (Biesta et al., 2015). This notion provided me with a means whereby I could critically examine the learning opportunities the school were providing to support teachers given context of extended autonomy.

For each teacher, being an active teacher meant adapting to the local surroundings and making decisions that would best enhance the learning for their students. For instance, Teacher C used the local natural environment for the inspiration behind his unit. Teacher B, although considering the limitation of space' envisioned a plan of learning that would fit within the physical context of the school's environment. Teacher D and F adapted what they had previously done to meet the individual needs of students as they have smaller class sizes. This correlates to the research uncovered in my literature review, namely that the degree to which a teacher can be said to demonstrate agency in dependent on how he or she identifies with a given context and the perceived expertise within that figured world (van der Heijden et al. 2015). Thus, being an active agent does not necessarily mean the transformation of teaching practices, rather the willingness to take small risks based on the current contexts in which one teaches. In cross referencing the impact of past experiences on planning, there were many similarities to each individual teachers' interview showing the dialectical interplay between the iterational the practical-evaluative dimension of planning.

### 4.2.2 How do teachers perceive autonomy in curriculum design?

None of the teachers explicitly referenced autonomy while planning a unit. This was much more prominent when asked directly during the structured interview. The findings do show from the analysis of my field notes that some teachers were more confident than others in adapting to this change. This confidence was the result of an array of factors including the amount of professional development done in regards to curriculum development and the accumulation of personal/professional experiences that gave them a framework whereby he or she would be able to adapt previous habits to the local conditions. Teacher D did express how having freedom to plan was a hugely positive factor in arriving at the school. In his previous teaching experience, he had felt pressure to 'obsessively' finish his planning to meet a pre-determined deadline, whilst in this school, he shifted his thinking about planning being more of a 'living document.'

On the other end of the spectrum, there were also implicit comments made during planning that suggest that unbounded autonomy is not the best approach to curriculum design. Teacher F who had gained a tremendous amount of confidence during her first teacher training regarded autonomy as a deterrence to focused planning and as a source of confusion for teachers when designing a unit of work. This was a sentiment expressed in the findings in my literature review when there was a lack of clear guidance, teachers were less inclined to engage with a different approach to curriculum planning (Priestley et al., 2012a). In this sense, Teacher F found agency not in autonomy, rather in empowerment from previous experiences. Additionally, Teacher E, who was a first-year teacher felt terrified by the prospect of planning conceptually when her initial training was more focused on subject content. She found the structure of unit design 'too vague' with no particular direction in terms of an anchor to guide her planning (Helsby, 1999). These came

out early in my field notes during her planning observation and these sentiments became less frequent the more she delved further into her planning. The early repetition does clearly indicate a 'cry' for help and guidance that she felt she did not have given the current school structures. I found this similar to the findings the qualitative study done in Scotland (Priestly et al., 2014) that suggest that teachers are affected by the hierarchal power structures present within a school. Where there is opportunity for developing strong horizontal relationships, teachers feel more confident to take risks and embrace change.

On a different note, Teacher B was the only participant who planned a unit he had never taught before. In cross referencing this with the interviews, he was also the teacher with the strongest underpinnings in his educational philosophy and spoke the most about the projective dimension of teaching. Without making any 'great leap,' this could correlate to the notion that what a teacher knows about teaching and learning influences both the aims that teacher sets and subsequently the kinds of tasks which exists in his/her working memory (Boschmann et al., 2014).

There were also no references made to autonomy in regards to the classification or framing of each respective subject area in any of the observations I conducted. This could possibly be the result of teachers not having engaged previously with scholarly debates in regards to what should be included in a curriculum or could be due to the contextual factors detailed below. Ball (2013) would suggest that teacher agency has been severely limited due to the strong historical tradition of what has been considered important to include in the syllabus. It appeared from my field notes that content choice was derived from what a teacher felt comfortable doing based on prior experience and/or what he or she though would be most interesting to students.

Although not a part of research questions, the teachers I interviewed and observed who were new to school's approach expressed the biggest hesitancy to see alterative futures in regards to their curriculum planning and were the ones who stuck closely to previous units of work. Only a more longitudinal and more focused study on this particular element would be able to provide adequate hypotheses as to if there is any relation between these two factors.

It is clear from my findings that the iterational dimension had the largest sway on teachers' perceptions of autonomy. Whilst all arriving to the same learning context, the means whereby teachers perceived and reacted to these factors could be seen as either enhancing or detracting the ability to make reasoned decisions.

### 4.2.3 What contextual factors affect teacher decision making?

One of the main contextual factors that teachers expressed during their planning was the constraint of time on their ability to plan. Cross-referencing with the interviews above shows a congruence to their talk data. For instance, Teacher C prefaced his planning by mentioning his recent promotion and how on account of this he had less time to devote to planning. Admittedly, he said that he would be commencing the unit he was planning at the start of the next week. Ideally, he would have preferred to do the planning at least a month in advance. He repeated used the phrase, 'What I would do if I had more time in the day.' Another limiting contextual factor was the physicality of the school space. Both teacher B and E had confined spaces and lack of particular facilities in which classroom activities would normally be carried out. What some teachers would viewed as an impossible demand, both saw as simply opportunities to respond, learn and move forward. Teacher D was in her first year of teaching. What she thought she would teach when she arrived at the

school had to change because of the lack of space. She quickly brainstormed at start of her planning on how she could bring across the concept of teamwork in a manner that would work in available space. Although expressing that she was not confident in how the students would response and how she would be able to help them in an area she was not as knowledgeable in, she still took the risk and proceeded with her planning. Biesta et al. (015) would suggest this willingness to take a risk is the result of repositioning the teacher at the heart of school curricular design in a manner that encourages freedom and empowerment.

Although expressed more strongly during the interview phase, several thoughts expressed while planning referred to the collective aspects of planning. Teacher B, whilst enjoying the experience of curriculum design in a way that was much different to his previous school also admitted that there was no 'check' on what he was considering important to transmit to students. Teacher A expressed strong regret that she felt force to work in isolation, having colleagues that preferred to work individually and did not seem to understand the importance of team teaching. Similar sentiments were expressed in the literature in which teachers felt a limit to their agency due to a lack of time or willingness to engage in professional dialogue with colleagues (Hargreaves, 1998). In contrast to this both Teachers E and F implied that they planned more effectively in isolation and were not really willing to collaborate in planning. When one cross references this with their description of their backgrounds, Teachers A and B both had curriculum planning as a predominate feature of their 4-year university course; whist on the other side, Techers E and F had completed a one-year teacher certification following a subject-specific course of study. The later relied heavily on their initial teaching experiences as model for unit design while the first two took more liberties in experimenting with different topics and approaches to designing learning.

Whilst, I am certainly not intended to draw a direct correlation, this has groundings in the literature as teacher's own educational training must be significant in the development of the position to both enquire further and to not be afraid to innovate (Priestley, 2011). For me this illustrates what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) meant when they said the three dimensions of the chordal triad model of agency 'resonate as separate but harmonious tones' (963).

By observing teachers in 'real time' I found meaning in the definition that I chose to adapt in regards to agency in Section 2. It is in the 'practical evaluative' that one begins to understand that teachers are not simply products of a particular environment. Each teacher interviewed had a completely differently set of past personal and professional experiences and each expressed various projective motivations for their work; yet, each manifested differently in the same school context. This reiterates with the ecological concept of agency whereby "actors always act *by means of* their environment rather than simply *in* their environment [so that] the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations (Biesta and Tedder, 2007: 137).

### 4.2.4 What motivates teachers in their curriculum design?

Each teacher referenced a naturally desired state during the planning observation (Brown and McIntyre, 1993). For Teacher A, it was for her students to engage with the conceptual framework of her subject. Similarly, both Teachers E and F payed careful attention in their planning to include activities that would capture the students' interest. Teacher D said that he 'liked thematic units' and this was driven by student interests and what they care about.

He did reference how difficult it has initially been for him transitioning from years in an IGCSE curriculum where he was quite comfortable. As this course was content heavy, he found that it did not easily lend itself to backward design, the approach championed by his current department head. What made this transition possible was his motivation to generate student interest due to the small class sizes. In this way, the projective dimensions of his agency enabled him to break from his past habits and make decisions based on a short-term motivation rather than routine. The consideration of small class sizes had less of an impact on Teacher E who made adaptations to certain activities she had previously used in her last school to account for smaller class sizes. Her motivation continued to be derived from the iteration dimension of teacher agency that was found in working her mentor.

Overall, the practical motivation guided teachers in the process of unit design (Boschmann et al. 2014). As the concrete activities where the main features of instructional design in the planning, little inference could be made during the observation about more abstract disciplinary thinking or consideration of long-term factors involved in the learning process (Handelzatts, 2009). In addition, there was clear dissonance between teacher's articulated beliefs and practicalities of planning. There was little evidence from the observations that suggests that there was any long-term planning in regards to the purpose of education. Whilst clear in the interview data above that teachers considered educational purpose when designing a unit, all of the dimensions of the actual planning happened with practical elements in mind. Although the literature spoke quite clearly about how planning can be used as a means whereby teachers consider the appearance of successful planning to be a motivating factor in designing curricula (Valli and Chambliss, 2007), I was not able to recognize any of these superficial intentions in regards of the motivations of teachers in

their planning. For each teacher, there was a genuine sense of wanting to get it right for the students. The literature review was particularly useful in enabling me to evaluate this data, especially in this case where it was the absence of particular data that I found quite revealing. Reasons for the absence of long-term projective aims in the chordal triad of agency could be the strongly held previous beliefs shaped through experience (Erss et al. 2006), the impact of organisational narrowness of vision and purpose (Biesta et al., 2015) or the unhealthy popularity and influence of short-term educational trends (Wermke, 2012). In seeking an outcome that would further professional learning and dialogue about curriculum planning, these findings feed directly into conversations about how to better support and prepare teachers to embrace autonomy and plan with both theory and educational purposes at the heart of design.

Although I focused on six teachers, these findings encouraged me to speak with more teachers in my school context as I found value in the dialectical and listening to teachers reasoning and justifications behind their decisions. Too often schools make assumptions about what teachers should be learning, when in fact conservations such as the ones I shared during my intervention provide much more contextually specific criteria whereby leadership could evaluate how best to support teachers in the curriculum design process.

## 5. Discussion:

### What is the impact of autonomy in curriculum design on teacher agency?

One of my most significant findings what that autonomy had little impact unless a teacher felt prepared in terms of their professional background and there are also contextual factors in place that gives a teacher the confidence to take risks. It was the depth of a teacher's knowledge of teaching and learning pedagogy influences the aims that a teacher strives for

and accordingly brings into memory the types of activities and tasks that a teacher is certain would work to help students develop towards these aims (Boschmann et al., 2014). Whilst each teacher did express there was some freedom and ownership in being able to design his or her own curriculum, the real-time planning wholly revealed that few teachers took major risks in designing a curriculum that departed from the way the teacher planned beforehand. Going back to the literature, there are many factors that could be affecting this hesitancy to embrace autonomy. One reason could be that teachers, when confronted with uncertainly and without the appropriate levels of support often strongly reactivate the stability of past habit in order to protect their identity (Priestley, 2011). Additionally, by cross referencing my study with previous findings in empirical studies, a teacher's own perception of what their role of a teacher should be is crucial to understanding how a teacher approaches curriculum design. If teachers perceive themselves as being change agents, they may be more willing to innovate and engage in collaboration with colleagues (van der Heijden, 2015). It is important to remember that teachers who did implicitly resist autonomy through articulating their approach to planning could also be in the early stages of empowerment (Sannino, 2010).

Another contextual factor that emerged that could also serve to strengthen teacher agency is the potential to plan collaboratively rather than in isolation. Several teachers articulated the desire to work together with colleagues in their department, but were left feeling isolated. This will require a shift in culture both in the institution and also in the individual dispositions of teachers towards the nature of planning. As Edwards (2015) showed in her work on a more collective definition of enacted agency, there is a danger in seeing autonomy as 'what I will do,' rather than being an agentic professional who embraces opportunities to take on autonomy collectively. There is an importance of engagement with

others within 'collectively organized contexts of action' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 998). The promotion of agency does not depend solely on individual teacher beliefs or perceptions of teacher agency (Biesta et al. 2015). In encouraging agency, both individual and collective development should be taken into account (Biesta et al., 2017). This also should be taken into consideration when leadership reflects on the strength of existing hierarchies in the school. Questions of the nature of these relationships is central to the practical evaluative dimension of teacher agency. Where there are limited opportunities for horizontal dialogue, teachers are less likely to take risks thus providing barriers to change (Helsby, 199). Therefore, relationships in schools make a crucial difference in enabling a teacher to express his or her agency (Priestley et al., 2014).

If schools want teachers to champion teacher agency through providing autonomy to them in designing curriculum, my study (in accordance with the literature) has showed there must be attempts to engage teachers as learners in regards to the theoretical underpinnings. What I am not trying to insinuate is that teachers are 'at fault' for not considering the long-term educational purpose in their planning, rather that perhaps there is a systematic flaw in how teachers are trained to these ends. Whilst the school had the sincerest intentions in offering unbounded autonomy to its teachers, what the leadership has potentially not taken into account is that the research shows that autonomy requires major shifts in established cultures, beliefs and structures (Livingston et al. 1995). Without giving clear guidance to teachers in how to make sense of the complex process of curriculum development, a teacher's agency of action is possibly limited. What will become past experiences are the ones that should explicitly be taken account of in the present. In considering the sorts of experiences that might contribute to teachers taking risks and being innovative, leadership must develop the opportunities for engagement with curriculum development as teachers

take on this role within the context of autonomy (Priestley et al., 2012c). Throughout my research, little reference made to the actual curriculum framework itself which is part of itself suggesting that that more explicit efforts need to made in enabling teachers to make sense of it (Priestly et al., 2014).

On the whole, both teacher interviews and observation data revealed a lack of expression in regards to the long-term aims of planning or theoretical underpinnings for the way that they were approaching planning. The current research context of the study has been working under the assumption that teacher will simply apply theoretical approaches from the iterative domain of their agency; discourse, however reveals that teachers were often constrained by educational rhetoric of the day with no discussion of educational theory. This is consistent with literature which detailed that working under a prescriptive policy can limit the potential of a teacher to see a different future (Biesta et al., 2015). Additionally, prior habitual practices become aligned with the prevalent language of the day that they are constantly reinforced through grammar and the structure of a school (Fenwick et al., 2013). What I am not suggesting is that teachers are unable to step outside of this, but there needs to be an institutional shift away from pushing the 'trend of the day' onto teachers, rather having a more considered approach of how to engage educators with the heart and soul of educational purpose. Schools should consider ways in which to get educators to think about the abstract issues of the classroom, including both theoretical frameworks and the substantive nature of a teacher's discipline (Boshmann et al., 2014). If future motivations are grounded in past experiences, this should provide impetus to provide meaningful learning experiences so that teachers collectively can approach autonomy with decisions that are rooted in and driven by educational purpose.

## 6. Conclusion and future implications

This is study is Illustrative of complexity of teacher agency, not one that provides an exhaustive view. What it does attempt to do is continue from the empirical work that has already been done in regards to the what the role of the teacher is in relation to curriculum design. It also took place in a school outside of a national system, presenting me to attempt to uncover how and why teachers reached the decisions they did in the context of autonomy. The findings, like the nature of an agency of action, are complex. Each teacher responded in a completely different way based on the strength of the habitual practices brought to the school, confidence gained through professional training in curriculum development and responses to the local environment and perceptions of autonomy that either inspired them to depart from routine and begin to envision a different future (Priestley et al., 2017). Emirbayer and Mische's chordal triad model (1998) was an invaluable tool in helping me to guide and make sense of my findings. The categories for each dimension also provided the criteria whereby I could evaluate the talk data gathered during the various stages of my intervention.

In this way, observing teacher planning and paying careful attention to teacher talk were useful means to begin to unpack the strength of intention on actual planning. The dimension that proved to be the absent from unit design was consideration of the long-term projective aspect of planning. Each unit, although done in a different fashion, was constructed with the practicalities of the classroom in mind along with the experience of the student with both the content and activities. The driving aim for most was preparing students for an assessment, an approach each had learned from previous experiences. Two teachers who had more experience with a more conceptual approach to curriculum planning were the ones who took more risks in their planning, designing a new unit for the

first time and considering the implications for students beyond the specific course of study. Although apprehensive at first about whether observation of teachers during planning would be useful, I found not only that it was an excellent way to understand teacher action 'in real time,' but also unintentionally was perceived by teachers as a useful means through which they could articulate their ideas and provide reasoned judgements for the decisions they were reaching. This risk in my methodology has proven to be a useful tool for professional dialogue within my given school context. By sharing my findings in a professional learning setting, the dialogue has been opened on how autonomy in curriculum design can better be a platform for both collaboration and support. In this way, I felt fulfilled in regards to the original outcomes I sought in conducting this study.

Overall, involvement with both the literature and my research process in this exploratory study have raised several new questions that deserve more focused investigation:

- How can professional learning opportunities inspire and not limit a teacher's discourse in regards to curriculum development?
- In what ways can initial teacher training prepare new educators to consider curriculum theory in planning whilst enhancing their agency?
- What is the role of collaboration in building teacher confidence in unit design?
- To what extent observation of teacher planning be a useful professional development tool?
- How could student agency be enhanced by having a voice in the curriculum development process?

I think these questions are at heart of what Stonehouse (1971) meant when he said: "There can be no development without teacher development...the best means of development is not by clarifying end but by analysing practice" (pg. 155); this could certainly be applied to professional learning in regards to curriculum design. This then would lead to more projective motivations; when teachers are able to display a high degree of focused and collaborative engagement in embracing autonomy in curriculum development, as well as a

higher degree of agency informed by more carefully considered educational purposes (Priestly et al, 2012a). Ultimately, autonomy in curriculum design also circles back to debates on control, with timely decisions needing to be made about who should own a curriculum and participate in the curriculum making process and to what extent (Mikser et al. 2016).

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## Appendices


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## Appendix A: Head Teacher Approval Letter

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**Director** Professor Jo-Anne Baird




Dear _____ (blanked to keep anonymity).

I am writing to enquire about conducting research in school this academic year. As you know, I am studying for the Master's in Learning and Teaching at Oxford University, supervised by Jason Todd. In my final research project "How does autonomy in curriculum design impact on teacher agency?", I will explore what it means for teachers to be active agents in and of their work, how teachers perceive autonomy, which contextual factors most impact on teacher agency in curriculum design and how teacher's past experiences impact agentic decision making.

The research will take place amongst a range of Middle Years' teachers, including teachers with over 5 years' experiences and those who have just begun this year. By participating in the research, the school would be contributing to a project that would deepen insight upon how teacher's plan and the influences, both past, present and future that influence how curriculum is designed. This will also illuminate areas for future teacher development in building a strong Middle Years' curriculum.

I hope to conduct this research between May and June, 2017 I would audio-record pre-post observation interviews with teachers involved and will also take notes during a 30-minute curriculum planning sessions.

Oxford University has strict ethical procedures on conducting ethical research, consistent with current British Educational Research Association guidelines. As practitioner research however, the University recognises that schools have the highest ethical standards in any event. Therefore, only your formal consent as head teacher is necessary, and not that of individual parents or staff. However, throughout the research, students and other teachers will be able to refuse to participate in any research activities at any time.

All participants, including students, teacher and the school, would be made anonymous in all research reports. The data collected would be kept strictly confidential, available only to my supervisor, Jason Todd, and me, and only used for academic purposes. It will be kept for as long as it has academic value.

If you feel you would like to take part in the study, or need more information about what is involved, please contact me or my supervisor. Further, if you have any questions about this ethics process at any time, please contact the chair of the department's research ethics committee, though: research.office@education.ox.ac.uk

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

**Appendix B: Interview Questions for Pre and Post Observation**

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## How does autonomy in curriculum design impact on teacher agency?

**Structured Pre-Observation Interview Questions**

- ◊ Give an overview of your past experience with curriculum (which models and what did you teach)? (*Iterational*)
- ◊ What did you think about the Middle Year's Model when you arrived at the school?
- ◊ What professional learning have you done in regards to curriculum design? (*Iterational)*
- ◊ What resources do you find most useful when designing a unit? (*Practical evaluative)*
- ◊ Are there any day to day factors that enhance or hinder your approach to curriculum design? *(Practical evaluative)*
- ◊ How confident do you feel about designing your own subject curriculum? (Practical evaluative and projective)
- ◊ What motivates you in your curriculum planning? (*Iterational and projective*)

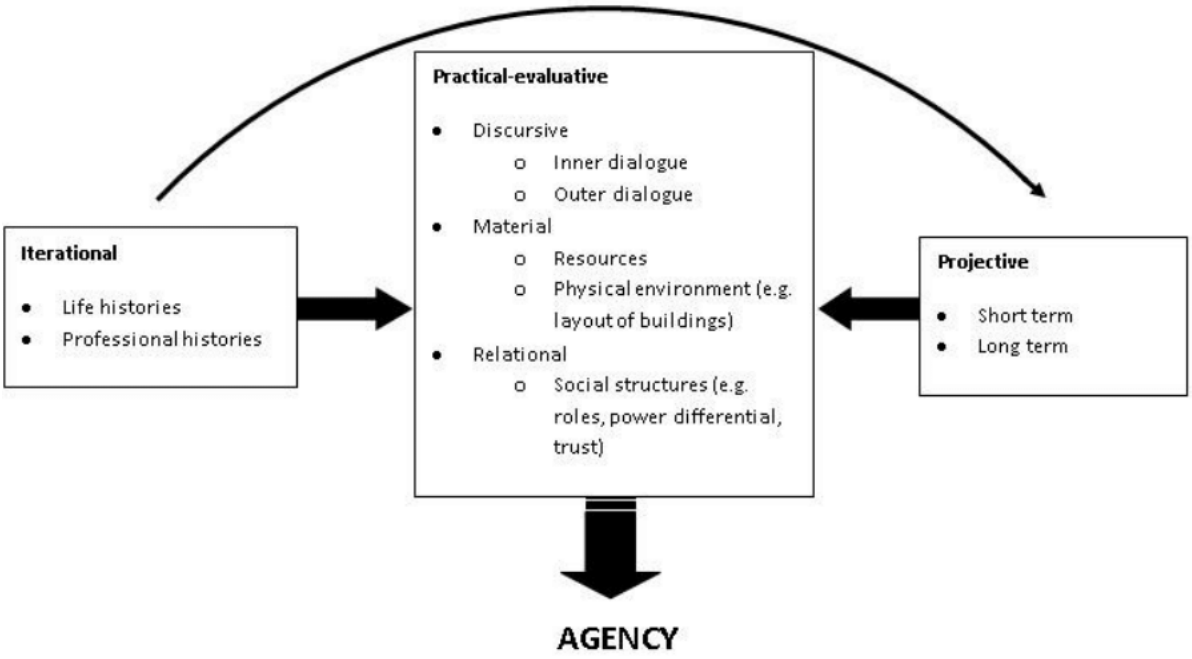
**OBSERVATION**

**Post-Observation Interview Questions**

In part, these will differ slightly depending on what the participant does during the observation; they will be along the lines of the following questions:

- ◊ Why did you decide to start with '*X' (*will differ from teacher to teacher)?
- ◊ What were you thinking about when you included '*Y'?*
- ◊ Did you experience any hindrances when designing the unit?
- ◊ What, if anything, would have enabled you to plan more effectively?

**Appendix C: Chordal Triad Model coding key**




**Iterational:**

- **Life histories**
- **Professional histories**

**Practical Evaluative:**

- **Discursive (*Inner and outer dialogue*)**
- ***Materia*l (*Resources and physical environment*)**
- **Relational *(Social structures: roles, power differential, trust)***

**Projective:**

- **Short term**
- **Long Term**

## Appendix D: Individual extract from initial structured interview transcript

***Extract from Transcribed Interview with Teacher A:***

**Interviewer:** OK. Umm, are there any day-to-day factors, umm, here at the school that either enhance or hinder your approach to curriculum design? Like I say, any of the practicalities that either kind of enhance the approach that you take or hinder it?
**Teacher A**: Now let's see. Maybe not more to hinder. I think there's a positive push to be (to be, still to be) innovative – I said that very British. Innovative.
**Interviewer:** (Laughs)
**Teacher A:** Umm, to (to) engage students. To push them. But we're also pushed to do so many other things. I would say time.
**Interviewer**: Uh huh.
**Teacher A:** Is always a factor. There's so many things that we need to do. Umm, and we have to do it yesterday. And then I find myself going home exhausted and not having time to really absorb and to think and to brainstorm like I used to. Umm, in the first couple of years I was here I could easily spend a weekend or a holiday planning out an entire unit and feeling so comfortable because I had that unit completely planned out. And I find myself in the last two years – the most recent two years – not being able to do that. I find myself planning my unit, considering my curriculum, as I'm teaching it. And I'm not comfortable with that, but that's my reality now. I want to be better prepared, umm, but the time is one factor and also, umm, resistance to people who pre-plan like myself. So, I've encountered resistance from other educators in the school who are so accustomed to doing the day-to-day thing or having the flexibility to change their minds, like they don't (they don't) write down their things.
**Interviewer:** Uh huh.
**Teacher A:** That when I would show them what I had – sort of like to share and to ask for ideas – (there was) I was ostracized. And so that also pushed me away from what I find is good practice that I should still be doing.
**Interviewer:** Cool. Thank you. Umm, how confident do you feel in like designing subject curriculum. Because obviously here we're kind of put in like, you know, I'm a historian, you're an English specialist. Do you know, like how (how) confident do you feel in designing?
**Teacher A:** I prefer to design curriculum collaboratively, because that's what I did in my previous school.
**Interviewer:** Yeah.
**Teacher A:** Umm, we would come together in what we would call mini-schools and it would be across subjects. We had at least one teacher in each subject and then we would build the curriculum together. And we were all trusted to come in with our own expertise from our subjects, but the curriculum we pulled together was designed to (to) give students an opportunity to study topics and themes across the subjects so they could see that the world is not just in boxes or in particular subject, period subjects. Excuse me. So, when I came here and I realize we were so individual in terms of planning, as you just described, umm, I lost a lot of my confidence because I felt, you know, how could everyone be so secure in what they are planning, all by themselves. Does nobody else share their ideas with others? You know, umm, can we not put our heads together? Umm, and then I realised what the issue was that everybody else was just using what they had used in their previous schools here and because there was nothing, there was no common curriculum plan or anything like that, there was no need to share with anyone else. There was no need to pool together or make anything interdisciplinary, which was a complete (complete), umm, change for me from what I was accustomed to.

**Appendix E: Indicative extract from transcribed interviews with analytical commentary**

| Interview transcript with Teacher A with colour coding | Analysis |
|---|---|
| **Interviewer:** So, the first one I just would like you to give me an overview of your past experience with curriculum. So, umm what different curriculums have you worked with in the past and where? | |
| **Teacher A:** Umm my first brush with curriculum was in my Masters education program - umm I guess I shouldn't say where. So, my **Master's education program and the very first model I was exposed to was the backwards model, the UBS.** What was the phrase again? Mum it was the understanding by design, if you know the text? | This highlights a strong professional background in regards to curriculum design, in fact, planning was central to her course of study. |
| **Interviewer:** Uh huh. | |
| **Teacher A: And in order for us to satisfactorily complete our Master's program we had to show that we could plan from the big ideas and then go from there, and you know these templates that we had to use were really big at the time.** | Again, she is reiterating how central curriculum planning was to her professional background. Implicit is a theoretical approach to planning, namely '*Understanding by Design*' |
| **Interviewer:** Uh huh. | |
| Teacher A: **It was 2007 and the school that I ended up in had adopted that model** | Interestingly, she ended up in a school that reinforced what she had learned. There was continuity in regards to thinking and approaching curriculum design. Although not explicit, she is implying that the support was in place for her to implement this approach. |
| **Interviewer:** Uh huh. | |
| **Teacher A:** And that's the first 3 years of my teaching was planning by design, starting backwards, big ideas, essential questions, what do they know, what do they need to know, what do they need to understand, umm… | |
| **Interviewer:** Hmm. | |
| Teacher A: And that's what I was already accustomed to before I even got here. **Umm, my second teaching job would then be this school, and there was no model. (Laughs)** | As her physical context changed, for the first time she did not have this context in place. Again, her *laughter* perhaps indicates that she took this with good humour and did not see it as impendent to her approach. |

## Appendix F: Sample of planning observation field notes with analytical commentary

| | Field Notes: Teacher C | Analysis | Field Notes: Teacher F | Analysis |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Approach to unit planning | Sketched it out on paper; audibly talked researcher through planning | Very conversational; articulated each step of the planning process | Brought up previous unit taught at another school. Audibly talked teacher through planning | Seemed uncomfortable when asking if she had to start from scratch; much more condiment with previous unit in front of her |
| Iterational | | | | |
| Life histories | Easy to come up with ideas for case studies because of his travels | Potential point that would allow for confidence in agency in a context of autonomy | Topic choices were influenced by her personal interest in social history. | Autonomy is opportunity for her to make agentic decisions |
| Professional histories | Modelled planning after fieldwork enquiry model<br><br>His past and present approach when teaching a new unit: Test for prior learning, introduce fertile question Model enquiry approach, develop student knowledge of subject area, students plan methodology for field work, class does pilot study, carry out research, assessment through reporting on the findings | Evidence of habitual routines in regards to planning; he implied that he rarely deviated from this approach. Also, implicit reference to inquiry questions; linking with pre-interview as this was school's professional learning focus for the year. | Referenced her first school experience and how that shaped her teaching. She has stayed '*true to her roots'*. There is a '*strength following format which linked to Allister Smith's Accelerated Lesson Planning.* Her past format that she applied to her unit design in order: Assessment, starter, key questions, content, consolidation activities and exam practice. | This area came through strongest as she redesigned a previous unit to her current group of students. She expressed strongly how influential her first teacher placement was and how she thinks the current school needs to adapt a more structured approach to curriculum planning |
| Practical Evaluative | | | | |
| Discursive (*Inner and outer dialogue*) | He decided to map out the unit making a chronological list- would then go through it a second time to refine the design. | Found 'inner dialogue;' useful in planning; repetition means for reflection | Plan with ideas of stimuli- then how lessons and activities would fit around these | Again, reference kept going back to 'Accelerated Learning Planning' |
| *Materia*l (*Resources and physical environment*) | Used local natural environment as inspiration for unit | Again, this provided an opportunity to activate agency by using local contextual factors | -Compared her outline with one from the textbook and using past paper questions to determine relevance of planned content.<br>-TES resources | She frequently went to TES in order to find exciting activities for students |
| Relational *(Social structures: roles, power differential, trust)* | Time was a limitation to planning as he has recently taken on a new leadership role. | Time major factor potentially limited full potential of agency | Small class sizes: influenced how she wanted to include more student input into unit design. | Clear concern for individual students in lessons- repeated several times throughout planning process |
| Projective | | | | |
| Short term | Wanting students to get practice with knowledge and skills that they would be able to apply again in the IBDP programme | Evidence of planning backwards; ties in with his previous roles in school | Began planning her, using the syllabus as her starting point -wanting to include only interesting parts of topics to keep students engaged | Student engagement and interest was most important in her planning; almost avoidance of tasks that would be perceived to be not is interesting. |
| Long Term | No reference made. | - | No reference made. | - |

## Appendix G: Research poster (used at MLT conference and with colleagues)

