

Exploring Primary School Principals' Attitudes and Experiences
of School Self-Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

School Self-Evaluation (SSE) is a relatively new initiative in Irish primary schools and it is still very much at an early evolving phase since its implementation. A lack of research that includes the voice of primary school principals pertaining to SSE and also as a means of professional development for the author led to the development of this study research. The purpose of this study is to explore primary school principals' attitudes and experiences of SSE.

The literature critiqued encompasses the purpose of SSE, SSE in the international context, how SSE is perceived in relation to external evaluation, and furthermore addresses current attitudes towards SSE and leadership styles associated with its implementation. A qualitative and inductive approach has been designed in response to the study's research questions. Six participants volunteered to engage in semi-structured interviews for data collection. The data was subsequently analysed thematically.

Emergent themes from the data collated indicate that reflection, collaboration and autonomy are positives that emanate from implementing SSE. While aspects of SSE are criticised, there is general acceptance that SSE is a positive process for bringing about school improvement. The findings demonstrated that the participants utilise a distributive leadership style when implementing SSE. Recommendations that emanate from the study are firstly, that schools must be given the appropriate allocated time to further enhance their skills in reflection and collaboration. Secondly, a more simplified approach to the SSE process would alleviate a number of the difficulties associated with it. Finally, the Inspectorate should continue to support schools to ensure that schools maintain autonomy over the SSE process. The study further suggests that a longitudinal study concerning the attitudes and experiences of primary school principals towards SSE may be beneficial.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 RATIONALE

The purpose of this research was to research primary school principals' attitudes and experiences of School Self-Evaluation (SSE). SSE is a rather new initiative in Ireland and it is still very much at an early evolving phase since its inception to Irish schools in 2012 (Department of Education & Skills 2012a). Research about SSE in Irish schools is relatively limited, especially in relation to primary school settings.

The researcher conducting this research is also a primary school principal and therefore the study will simultaneously contribute to the professional development of the researcher. An in-depth knowledge of SSE and principals' attitudes and experiences will contribute to the researcher's chances of success in their chosen career. Through the study, it is envisaged that the researcher will increase and develop their skill set, which is essential for generating knowledge of practice in their own local practice. The researcher wishes to produce data and evaluate evidence essential to enable them to construct and inform their own theories of practice in order to influence their own potential and the capabilities of other primary school principals.

The Department of Education (DES) (2017a) have acknowledged the involvement and engagement of school leaders in ensuring SSE is successful in schools. Saunders (2000) points out that school principals can influence the positive or negative attitudes towards SSE in their schools. This evokes a concern for the researcher that needs to be developed in this research, in relation to the principals' attitudes and experience towards SSE. This research serves to add the voice of the primary school principal to the literature. As principals are the leaders within their schools, their attitudes and experiences of SSE are important for the future of SSE in primary schools. The attitudes and experiences of primary school principals to the development of this relatively new model of evaluation and to ensure quality education will be of particular interest to all educational stakeholders. Hence, exploring the link between SSE and principals' attitudes and their leadership style will provide valuable guidance to the DES, the Inspectorate and school leaders. It is envisaged that results obtained from this research and the ensuing conclusions will inform policy and shape developments in relation to SSE in Ireland and contribute to further research ideas in this area.

1.2 RESEARCH SITE

The data acquired from this research was to ascertain six primary school principals' attitudes and experiences on engaging with the SSE process. Geographical considerations were initially important in selecting the principals for the interviews (British Educational Research Association (BERA) 2018). The participants were all located in a particular county in Ireland, in close proximity to one another. There was a mixture of rural and urban school placed principals. The research, while confined to a small and convenience sample, was aimed at gaining depth and rich insight.

The participants involved in the research were not a representative sample of schools in the specific geographical area, but rather a sample of primary school principals that opted to participate in the research. The researcher is aware that this research will not be representative of all primary school principals. Creswell (2013) points out that the objective in qualitative research is not only to research a limited number of participants but also to collect extensive information about each participant studied. Therefore, the essence of my research is not quantity based, but ascertaining a selection of primary school principals' attitudes and experiences regarding SSE.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objective of the research is to examine the attitudes and experiences of primary school principals towards SSE. The first part of the research questions will identify the attitudes of primary school principals towards SSE. The researcher looked to establish their attitudes towards SSE and whether they feel it is a constructive process. The second part will examine their individual and collective experiences of SSE. The researcher will examine how the initiative is implemented within the school setting and who is involved in its implementation. I deliberately chose the two parts of my research question, of attitudes and experiences, as I believe in their totality they give deep and meaningful insight into what primary school principals' think, feel and how they behave towards SSE.

The research will set out to make a contribution by formulating answers to the following two questions:

- 1) What is the attitude and experience of primary school principals towards SSE?
- 2) What implementation practices are used in schools for SSE and who was involved in its implementation?

According to Vanhoof *et al.* (2009) a positive attitude is the essential basis for implementing SSE. In the next section the researcher will outline what they mean by the term ‘attitudes’.

1.4 ATTITUDES

Attitudes can be defined as the feelings that a person has about something, based on their own understanding and belief regarding that object (Kind *et al.* 2007). The three components of cognition, affect and behaviour ground this description of attitudes (McGuire 1968; Bagozzi and Burnkrant 1979; Rajecki 1990). Based on feelings a person takes certain actions in accordance with their knowledge and beliefs about something. The term attitude is used to refer to these dispositions to respond with some degree of favorableness or unfavorableness to a psychological object (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Eagly and Chaiken 1993). The object can be of any nature or type and in this research it pertains to SSE. Throughout this research, attitudes are ultimately considered as evaluative judgements formed by the participants (Ajzen and Fishbein 1977; Ajzen 2001; Crano and Prislín 2006). These evaluations are based on cognitive, affective and behavioural information and are outlined in Figure 1.1.

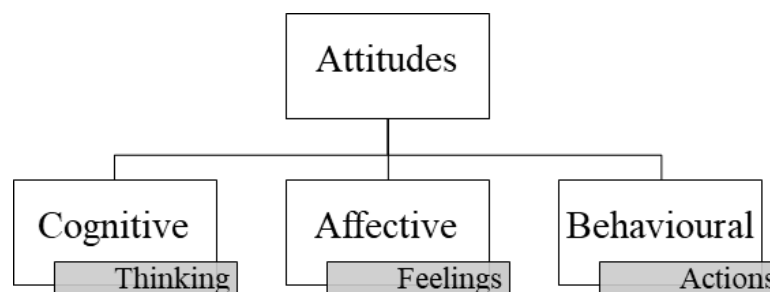


Figure 1.1 The Tricomponent Model of Attitudes

Attitude has proven a valuable construct in research and many topics have used attitudes as an important exploratory variable (Baker 1992). The use of the attitude concept is based on the assumption that attitudes are a precursor to predict behaviour. Pickens (2005) highlights that the cognitive and affective components of attitudes are internal to a person and that we can view their attitudes from their resulting behaviour. Likewise, Allport (1935, p.6) viewed an attitude as “a disposition to act”. Other authors have also emphasized the possible connection between attitudes and behaviour. Cohen (1964, p.138) stated that “attitudes are always seen as

precursors of behaviour, as determinants of how a person will actually behave”. Bem (1972) also states that the attitude of people can be inferred by observing their behaviour. According to the tricomponent model of attitudes, “holders tend to act in a way that is consistent with the attitude” (Guirdham 2002, p.94).

However, it must be noted that some research shows that attitudes do not always predict behaviour (LaPiere 1934). People’s behaviours can be influenced by other variables than just their attitudes (Schwarz 2008). Consequently, the researcher looked at supplementary ways to determine the participants’ attitudes towards SSE. In this instance, the researcher also observed the participant’s cognitive and affective components of attitude. Schwarz (2008) proposes that observation of attitudes is not sufficient and therefore attitude needs to be inferred from people’s responses. Therefore, attitudes must be deduced from measurable responses due their hypothetical construct (Dhiman 2015). These responses must reflect positive or negative evaluations of the object and then there is no limitation on the types of responses that can be measured (Ajzen 2005). Arising from this research, semi-structured interviews were selected to capture these underlying dimensions of attitudes towards SSE by primary school principals.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This research is a study exploring the attitudes and experiences of primary school based principals in relation to SSE. Theory is the final destination of research not the beginning (Cohen *et al.* 2007), however, qualitative, self-reflexive researchers must acknowledge their position in relation to the research study (Tracy 2010). The themes that have emerged in this literature review are those identified from the researcher's professional experience and judgement as relevant to the research questions and from extensive reading on the topic. The literature review aims to examine and critically analyse existing, appropriate literature concerning SSE, its purpose, the balance with external evaluation, the leadership styles associated with it and current attitudes both nationally and internationally.

2.2 DEFINITION OF SSE

SSE is gaining agency as part of the rhetoric of the Irish primary school landscape. However, SSE is a multifaceted and complex concept. The researcher will look at the various definitions of SSE in literature and highlight the common and salient features which are applicable for the emergent model in Irish primary schools.

Circular 0039/2012 from the DES (2012b) first introduced SSE formally to the Irish educational system. This evidence based internal school evaluation is grounded on a process of collaboration and reflection. SSE requires schools to make judgements about their own practices in a systematic way to foster school improvement. Schools must gather, collate and examine evidence about successes and areas for improvement, leading to further development. The challenge of school improvement requires principals to lead their school through a process of self-exploration and critical reflection to result in reform. Greater creativity and diversity in the role of the principal are necessary to influence such improvement (Grant 2013). The principal is ultimately responsible for overseeing the self-evaluation report and the School Improvement Plan (SIP).

The Inspectorate's SSE Guidelines (Department of Education & Skills 2016a) identify six-steps in the SSE four-year cyclical process (See Figure 2.1). The first three steps of the SSE iterative process encourages schools to begin by engaging in an investigation phase to scope out and develop the SIP. The next three steps, the second phase, is the implementation phase. This phase will enable improvements and initiatives to become embedded in everyday practice (Department of Education & Skills 2016a).



Figure 2.1 SSE Six-Step Process

The Scottish Inspectorate simplifies SSE in three basic questions which clarify the fundamentals of SSE: “How are we doing? How do we know? What are we going to do?” (HM Inspectorate of Education 2001, p.1). This official publication has relevance for the model of SSE currently evolving in Irish schools as it has an emphasis on school improvement rather than accountability. Schildmark (2007) defines SSE as an internal systematic process that serves to assess the functioning of the school and the achievement of its educational goals, so as to inform future planning, decision making, with school improvement as the overarching purpose.

2.2.1 Reflection

MacBeath (2005), a seminal writer in this field, advocates for a reflective dimension to the SSE process that is omitted from the definitions above. MacBeath (2005) believes that the primary goal of SSE is to help schools to maintain and improve through critical self-reflection. The ability of schools to reflect is arguably one of the most key influences in achieving high-quality self-evaluation (Van Petegem *et al.* 2005). The DES (2012a, p.10) also supports the importance of reflection as they define SSE as “a collaborative, inclusive, reflective process of internal school review”. SSE, therefore, can be seen as a systematic form of reflection.

Blase and Blase (2002) examined how leadership behaviours directly affect teachers and teaching. Their research was extensive; in excess of eight hundred teachers participated. One of the themes that emerged from the data was the importance of school leaders engaging in meaningful dialogue with teachers to promote reflection. The study stated that effective leader’s converse with teachers by offering suggestions, giving feedback, demonstrating, imparting advice and opinions, and through praise, which ultimately promotes reflection. The authors suggested these behaviours make a leader more approachable, which in turn creates a

more effective school culture of behaviours that are routine and predictable (Blase and Blase 2002).

2.3 INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

It is important that the development of SSE in Ireland is firmly rooted in the context of the international arena and agenda. Two governing organisations that have predisposed the development of SSE in Ireland are The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Standing International Conference of National and Regional Inspectorates of Education (SICI). Both agencies concern themselves with best practice of SSE; offering recommendations and providing an international arena for discussion. MacRuairc's (2010) examination of previous policy recommendations in Ireland indicates that the OECD has been very influential in framing national policy.

SICI (The Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI) n.d.) entered the arena of national and regional inspectorates of education in 1995, boasting 37 European participants, of which Ireland is a member. Despite SICI's more discreet prominence in this field compared to the OECD, it has made notable offerings to SSE in Ireland.

SICI outlined 10 proposals regarding inspection and improvement in their published document entitled the *'Bratislava Memorandum'* (2013). They elaborated on the non-obligatory degree of the proposal and highlighted that its adoption by each national inspectorate is ultimately up to themselves and their circumstances (The Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI) 2013). Both SICI and OECD operate on a non-dictator policy driven premise, however it is perceived the Irish Inspectorate would consent to such proposals vis-à-vis SSE. The *'Bratislava Memorandum'* and the Department of Education's Chief Inspectorate are in parallel in thought with regard to SSE. The *'Bratislava Memorandum'* (The Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI) 2013, p.3) endorses "self-evaluation leading to improvement rather than passive compliance with an externally determined agenda is central to sustained enhancement in the quality of students' learning". This proposition resonates and echoes the Department of Education's Chief Inspectorate who stated that:

"the most crucial question facing us has been whether the primary purpose of inspection and self-evaluation should be accountability or school improvement. For example, while school self-evaluation serves both these purposes we have decided that school improvement is the primary objective in school self-evaluation (Hislop 2013, p.15).

2.4 PURPOSE OF SSE

What is evident from the extant literature is that there are many purposes for SSE. This literature review will endeavour to summarise the main purposes. Clift *et al.* (1987) studied SSE in numerous schools in England and Wales. They determined that for SSE to be successful, it is crucial that its purpose is clear. Similarly, Kyriakides and Campbell (2004) emphasise that clarity must be established alongside an agreement regarding the objectives of SSE. They state that schools must start with a clear understanding of the aims of SSE and of how it will be conducted. It is evident from the current literature that there is no one particular universally agreed motive for SSE.

Scheerens *et al.* (1999) studied SSE in four countries: the UK, Netherlands, Spain and Italy. They discovered that these countries view SSE as a means for school improvement and as an opportunity to meet the demands for accountability. Tension could emanate from this dual purpose, particularly if there is substantial pressure for schools to achieve certain standards and results. This pressure can result in schools camouflaging undesirable outcomes by implementing deliberate behaviour (Blok *et al.* 2008). Ball (2003, p.224) refers to these outcomes as “fabrications”.

Kyriakides and Campbell (2004) claim that schools engage with SSE to systematically improve the quality of the school and to improve teaching and learning. They outline that SSE can simultaneously serve three purposes: (a) political, involving all school stakeholders which reflects democratic values; (b) accountability, providing evidence to parents and the wider community; and (c) professional development, providing feedback for growth and improvement to the school (Kyriakides and Campbell 2004). Similarly, MacBeath (2006) states that SSE is driven by three primary reasons: (a) Economic (b) Accountability and (c) School Improvement. However, the researcher would propose a fourth reason (d) Change. For the purpose of this research the researcher is going to look at these four main reasons in more depth.

2.4.1 Economic

MacBeath (2006) highlights that one of the main benefits of SSE is economics. He determines that the costs involved with training, administration and external inspections do not reflect value and are too high. The reasoning of this argument is that SSE is more cost effective to the State than the more costly external inspections. Leading advocates of SSE have maintained that

savings could be made by no longer solely relying on the external inspections because SSE is a more cost effective alternative (Chapman and Sammons 2013).

2.4.2 Accountability

With the growing calls for greater accountability, SSE has become a major trend in several OECD countries since the late seventies and early eighties (Mortimore 1983; Simons 1987). The research project SYNEVA (European Commission 2009) on SSE showed a prominent merging toward models highlighting internal self-evaluation. Janssens and van Amelsvoort (2008) propose that with guidelines and instruction from the Inspectorate the optimal outcomes can be achieved. They advocate that training should be provided to enhance local control over the SSE documents produced by schools.

Strong recurring themes about SSE emanate from both the international educational literature and the DES documentation. The tension between public accountability and professional autonomy is evident throughout. Evidence shows that while schools are engaging with the SSE processes there remains a difficulty to reconcile the two key policy objectives of greater school autonomy and increased accountability (McNamara and O'Hara 2008).

A view on the dangers of accountability resonates with Hargreaves (2003) who believes that the compulsive obsession with standardisation has been a result of the search for higher educational standards. The Irish Inspectorate has stated that it does not want to replicate the errors of other nations. They have proclaimed that they will benefit from the experience of seminal academics, who have proven that a focus on accountability has not led to desired improvement (Hislop 2013). Fullan maintains that accountability has a part to play as a change agent but warns that it should not be the principal objective:

“To be clear it is not the presence of standards and assessment that is the problem, but rather the attitude (philosophy or theory of action) that underpins them, and their dominance (as when they become so heavily laden that they crush the system by their sheer weight)” (2011, p.8).

Clift *et al.* (1987) describe the first experiences of a number of schools with SSE. They determined that SSE did not contribute to improvements. They highlighted the naivety of the schools approach that paid little attention to the validity and reliability of SSE. They discovered that many schools lacked adequate time and resources. The researchers notably recommend linking SSE from the outset with school improvement, as opposed to accountability.

2.4.3 Improvement

Improvement is certainly at the crux of SSE rationale in Ireland. The DES (2014) publication by the Irish Inspectorate entitled *Evaluation for School Improvement – a guide to follow-through inspection* depicts the pivotal role that school improvement represents in this process. Barber (1996) argues that the search for improvement is the essence of a successful school and that effective SSE paves the way for it. He describes SSE as relentless in its search for evidence in a school's transparency of purpose, behaviour and teaching.

Fullan (1991) stresses that school improvement is achieved when there is a balanced blend of support and pressure, of internal and external evaluation coupled with bottom-up and top-down change. Blending these three factors can determine whether schools will remain stagnate and decline or will flourish and develop. Harris and Lambert (2003) have shown that school improvement works best when there is more support than pressure on schools. The current inspection method in Ireland can be described as '*inspection for improvement*' which aims for a co-professional approach with schools emphasising the complementarity of SSE with an external inspection by Inspectors (Coolahan *et al.* 2017).

McNamara and O'Hara (2008) describe the aims of SSE in terms of a continuum with accountability and teacher professional development at opposite ends. McNamara and O'Hara (2006) highlight the positive results of SSE and outline that teacher's view SSE as less threatening than external evaluation. However, this research lacks the voice of the primary school principal, stressing a significant knowledge gap.

Improvement is certainly to the fore as a rationale for SSE in Ireland. In 2014, the DES published *Evaluation for School Improvement – a guide to follow-through inspection*. This title clearly indicated that improvement was fundamental to the SSE process. The *Looking At Our School* (LAOS) (Department of Education & Skills 2016b) framework produces a template for schools undertaking SSE. Within this framework, the role of external inspection by Department Inspectors is expressively moderated. The model which is encouraged is similar to the one championed by MacBeath (2005). MacBeath (2005) supported a model in which external evaluation focuses primarily on the school's own approach to self-evaluation. The LAOS (Department of Education & Skills 2016b) framework was designed with an emphasis on collaboration and partnership rather than accountability.

2.4.4 Change

Schools have been encouraged to use the SSE process to assist them in introducing and embedding recent initiatives such as *The Numeracy and Literacy Strategy* (Department of Education and Skills 2011), the new *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA 2015), the *Special Education Teaching Allocation* (Department of Education & Skills 2017b) and the *Digital Learning Framework for Primary Schools* (Department of Education & Skills 2017c). By using the SSE process, schools have the opportunity to implement these changes in a way that is relevant and meaningful in their particular context (The Inspectorate Evaluation Support and Research Unit 2018).

Circular 0039/2012 (Department of Education & Skills 2012b) made clear reference to the use of the SSE process to schools implementation of the *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (Department of Education and Skills 2011). Circular 0061/2015 (Department of Education & Skills 2015) and *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020 Primary* (Department of Education & Skills 2016a) advice schools to use the SSE process to introduce national initiatives. Fullan (2011) emphasizes that change is possible by using SSE as a tool to implement such change.

Gladwell (2000) outlines three rules which can bring about improvement or change: *the rule of the vital few, the stickiness factor and the power of context*. SSE requires a ‘vital few’ to urge and create interest in its capacity to bring about improvement. This research aims to discover the primary school principals’ role as one of the ‘vital few’. Since 2012, the Department of Education (2012b) have made SSE mandatory in all primary schools and this will help SSE ‘stick’. The researcher wishes to examine whether the rule of the ‘power of context’ will ensure that SSE will be implemented continuously to bring about change and improvements so that “the implementation of the school improvement plan ultimately leads to a new cycle of school self-evaluation” (Department of Education & Skills 2012a, p.14).

McBeath (2006, p.1) maintains that “self-evaluation is now seen as a matter of priority in most economically advanced countries of the world”. He (2005) advocates that *Schools Must Speak for Themselves*. MacBeath (2005) argues that SSE improves pupils’ learning, is beneficial to the professionalism of teachers and he strongly advocates that change and development come from within the school setting. Hopkins (2003) highlights that school leaders need to be geared towards increasing the capacity for change. He argues that schools should not be wasting time trying to create something new each time there is an educational challenge or initiative.

MacBeath *et al.* (2000) note that self-evaluation builds on what is already there rather than trying to apply something new.

2.5 EXTERNAL EVALUATION

A division of the DES, the Inspectorate, are responsible for evaluating and reporting on Irish school's performances. They publish evaluation reports, known as the Whole-School Evaluations (WSEs). The Education Act (1998) states that the purpose of the WSE is to review the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of schools. They evaluate areas such as 'teaching and learning' and 'leadership and management' to evaluate the internal working dynamics of a school. They provide information indicating the areas of strength for the school and also highlight areas for further development.

Internationally, there is growing evidence of a move from confrontational forms of SSE chiefly concerned with external accountability towards an internal system more attentive to capacity building for self-evaluation, professional development and improvement (Nevo 1983; MacBeath 2005; McNamara and O'Hara 2006, 2008). It is generally accepted that both self-evaluation and external evaluation strengthen the commitment of all of the key stakeholders to evaluate what they are doing (MacBeath and McGlynn 2002).

Sugrue (2014) raises the issue that when self-evaluation is promoted as virtuous by the Inspectorate, who has responsibility for external accountability, there is considerable potential for sending mixed messages, as well as intensifying the performative dimensions of accountability. The dual role of inspectors – 'advisory' and 'evaluative' – blurs the boundaries, it can lead to confusion on the part of school principals as they can find it difficult to determine which of the two roles the inspector is exercising at any given time (Coolahan 1994).

The issue of control is one of the most controversial aspects of SSE: who has the control of the process (Simons 1987; Ball 2003). Arising from this, key themes that discussions in literature on SSE centre around are the aims of SSE, the form, the procedure and the organisational conditions (Blok *et al.* 2008). Nevo (2002) states that SSE represents school empowerment and the transfer of authority from government body to local level. He argues that participation in the SSE process contributes to the empowerment of a school organisation. He believes this is as a result of the acquirement of a school to monitor itself in a more systematic way and therefore gaining greater confidence in its own educational direction (Nevo 2002).

MacBeath (2006) has identified three models of evaluation: (a) Proportional: a school's own data is used as a starting point. The better the self-evaluation the less intensive the inspection. Ireland's current system is categorised under this rubric. (b) Ideal: the inspectorate report on the quality of SSE and highlight areas for improvement. (c) Supporting: support is provided by the Inspectorate for schools in carrying out SSE more effectively. Several authors strongly oppose externally driven SSE that mainly focuses on technical information; they advocate for democratic forms of SSE that provide information on the quality of educational practice and this in turn develops professional learning (Simons 1987; Saunders 1999). Some of the necessary conditions for effective and successful SSE, such as shared objectives and ownership, may not be achieved if externally initiated SSE practices decrease the school's commitment (Mortimore 1983; Simons 1987; Saunders 1999).

Additionally, externally driven SSE that focuses on the productivity and results, called performativity by Ball (2003), can result in profound paradoxical effects on teachers and schools. It may lead to a surge in resistance, distrust, distrustful compliance and strategic response behaviours. Mathews (2010) extensive review of a large body of SSE literature discovered that evaluations were viewed as a form of control. He conveyed that due to the availability of reports online, that it can lead to teachers feeling that it is necessary for them to prove rather than to improve.

Scheerens *et al.* (1999) believe that an important precondition for successful SSE is extensive external support. They maintain that the purpose of the evaluation should be explained vis-à-vis internal and external requirements from the onset of the process. They highlight that the support should continue to the later stage where advice and guidance is required for making practical use of evaluation results.

Nevo (2002) presents international theory and practice suggesting that SSE is a '*real thing*' being practised in many educational systems. He outlines that it is not without problems but has much potential. However, Nevo does not suggest SSE as an alternative to external objective evaluation. He advocates the combination of both for the benefit of school accountability and school improvement. He presents some examples, from a variety of educational systems, demonstrating that it can be done and that it is worth doing. Nevo (2002) argues that external evaluation can influence a school's internal evaluation, by expanding its scope and adding to its validity.

Scriven (1991) contests the validity of self-evaluation and claims that the results of self-evaluation are notoriously unreliable. One way to possibly improve the validity of SSE is to connect self-evaluation as a method for internal evaluation with external evaluation procedures (Nevo 2001). Nevo (2001) describes how both internal and external evaluation processes are mutually beneficial and believes that the interaction should be reciprocal between the internal and external evaluators and should be based on a two-way flow of information resulting in a process of mutual beneficial learning. Although both parties are not necessarily equal in authority, they have something to learn from and to teach each other. Chapman and Sammons (2013) state that:

‘hawks’ argue that school self-evaluation is an easy soft-centred option which can result in navel gazing and lacks the objective hard edge that external evaluation brings ... while ‘doves’ argue that for improvement, to be embedded within the school, it must be owned by the very agents of change tasked with generating improvement (2013, p.16).

This quote suggests that there should be a balance and a link between SSE and external evaluation and placing both sides against each other is a false dichotomy (Chapman and Sammons 2013).

The model of SSE adopted by Ireland cleaves to what can be evidenced as the emerging orthodoxy (McNamara and O’Hara 2008). Schools are required to engage in a process of SSE that is scrutinised and judged by an autonomous external body, the Inspectorate. The Inspectorate are ultimately responsible for the final decision as to the quality and value of a school’s SSE. They communicate their findings to the wider community via published online reports. While the internal engagement with the process is considered central, the ownership of the final evaluative judgment is complex and controversial.

2.6 LEADERSHIP

Definitions of leadership are distinctly subjective and numerous throughout literature. Bass (2000), a seminal author on this topic, reports that it is pointless to define it. Bass (2008) believes that one must view leadership from the personal and situational perspectives of the leader. West-Burnham (2009, p.5) states that educational leadership is “a moral activity” and that leadership actions are an outward reflection of their internal values and belief system. Northouse (2004) defines leadership behaviours as those leadership styles by which a leader influences others to achieve organisational goals. Therefore, when we refer to a leader’s attitude, we are trying to explain his or her behaviour (Pickens 2005). To investigate the

behavioural part of the tricomponent model of attitudes, the researcher will examine some of the leadership styles associated with SSE.

Mumford *et al.* (2000) conducted a study to establish specific traits personnel expect and desire from leaders. They identified behaviour as one of the key leadership expectations. The focus of the research was on the observation of the leaders' behaviour as they interacted with their followers. The authors discovered that the leaders' behaviour influenced the behaviour of others within the organisation. This research highlights the importance of a principal's actions, and therefore their attitude, towards SSE in the school context.

Hallinger (2003) made a number of conclusions from his review of 125 empirical studies. He concluded that research has provided evidence vis-à-vis the quality of leadership behaviour, the effects of leadership on the school culture and the school's outcomes and lastly, on the effects of the school context on leadership. Hallinger (2003) determined that pupil achievement is influenced discreetly through the principal's actions and that they set targets and objectives as their most significant act. This research demonstrates the importance of the conative element of attitudes; a principal's actions and behaviours, visible through their leadership styles.

The researcher will discuss three seminal leadership theories; distributed, pedagogical and transformational leadership in greater depth with respect to SSE.

2.6.1 Distributive Leadership

Distributive leadership has become firmly rooted in the rhetoric of current educational leadership and management literature. Based on the analysis of Gronn (2002) and Spillane (2006), it is about more than distributing leadership roles; the focus is on the collaboration and cooperation of all as a whole. They view leadership as something that can no longer be carried out by one person alone. Gronn (2002) and Spillane (2006) believe that distributive leadership requires a social interaction and cooperation as a whole team, and that decision making is governed by the interaction of individuals.

Hallinger and Heck (2003) state that the essence of leadership is achieving results through others. Critically, it is this interaction that forms the platform to drive goal-setting and systematic responses, according to Johnsen (2002). He extends this by stating the quintessence of leadership is the "leadership behaviour" of the individual (Johnsen 2002, p.12). Reciprocated discussion, meaningful dialogue regarding goal setting and the approaches needed embody the performance required of school leaders. The triage of problem-solving, planning and deciding an end point is crucial according to Johnsen's (2002) ideal leadership model. Problem-solving

is a triad of processes; analysis, interaction and the search and learn process. A core fundamental of the SSE process is the accomplishment of a school's goal achievement. This parallels Johnsen's (2002) ideal leadership model with reference to the analysis process as it relies on analysing what steps to take next.

Distributed leadership and Johnsen's (2002) definition of leadership strike recognisable similarities. Distributed leadership is action focused, a direct result of principal and teacher interaction (Harris 2003). It signifies cooperation and collaboration relating to roles and responsibilities of individuals within the structure. Working in tandem promotes and produces transferable skills and experiences that can be shared and developed. These collective activities can act as an agent of change and contribute to significant organisational gains (Spillane *et al.* 2004).

“The principal encourages teamwork in all aspects of school life. He/she creates and motivates staff teams and working groups to lead developments in key areas, thus building leadership capacity.” (Department of Education & Skills 2016b, p.28). Principals have the power to influence others through their leadership proficiencies to ensure a motivational, collaborative and meaningful atmosphere is nurtured. McHenry (2009) supports this, when he states there is an absolute need for motivational support. This enhances peer learning and allows for productive development. Teachers must feel valued and this requires a collective leadership promoting collaborative efforts (Brownell *et al.* 1997). To permit such significant collaboration requires the principal's commitment to and investment of time, resources and space (Brownell *et al.* 1997; Gajda and Koliba 2008).

The development of a collaborative culture can be nurtured or impeded by a principal's leadership behaviour and actions. Purposeful attention is necessary to create a culture of collegial interactions. A dedication to continuous renewal is necessary to maintain this type of culture (Garmston and Wellman 1995). Ideally this should be a shared practice amongst all, however, it is the principal's responsibility to equip and empower others with the knowledge that encourages collaboration to develop (Rosenholtz 1989). A principal must be willing to relinquish some control to teachers so that they can effectively participate in decision making and therefore cultivating the expertise and experience of teachers (Barth 1988). Fletcher and Kaufner (2003, p.22) define distributed leadership as a style “enacted by people at all levels rather than a set of personal characteristics and attributes located in people at the top”. Fullan

(1991) points out that influencing the culture of the school is the most important job for the principal.

2.6.2 Pedagogical Leadership

Pedagogical leadership is the heartbeat of education. It is the disposition of teaching and learning and is unanimous with the SSE process. Supporting teaching and learning are at the heart of this leadership style by attaining goals through curriculum implementation. Ärlestig and Törnsten (2014) reference that to be a pedagogical leader there must be a child-centred approach and a relentless focus on teaching and learning.

As defined by Ärlestig and Törnsten (2014), pedagogical leadership incorporates observations, feedback and professional dialogue. Relating this to the SSE process, Robinson *et al.* (2008) investigated leadership styles in a meta-analysis of studies published between 1978 and 2006. They found that one of the most effective practices for principals to bring about improvement was through involvement in promoting teacher learning and development. They discovered that this was the most effective leadership activity on pupil outcomes than other leadership dimension. This echoes Robinson *et al.* (2008) who purport that the more leaders focus their time and energy on teaching and learning, the greater the influence is on pupil outcomes.

2.6.3 Transformational Leadership

Self-awareness and reflection are to the core of transformative leaders (Shields 2017). Intellectual astuteness and social justice awareness are required. As defined by Shields (2017) optimism, hope, moral courage and possibilities are the key tenets of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership epitomises an engaging and activist approach to leadership (Shields 2017). Leaders are merely managing the status quo if change is not contemporaneous. The status quo is challenged with transformational leadership (Bass and Riggio 2006). Transformational leadership is at the peril of reverting to transactional leadership if it is not challenged (MacNeill and Boyd 2018). However, Bass (2008) claims that all transactional leadership will eventually diminish and ultimately become transformational leadership. He refers to it as a continuum. Flexibility and innovation are essential in order for transformation to exist and to move along this continuum (Bass 2008). According to Bass (2008) transformational leaders can exist as both negative and positive.

2.6.4 Conclusion

Changes in circumstances, initiatives and personnel evoke different leadership styles. Crucially, the researcher believes that tailoring these leadership styles in a meaningful and appropriate response is the overarching challenge. The leadership style associated with SSE is tenuous without reference to recognised seminal research and leading authors in the field, international research and guidelines and mandated policy documents. However, leadership influences are rooted in responsibility and condition. How these behaviours and actions are disseminated form part of the analysis of this research. The execution of influences can exist formally and informally (Johnsen 2002). The manner in which a primary school principal conducts their leadership style can directly affect SSE implementation. The outcome of this is differing attitudes and experiences that can be received with hostility or as a pathway for progress (MacBeath 2005).

2.7 ATTITUDES TOWARDS SSE

In this section the researcher will outline and discuss some of the literature available in relation to attitudes towards SSE. A search of the literature reveals a distinct lack of research observable in the primary level in Ireland stressing a significant knowledge gap. This researcher was unable to find any relevant research based on the attitudes and experiences of Irish primary school principals towards SSE. The understanding of primary principals' attitudes and experience towards SSE in Ireland is important because of the existing empirical evidence pointing to the link between conceptions and behaviour (Kallgren and Wood 1986). This research is designed to give an opportunity for primary school principals' attitudes and experiences of SSE to be voiced.

A doctoral dissertation by Mathews (2010) interviewed principals on SSE using focus groups. Mathews proposed a model of SSE based on reflection and inquiry. Mathews used data and context to ensure that SSE assist continuous learning in schools. However, a limitation of the research was the absence of primary school principals' voices as the focus was only pertaining to post primary schools. Furthermore, Mathews admits that no additional examination of the views put forward by the focus groups occurred.

Murphy's (2018) research and analysis of how individual Irish teachers make sense of SSE outlines that their perceptions of SSE depicted a skewed focus on accountability over school improvement. Hargreaves and Braun (2013) likewise discovered that teachers perceive

themselves as the driven rather than the drivers of SSE. However, once again the voice of the primary school principal was omitted from these studies.

Harvey (2015) examined the impact of SSE policy on a sample of school leaders and teachers in two post primary level schools. This research discovered that the focus group participants veered more towards a status of contrived compliance rather than committed and proactive engagement as regards SSE. However, by choosing just two post primary level schools, limitations are evident on the scale and scope of the research.

In other countries, there is a perceived onerousness of SSE in schools and a resistance towards the added paperwork that SSE effectuates (Van Petegem *et al.* 2005). School principals in the Netherlands regard SSE as a useful and informative process (Blok *et al.* 2005). They believe that SSE yields a reliable picture, although they admit that it is time consuming (Blok *et al.* 2005). McBeath *et al.* (1999) arrive at a comparable conclusion in their assessment of a project in which 100 European schools carried out SSE. However, Van Petegem *et al.* (2005) claim that Finish principals are generally positively inclined towards SSE and that they are convinced of its benefits.

The results of Davies and Rudd's (2000) research also show that their participants experience SSE as positive. Davies and Rudd's study involved a review of key documents, and in-depth interviews with leaders and staff in schools that were in the process of engaging with SSE. They noted that management bodies found self-evaluation a useful entry to their schools. SSE helped them to develop an overview of how their school was performing. School staff were content with a change in the school culture and the impetus SSE had on teacher development. Numerous issues and difficulties were also noted, most notably, workload implications for staff; the need for the management body to achieve a balance between management and support; and the expectation for schools to take an appropriate degree of ownership of SSE. Ownership had mostly been confined to school leaders, excluding teachers, pupils and parents. Overall Davies and Rudd's (2000) research showed that both the management bodies and the schools had positive attitudes towards self-evaluation.

2.8 CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed for this research concludes that exploring the attitudes and experiences of Irish primary school based principals in relation to SSE is worth the significant effort. Difficulties arise in the literature in that firstly, many of the studies and researchers are located outside of Ireland and secondly, much of the researched literature is within the post primary

sector and not in the primary sector in which this research is situated. Wilkinson *et al.* (2013) dispute, however, that leading practices transect varying educational contexts.

The findings from the literature review demonstrate that this study is necessary. Numerous questions have arisen that warrants this research necessary. The researcher wishes to explore Irish primary principals' attitudes towards SSE, what they believe the purpose of SSE is, how they come to terms with the conflicting nature and role of the Inspectorate in relation to internal and external evaluations and what their leadership styles as regards SSE can tell us about their attitudes towards it. The next section describes the procedures and methods employed in this research in addressing the research questions and existing gaps within the literature regarding the attitudes and experiences of primary school principals towards SSE in Ireland.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the central research question guiding the study, the sub-questions of the research and the research aims and objectives for each research question (See Table 3.1). The research cycle and procedure undertaken are then demarcated, while also taking into account the researcher's positionality and reflexivity. Methodology and research design are then described, outlined and justified.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Table 3.1 Research Questions

Central Research Questions	Primary Research Aim and Objective
What are primary school principals' attitudes and experiences of SSE?	The purpose of this qualitative research will be to explore SSE in primary schools from primary school principals' attitudes and experiences.
Sub Research Questions	Research Aims and Objectives
What is the purpose of SSE?	To explore the various purposes of SSE from a primary school principals' perspective. This line of questioning aims to discover the behavioural element of the participants' attitudes.
What is the role of principals in SSE? How did you/do you carry out SSE in your school?	To understand the principals' leadership role within the school context in relation to SSE. This line of questioning aims to discover the behavioural element of the participants' attitudes.
What is the role of the Inspectorate and external evaluations/WSE, if any, in relation to SSE?	To explore principals' attitudes and experiences of the Inspectorate and external evaluation in comparison and contrast to SSE. This line of questioning aims to discover the cognition and affective elements of the participants' attitudes.

3.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Academic research is applied to gather and investigate information, through a series of steps, in order to develop our knowledge of a topic (Creswell 2012). The ‘Research Onion’ (Figure 3.1) designed by Saunders *et al.*(2009) illustrates the stages involved in the research and the effective progression through which the research methodology was designed. The ‘Research Onion’ allows the researcher to reflect on each layer of the research design individually and in relation to the other components in the research design. The approach for this research is a qualitative method, inductive, cross-sectional study based on an inductive approach located in the field of Interpretivism. Each layer of the ‘Research Onion’ will be dissected, clarified and justified.

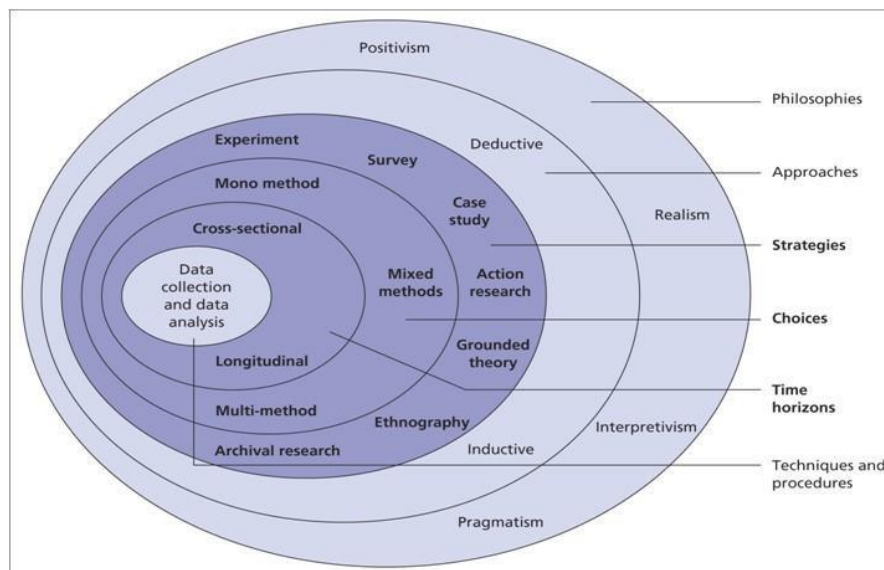


Figure 3.1 The Research Onion

3.3.1 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy can be defined as a researcher’s understanding of the world, their assumptions about knowledge conventions and their appreciation of the construction of said knowledge (Saunders and Lewis 2018). The researcher’s philosophy undeniably influences the initial composing of research questions and subsequently frames an appropriate research design in reaction to the research questions. The research philosophy, therefore, is regarded as the paradigm overarching the entire research study, justifying the location of the philosophy layer as the outermost sphere of the ‘Research Onion’ encasing the research in its entirety.

The researcher outlines in Table 3.2 the advantages and criticisms of this research philosophy (Cohen *et al.* 2007; Creswell 2007; Pham 2018).

Table 3.2 Researcher's Philosophy

Advantages of Interpretivism	Criticisms of Interpretivism
Can discover hidden reasons behind complex and multifaceted social processes.	Time consuming, especially in relation to data gathering and analysis.
Can aid theory construction.	Can lead to research bias and preconceptions into participants' inferences.
Suited to researching context specific events and processes.	All participants may not be equally credible, unbiased or knowledgeable which may lead to misleading or false impressions.
Can uncover interesting and relevant research questions for further research.	May sometimes fail to answer the research question.

The researcher primarily employed an Interpretivist philosophy as he sought to research SSE through the subjective interpretation of the participants involved, by interviewing the different participants and reconciling differences among their responses using their own subjective attitudes and experiences (Creswell 2007). It is important at this stage to discuss the researcher's positionality and reflexivity and how the disadvantages of Interpretivism were overcome in relation to the research.

3.3.2 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Cohen *et al.* (2007) emphasise that the researcher enters the research process with pre-existing knowledge and attempting to eradicate researcher influence would be impractical, hence, highlighting the researcher as a significant, integral tool in qualitative research design (Merriam and Grenier 2019). Saunders *et al.* (2009) specifies that inductive approaches to research particularly actualise the researcher as a cog in the research wheel. Researchers, however, must exert self-reflexivity at each phase in the process in openly recognising their influence on the project particularly those working in an insider position (Cohen *et al.* 2007).

The researcher conducting this research is also a practitioner and therefore introspectively expressed and evaluated their role, bias, relationships and decisions during the research

procedure in an attempt to curtail potential disadvantages. Merriam and Grenier (2019) advise the qualitative researcher to identify and monitor personal biases rather than to try to eliminate them. The researcher recognises that by them making the decision on the research topic, on the data collection method, its analysis and interpretation, subjectivity will always be part of the research. However, subjectivity through reflexive thought can contribute to the research as it can be recognised and monitored for more reliable research. As part of the research setting, context and social phenomena being researched, the researcher can investigate deeply into possible subjectivities (Glesne 2016; Merriam and Grenier 2019). The researcher recognised their role and influence on this research throughout.

The researcher, as a primary school principal, wished to control their bias on the research and therefore add to the validity of the research. Firstly, the researcher was aware of the potential of bias. The researcher used a research journal to foster their self-awareness. The researcher made an effort to get in touch with those different aspects of self and constantly thought through how these might impact on the research study. Secondly, the researcher reduced potential bias by using an analytical method that ensured there was constant comparisons made throughout the research. Data was matched against data, not only for similarities and differences, but also for consistency. A researcher's biases can creep into research in many different ways, most notably, through our phrasing of a question during the interviews. The researcher ensured that leading questions were avoided where assumptions and biases could be in the question itself. The themes of the interviews were forwarded to the participants. Their feedback and any adjustments they required was sought. This ensured that the researcher did not make preconceptions into the participants' inferences.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) note that qualitative researchers should be unafraid to draw on their own experiences when analysing data because they realize that these experiences become the foundations for making comparisons and discovering new findings. What is being required in the notion of reflexivity is a self-conscious awareness of the effects that the researcher as a practitioner is having on the research process, how their attitude and experience would feed into the situation being studied (Cohen *et al.* 2007). The researcher therefore applied themselves the same critical scrutiny that they applied to the participants and to the research. The researcher continuously scrutinised their own attitudes and experiences towards SSE through the use of a reflective journal. By thinking reflexively throughout the entire research process, through the use of a reflective journal and making the research process itself a point

of analysis, the researcher reduced the risk of being misled by their own attitudes and experiences.

An important step in the research that substantially enhances credibility is member checking (Carlson 2010). At completion of the data analysis, the researcher communicated a summary of the themes that emerged and requested feedback or member check from the participants. Through this process, the participants were able to validate the findings and that the researcher had accurately interpreted the data. The participants were also provided with verbatim transcripts of their interviews for the purposes of verifying accuracy, correcting any errors or inaccuracies and providing further clarifications (Hagens *et al.* 2009).

3.3.3 Research Strategy and Approach

The research strategy and approach utilised by the researcher could be best described as an inductive approach. This approach states that theory is an outcome of research (Bryman 2008). To ensure transparency, the researcher will offer a step by step explanation of how themes and insights have been built up throughout the data analysis. Thematic analysis was used as a method for identifying, analysing and communicating themes within the data. This is further detailed in section 3.4.1.

Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology that aims at constructing theories from data (Corbin and Strauss 2015). This research was originally focused on elements of grounded theory approach as it hoped for conceptual thinking and theory building rather than theory or hypothesis testing (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Elements of grounded theory approach was used in this research strategy and approach. Theories were derived from the data rather than from the researcher's prior theoretical viewpoint. However, for the purpose of this research study, the term grounded theory is employed simply to imply that the researcher has grounded their theory in data.

The interpretive qualitative disposition of the research aims not to directly align data gathered with pre-existing theories but to pursue evolving and emergent theories from the data in line with Buchanan (2012). Subsequently, the theories built have to be applied to the context in which they originated. Similarly, Saunders *et al.* (2009) argue that an inductive method is predominately preoccupied with the specific context in which the phenomenon transpires.

The researcher followed an inductive approach, by beginning with the topic of SSE. Empirical generalisations and preliminary relationships were then identified as the researcher progressed

through the research. No hypotheses were established at the initial stages and the researcher was uncertain about the type and nature of the research findings until the study was complete. This inductive approach was utilised because it allowed the findings from the research data to inform the theory. As the researcher wished to understand primary school principals' attitudes and experience towards SSE, this approach allowed the researcher to draw general conclusions from the data obtained from the participants. The researcher could understand the participants' attitudes and experiences towards SSE from their point of view. An inductive approach also allowed the researcher flexibility as they were not restrained by any predetermined information. The researcher could therefore focus on the cognitive, affective and conative parts of the participants' attitudes towards SSE.

3.3.4 Methodological Choice

Saunders *et al.* (2009) define the methodological choice as the employment of either a quantitative and qualitative or a combination of both in the research design and implementation. The purpose of the research was to gain insights into the attitudes and experiences of primary school principals towards SSE. The explorative objective of the research seeking primary school principals' attitudes and experiences of SSE would not be effectively achieved through the collection of numerical, quantitative data in the form of a survey. The purpose of this research was to probe deeper into a small number of participants and discover their attitudes and experiences of SSE. In order to do this successfully, the research was undertaken from a qualitative perspective. Qualitative researchers want the opportunity to connect with their participants and to see the world from their viewpoints (Corbin and Strauss 2015). It was therefore decided to gather data the research data via semi-structured interviews.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

A qualitative interview occurs when researchers pose questions to participants, record the answers and later transcribe the data digitally for analysis (Creswell 2012). Interviews capture participant voice providing personal, in depth information proving as a robust data collection method in qualitative research (Creswell 2012). Semi-structured interviews cover a list of themes and questions, however, the questions and order of questions varied in certain cases enabling the researcher to explore and probe if appropriate or required (Saunders *et al.* 2009). Open-ended questions enabled the researcher to probe and delve deeper into the participants'

attitudes and experiences of SSE also resulting in unforeseen answers reflective of the emergent, inductive nature of the research design (Cohen *et al.* 2007).

Sudman and Bradburn (1982) suggest longer questions are suited for asking questions about behaviour, as they allow the participants to respond to possible examples, and shorter types of questions are more suited for gathering data about attitudes. This data collection method was also in line with the research questions as it is suited to the exploration of attitudes, beliefs and motives (Richardson *et al.* 1965). A focus group may have been fitting in gathering the participants' attitudes and experiences of SSE, however, it was decided that the sensitive nature of information discussed regarding SSE in the various schools may breach confidentiality issues and this method was therefore dismissed (Robson 2002). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data gathering method.

3.4.1 Semi-structured Interviews

A level of consistency was ensured between interviews by using a semi-structured format while also providing opportunities to explore and investigate specific responses from the participants. The pattern of semi-structured interviews allowed and enabled the researcher to have prepared a Topic Guide (See Appendix 1) or relevant questions to be covered with each participant (Bryman 2008). Interviews allowed both the interviewer and the participant to clarify the ambiguities and necessary points. Questioning and probing allowed the researcher to glean the ways in which the participants view SSE through their attitudes and experiences. Mason (2002) states that this form of interviewing is more likely to generate a fairer and fuller representation of the participants' perspectives. Semi-structured interviews should transpire similar to conversations rather than formal events (Marshall and Rossman 2014). As the researcher wished to attain the attitudes and experiences of the participants, semi-structured interviewing was chosen as an effective method to probe the subjective feelings and attitudes of the participants (Weiss 1994).

Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to carry out the interviews face-to-face with the six primary school principals. Therefore, the interviews were conducted by telephone. Interviews were audio recorded and the researcher made notes and reflections on each interview immediately after the conclusion of the interview. The collecting of quantitative survey data is common and well-represented in literature, using telephone interviews for qualitative data collecting has been considered an inferior alternative to face-to-face interviews (Novick 2008). Rubin and Rubin (2011) state that a disadvantage of telephone interviews is

the lack of nonverbal observations. Miller and Cannell (1982) also identify that the reduction of the interview situation to just auditory sensory cues can be particularly problematical.

However, the use of telephone interviews was very successful for this research study. Telephone interviews provided quality data (Drabble *et al.* 2016). Drabble *et al.* (2016) highlight that the use of telephone interviews creates flexibility for scheduling, as well as privacy for the participants. Miller and Cannell (1997) advocate that telephone interviews are more reliable than face-to-face interviews because the participants may disclose information that may not be so readily forthcoming in a more intimate situation. Telephone interviews certainly have their advantages and their use was overseen by the criterion of fitness for purpose (Cohen *et al.* 2007). Due to the requirements for ‘Social Distancing’ during the COVID-19 pandemic, telephone interviews were necessary, appropriate and beneficial to gather the research data.

Interviews with the six primary principals were conducted at a time of their request and ranged in duration from 17 minutes to 32 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and the researcher immediately noted their reflections after their conclusion. Much thought and consideration was given to the development of questions for the Topic Guide (Appendix 1). Questions were initially devised based on emerging themes from the literature and on the researcher’s professional experience of SSE. The questions were developed using the three guidelines set out by Rosenthal (2016). These guidelines are summarised in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Rosenthal’s Guidelines (2016)

Guidelines	Reasons
Truly open ended and neutral questions	This helped to ensure that the questions did not make assumptions about the researcher’s opinion on the topic, nor should they offer any clues as to what the interviewer hopes the participant will say.
Singular questions	The researcher ensured that only one topic was asked about at a time. This was particularly important as within this research there were multiple objectives as part of the broader research questions.
Clear questions	In order to achieve this, topic guides were reviewed to ensure that there was clarity in the questions created.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

In interpretive analysis, observations must be understood through the lenses of the participants. It must involve viewing the phenomenon from the subjective perspectives of the participants. It must also understand the meaning of the participants' experiences in order to provide a "thick description" (Tracy 2010, p.840). It is necessary to communicate why the participants acted in a certain way through a rich narrative story. The researcher tried to ensure that the story was viewed through the eyes of the participants and depicted their attitudes and experiences towards SSE.

Integral components of interpretive analysis is the documenting of the verbal and non-verbal language of participants and the analysis of such language (Williams 2019). Cohen *et al.* (2007) believe that transcriptions inevitably lose data from the social encounter. However, the researcher ensured that the data was viewed through the eyes of a person by depicting and understanding the emotions and experiences of the participants. The researcher audio recorded the interviews but also made written notes of when a participant was demonstrating a strong emotion or feeling. This was further supported by listening back to the audio tapes and listening for differences in the tone of the participant's voice, the inflection of their voice and where there was any emphasis placed by the participants.

The research design drew on thematic analysis methods. A limited number of themes were identified using thematic analysis by associating and refining emerging topics that adequately reflected the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). A rich, detailed and sometimes complex account of data can be provided through the flexible and useful research tool of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This method will be explained in more detail in section 3.5.1.

3.5.1 Thematic Analysis

It was decided to use a thematic analysis approach towards the data gathered. The researcher adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis model as the structure for their analysis (See Figure 3.2). The researcher will discuss each of the six-steps in detail.

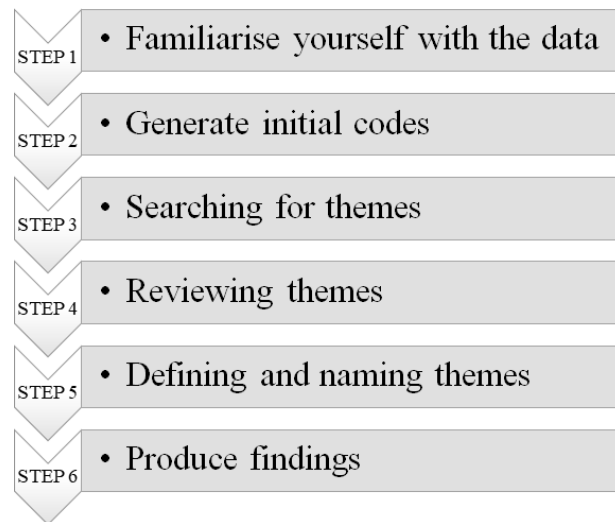


Figure 3.2 Thematic Analysis Approach (Braun and Clarke 2006)

1. Familiarise yourself with the data

This initial step involved the researcher becoming familiar with the data by listening to the audio of the six participant recordings a number of times before initiating the transcription process. While listening to the audio repeatedly, the researcher noted down initial ideas and reflections. Becoming familiar with the data was a necessary step before the researcher could start the next phase of analysis. An important step in the data analysis was transcribing the interview audio (See Appendix 2). The researcher included the literal statements and included any noteworthy non-verbal and para-linguistic communications (Hycner 1985).

The recordings and the transcriptions were approached with an openness to emerging significances. This meant that the researcher suspended their own meanings and interpretations and viewed the data from the position of the participants. The background and matrices of the participants' viewpoint and philosophy were used in order to understand the meaning of what participants were saying, rather than what the researcher expected them to say (Hycner 1985).

2. Generate initial codes

One of the challenges of qualitative analysis is reducing the amount of written data to convenient and understandable amounts (Cohen *et al.* 2007). This challenge was addressed by a process known as coding. Ryan and Bernard (2003) position thematic coding as a process performed within many analytic traditions, such as thematic analysis.

The coding framework started with three categories revolving around all three parts of the research questions and the tricomponent model of attitudes discussed earlier. Appendix 3 is

included and provides a sample of the line by line coding of interview data. The first category was on the participants' beliefs and thoughts about SSE; their fundamental understanding of SSE. The second category was their emotions and feelings; whether the participants had positive or negative tendencies towards SSE. Lastly, the third category was on the participant's behaviours and actions; it related to their implementation procedures and practices towards SSE.

3. Searching for themes

After the data was categorised into the three sections, the next step was to search for themes. Codes were organised into possible themes and data from the transcriptions were gathered relevant to each theme. At this stage when the themes were identified, the coded data was placed into an Excel Spreadsheet giving each theme identified a title. Appendix 4 is included and provides samples of curated Excel sheets identifying themes that emerged.

4. Reviewing themes

Similarities and differences were identified through constant comparisons between emerging themes. This led to the researcher discovering more abstract understandings of the themes, leading to their theoretical clarification and to the development of more complete analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Strauss and Corbin 1998).

5. Defining and naming themes

The specifics of each theme were developed which led to the overall story that the analysis communicated. Consequently this led to the generation of clear descriptions and headings for each theme.

6. Produce findings

The researcher was very conscious of making connections between the themes to the research questions in relation to the attitudes and experiences of the participants towards SSE. Creswell (2009) states that making interpretation or meaning of the data is the final step in data analysis. In line with the inductive nature of the research method, some themes were discovered that had not been identified and this directed the researcher to revisit the topic in the literature review section. A significant example of this was the theme of reflection.

3.6 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

In this section the researcher will outline how the findings of the research were validated. Qualitative researchers rely on validity and reliability as markers of effective research (Cohen

et al. 2007). Creswell (2009) recognizes that the researcher's subjectivity must be considered, particularly in relation to findings, no matter how refined or logical the data analysis is. These indicators do not merge effectually with the qualitative data collected within this research and therefore, a more appropriate criteria for assessing the worthiness of this research was sought. This research embraced Tracy's (2010) eight criteria of qualitative quality research, as summarised in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4 Tracy's Criteria (2010)

Worthy Topic	The topic of SSE is relevant, timely, significant and interesting due to the lack of literature available giving a voice to the primary school principal on the relevantly recent policy of SSE.
Rich Rigour	This research ensures rich rigour as the research is founded on strong theoretical concepts as outlined in the Methodology section. The data collection method employed generated a wealth of data. The thematic analysis process employed ensued a comprehensive approach was taken in generating a data audit trail. The richness of data is also perceptible in the data extracts evidenced findings outlined in the next section.
Sincerity	The researcher exerts self-reflexivity throughout the research. Possible bias is reflected upon in the Methodology section. The researcher is transparent regarding approaches to the research design, data collection and data analysis.
Credibility	Credibility is achieved in this research with the density of description throughout. Credibility was sought by having six sources of data and ensuring participant validation of the interview transcripts.
Resonance	Whilst this research involves a small sample of six principals, the rationale underpinning the research and the expressions of participants in the data extracts should be familiar to other primary school principals.
Significant Contribution	An exploration of current literature explores a considerable knowledge gap surrounding primary school principals' attitudes and experiences of SSE in Ireland. This research, whilst small scale, shares insights of principals' attitudes and experiences of SSE, suggests innovative findings and confirms pre-existing findings consistent with the existing literature.
Ethical	An ethically robust research has been designed following ethical procedures of the researcher's educational institution and ethical permission was granted prior to implementation. The researcher endeavoured to ensure existing ethics in the sharing of the findings and in the analysis of the findings (See Appendix 5).
Meaningful Coherence	The research explored primary principals' attitudes and experiences of SSE. The data collection method facilitated this exploration in replying to the research questions underpinning the research. The research meaningfully interrelates the literature, the research questions, the findings and conclusions.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter Three described explicitly the design, justification of the research methodology and data analysis carried out within this qualitative research. This chapter details the findings that have emerged from the rigorous exploration and analysis of the data. It will address the overarching research questions underpinning the research. The purpose of this research is to investigate primary school principals' attitudes and experiences of SSE. The research also sought to discover the implementation practices and who is involved in SSE within the participants' school setting. The researcher will focus on the cognitive, affective and behavioural compartments of the principals' attitudes and experiences towards SSE. This section will therefore address these overarching research questions underpinning the research.

The researcher wanted to let the research participant's voices be heard. The subsections reflect the themes that have emerged from the analysis of the data. These themes will be supported by extracts from the data. The data collected in this research arose from six semi-structured interviews with primary school principals. The findings evolving from each participant are not considered in isolation but interwoven and subsequently presented thematically. The four overarching themes that have emanated from the data are:

1. Reflection
2. Improvement
3. Distributive Leadership Style
4. Autonomy

This section contains a breakdown of the main themes which emerged in the data gathering. When prompted to discuss SSE, the participant's responses covered a wide range of benefits and were relatively comprehensive. Parallels emerged in responses, with the participants mentioning several comparable benefits of SSE. The central themes and subthemes will be revisited in this section of the research paper. The researcher will isolate these emergent themes by attributing relevant participant's quotes to further validate the interpretation of the data which forms the basis of an analysis of findings throughout this section. The researcher looked at common aspects in relation to the research in the literature review, thus ensuring that the researcher was mindful of how the findings compared to existing findings and research. On the whole, the findings about SSE reflected what is in the literature review section.

The researcher adopted a narrative style for discussing the findings as this would be the most appropriate method due to the use of semi-structured interviews. Saunders *et al.* (2009) highlight that this approach is suitable for in-depth and semi-structured interview data collection methods, as it permits the researcher to preserve the honesty and integrity of the data (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

4.2 REFLECTION

The researcher began each of the semi-structured interviews by asking the participants what was their understanding of the term SSE and what it meant to them. The researcher sensed this was a significant question to establish a baseline of the participants' attitudes towards SSE. From the commencement of conducting the interviews, the term SSE was clearly understood by all the participants. This added to the depth and wealth of the interviews and also increased the validity of the findings.

From the outset it was clear that the participants understood the fundamentals of SSE. They conversed openly and recognised some common components and features one would normally associate with SSE:

My understanding of SSE is that it's a process for schools to take a look at what they are doing, where it is that they might improve and what they can do to improve. (Larry)

It's a process whereby schools stop, look, reflect, think about where they're at and self-evaluate and see where they need to move forward for the good of the learning needs of the children. (Amy)

The theme of reflection that emerged from the interviews gives an indication of the positive prerequisite attitude and experience that primary school principals have regarding SSE. Reflection was identified as crucial and essential to the SSE process. One participant stated that:

SSE is for all schools to look at themselves, reflect on what is going on well in the school and what we need to improve in the school. (Sean)

Another participant placed even more emphasis on the importance of reflection when stating that:

I think the most important thing is to try and make teachers more reflective, try to get us all to reflect on our own practice. (Adam)

The high level of awareness of the importance of reflection is also evident in the primary school principals' responses as reflected in the following comment that:

My leadership and management is getting better because of my reflection. I can use this then school wide, so for example in school self-evaluation. (Sean)

Some of the participants highlighted the role of reflection as an evaluative tool and as an integral part of SSE:

It's a process whereby schools stop, look, reflect, think about where they're at and self-evaluate and see where they need to move forward for the good of the learning needs of the children. (Amy)

SSE encourages schools to be reflective and this was perceived by the participants to be a theoretically positive development:

Individual teachers at the school collectively have to examine their practice and change the things they are doing. (Larry)

Something that I would have picked up from others was having a section in the Cuntas Miosúil that specifically was about SSE and writing in what aspect of your practice or the work you carried out that month that fell in the remit of SSE. That's reflecting on it and making people think about it. (Adam)

The findings from the data gathered would concur with those in the literature review as regards reflection and its importance to SSE. MacBeath (2005) and Van Petegem *et al.* (2005) advocate that reflection is the key to successful SSE. The six participants interviewed all clearly highlighted the importance of reflection and its importance for achieving high quality SSE in their schools. All participants placed huge emphasis on the reflective character of SSE and the reflective style of practice exhibited by their schools. In line with Vanhoof *et al.* (2009), the fundamental assumption from the data demonstrates that the extent to which a school undertakes and is committed towards a reflective style of practice and approach, will determine the quality of SSE.

4.3 IMPROVEMENT

Improvement was a dominant thread revealed by most participants as an apparent benefit of SSE. The process of SSE to result in school improvement was mentioned by many of the participants:

My understanding of SSE is that it's a process for schools to take a look at what they are doing, where it is that they might improve and what they can do to improve. (Larry)

SSE is our chance as a school to look at an aspect of it, see where we are going with it, are we doing it well, how we are doing, how we can improve on it. (Jack)

It is evident from these quotations that SSE is perceived as a viable platform for school improvement (Clift *et al.* 1987; Kyriakides and Campbell 2004). However, while it was often stated by the participants that improvement was a benefit and ultimate reason for SSE, the participants failed to disclose their understanding of the term improvement. The rationale and one of the key logics mentioned in the literature review about SSE is improvement. This was also part of the cognitive reasoning for SSE as supported by some of the participants:

SSE is a formal process that leads to a whole school approach. From that point of view I would see it as something that can improve things. (Larry)

But SSE is basically you looking at your school and finding out how you can improve it. (Sean)

Although many of the participants mentioned change as a purpose for SSE it was in the context of change to bring about improvement:

It is really about a change that is going to improve things. (Larry)

The quotes selected in this section best reflect the participant's initial insights about SSE. There was much similarity and commonality in the attitudes and experiences of the participants towards SSE. There was no indication of the economic logic for SSE as outlined by MacBeath (2006). The participant's attitudes and experiences were certainly positive towards SSE as demonstrated the importance of reflection and that the overall purpose of SSE is for improvement. The themes of reflection and improvement could be argued as Gladwell's (2000) 'stick factors'.

4.4 DISTRIBUTIVE LEADERSHIP

To answer the second part of the research question as regards the implementation practices towards SSE and who is involved in its implementation, the researcher got the participants to converse on the level of their involvement with SSE and the involvement of other relevant stakeholders. As outlined in the literature review, Gladwell (2000) outlines three agents of change. This section will look at who the 'vital few' are in relation to SSE (Gladwell 2000). In

the discussions on this matter, the participants mentioned children, parents, teachers, In School Management Teams (ISMT), Boards of Management and the Inspectorate. The level of involvement of these various stakeholders raised many similar opinions, but especially concerning the degree and the importance of the involvement of teachers.

Participants were receptive to the involvement of pupils and parents in the SSE process:

I would like to think – everybody is involved in SSE, for example our parents, our children, our teachers and myself. (Sean)

If it is done really the way ideally it should be done, parents are fully aware that the school is working away on whatever they are working on. They have a role to play in it. (Larry)

However, parental involvement was viewed less as a support and more as a means of raising awareness:

After that the involvement of parents through questionnaires, the involvement of pupils and obviously the Board of Management in the sense of keeping them abreast of things, keep them up to date on things. (Adam)

The majority of participants supported parental involvement, however, expressions of concern in relation to getting universal agreement and adequate feedback in relation to SSE were noted:

The bigger the school is, the more teachers there are and the more stakeholders there are and the bigger number of people, the harder it is to get everybody on the same wave length or in agreement that this is something that needs to be done. (Larry)

There are parental surveys that go out alright. To be honest, there is a quite poor return in our parental surveys. (Sean)

Mixed responses were recorded in relation to the extent to which the parents and the pupils should be involved with SSE. Concern emanated by some participants who felt it was important that parents and pupils would not have the dominant role in relation to SSE. The following statement depicts this concern:

A lot of it has to come from the staff because they're the people that you are going to be asking to make the improvements anyway. (Sean)

This form of distributed leadership resonates with the view of Harris (2003) that it is a direct result of principal and teacher interaction. Although all the participants valued the input of parents and children, the participants emphasised the role the teachers played, especially in setting the initial focus for SSE, as pivotal:

SSE is going to come initially from the teaching staff of the school. (Larry)

Certainly at the beginning it was a whole staff involvement. (Adam)

Our first thing is that we discuss it as a staff at a staff meeting. (Jack)

But the focus would always come from a discussion, an open ended discussion meetings with the staff. (Jack)

4.4.1 Collaboration

An important subtheme that emerged was that SSE can encourage teachers to work together in a more collaborative manner. It also led some of the participants to reflect on the wider benefits and significances of collaboration that SSE can yield:

When I started teaching first, you went into your classroom and closed the door and you were king. It didn't matter what happened or didn't happen, you just did it. Whereas now there is more collaboration and professional discourse. (Larry)

It is all about collaboration. It's not just for one person. I am delighted how we came together as a staff. (Amy)

To give people the opportunity to collaborate and plan together on a set of agreed targets that you can continue to push and refresh. (Adam)

Everything comes together in collaboration with the staff. (Jack)

Many of the participants highlighted the necessity of staff buy in for SSE to succeed and to be successful:

When the staff are saying it, and it's not me that's saying it, then it is an easy thing to be pushed through. (Sean)

It needs buy in from everybody if it is going to be implemented. (Larry)

The role of the ISMT in influencing SSE was also acknowledged by some of the participants:

We would have middle management within the school we would have meetings before the staff meetings to decide how we are going to go about it. How we are going to deal with the feedback we are going to get from the staff. (Sean)

It is driven essentially by post holders on the In School Management Team. (Larry)

The data gave an indication of the type of leadership style adopted by the participants. The distributive leadership style outlined in the literature review and promoted by the DES (2016b) was evident throughout the data. This could be best summed up by the following participants:

It is important that teachers take on leadership roles themselves, that we are building leadership capacity. (Larry)

My role as principal to lead this and to ensure that there is good collaboration, that it is a team effort. That everybody is on board. (Amy)

As long as there is a process happening, I'm happy. I really do my best not to take over. (Clive)

One respondent explicitly mentioned that:

It's important that there is Distributed Leadership there. (Amy)

Contrary to Davies and Rudd's (2000) research, the data highlighted that ownership of SSE is not just confined to those in leadership positions. If leadership is influence, then teachers exercise leadership every day. The participants were unified in the need for distributed leadership to address the complexity of the challenges and to carry the burden of leading (Harris 2013).

The participants certainly have positive attitudes towards SSE and its benefits were addressed with ease. The participant's undoubtedly positive attitudes towards SSE were evident, and they reported it led to reflection and collaboration practices in the school. The leadership style adopted by the participants towards SSE was predominantly a distributive leadership style. This distributive leadership style demonstrates the participant's behaviour and actions towards SSE. It revealed a positive attitude and invites the development of a collaborative culture within their schools. This leadership style resonates with Fullan's (1991) claim that influencing school culture is the most important job for the participants. Fletcher and Kaufer's (2003) definition of distributed leadership is evident in the participant's responses, as more than one person is involved in exercising and influencing the SSE process. The participants also recognised their

role in fostering collaboration amongst teachers and that this in turn would lead to improvements in teaching and learning and ultimately enhance pupil learning.

The distributive leadership as described by Gronn (2002) and Spillane (2006) were certainly evident in the participants' responses; the focus was on the cooperation of all the team as a whole. The decision making was overseen by the interaction of those involved, rather than by a limited number of people in leadership roles.

The participants also placed huge emphasis on achieving staff buy in for SSE to be successful. The theme that emerged was that the participants emphasised the advantages of getting the school and staff to take ownership of the process. The *vital few* for the participants were certainly the teachers within the school and the importance of their role for the successful implementation of SSE (Gladwell 2000) .

4.5 AUTONOMY

Gladwell's (2000) *stickiness factor* is notable in relation to the theme of autonomy that emerged from the data. The participants highlighted the benefits that SSE gives to schools as regards autonomy. This theme answered the third part of the research question as the level of involvement vis-à-vis the Inspectorate prompted differing responses pertaining to SSE. The Inspectorate's SSE advisory support visit seemed to have been a positive experience for the participants who availed of it. The participants noted the supportive and reassuring nature of the visits in affirming their approach to SSE:

From my experience having engaged with them specifically around SSE it was supportive. (Adam)

It was a positive experience, one that was advisory, one that was supportive, and one that encouraged reflection on the part of the professionals within the school. (Adam)

I found that the visit from the Inspector was very helpful, it was advisory. (Amy)

This finding would be in line with Harris and Lambert (2003) who argued that school improvement works best when there is more support than pressure on schools. The paradox associated with SSE, as outlined in the literature review, began to emerge when the participants were discussing the perceived purpose of SSE. This paradox exists due to the complexity of conflict between whether SSE is about giving schools the autonomy to bring about improvement or whether it for accountability purposes. Concerning autonomy and SSE, one respondent stated that:

The thing that I like about SSE is that it gives a huge amount of autonomy to schools.
(Adam)

It's certainly is an initiative of the education sector that I have found to be beneficial in that we have autonomy, we have the independence to go choose what way we look at it. (Adam)

While autonomy was mentioned by all of the participants, the relationship between SSE and accountability did not come to the fore in any of the interviews. This would demonstrate that the participants did not ultimately view SSE as a process of accountability but fundamentally as a means of bringing about improvement in the school:

SSE to me has always been a way of "How do we make the school a better place?"
(Clive)

As regards the role of the Inspectorate in relation to SSE, the participants displayed strong emotions and attitudes that the Inspectorate's role was minimal:

I think SSE would fall down if it was case that it was the Inspector coming in telling, a dictate from on high, telling us that this is what you should be doing. (Adam)

To me their role is quite minimal. In our school, to be honest with you, we lead it, we assess it and we have a look to see if it is working. I don't need an Inspector to tell me if it is working or not. I know if it is working in my school. I don't really need an external person to come in and tell me. (Clive)

The participants posited the fact that if the Inspectorate operated in a more interfering capacity in relation to SSE, that this would make SSE more externally directed and therefore undermine the SSE process and the schools autonomy over the process. This was certainly a very strong attitude that emerged from the data and can be summed up by the following participant:

Whether there's a role for the inspectors I don't see it as a major roles to be honest with you. I would see it is as school business. I'm not saying that they should not know about it, but I see it as more of an internal school business rather than for an external evaluator. (Larry)

It is evident from the data that the participants view SSE as a positive initiative. However, this can only remain so if schools and principals have the 'legendary autonomy' they deserve (Coolahan 2003). They clearly view that it is a system to bring about improvement within the

school and that the Inspector's role is one of supporting the process. They view WSEs as a form of external evaluation, whose purpose is one of accountability. The apparent paradox in relation to SSE and its purpose, outlined in the literature review, was not evident in these responses from the participants.

4.6 CHALLENGES

Overall, the data illustrates that the participants have positive attitudes and experiences towards SSE. However, as pointed out by Saunders *et al.* (2009), qualitative research permits the investigation into areas that had not been previously considered and that discussing these may enhance the understanding of the specific topic. A number of challenges in relation to SSE were highlighted by the participants.

4.6.1 Paperwork and Time

Uniformity emerged in the responses of the participants to this particular theme. The majority of the participants make reference to the overload and intensity of paperwork. They also highlighted the lack of allocated time to engage with SSE. They were concerned that this would lead to SSE becoming a box ticking exercise rather than engaging with SSE in a measured and meaningful manner. SSE was referred to, explicitly or implicitly, as a possible bureaucratic requirement. This sentiment was best summed up by the following quote:

At the start I would have seen it very much as a tick the box type of procedure. (Sean)

A direct response explicitly stated by one participant on the workload associated with SSE was that:

The challenge is always paperwork. (Clive)

The intensification of workload was a theme which unified many of the participants. Participants spoke of the particular pressures on time. The extra work and administrative duties associated with SSE have become an extra burden for the participants. One of the participants also noted the challenges associated with the increase of inspections and evaluations:

I do think the time involved is a challenge. (Larry)

I do see a bit of a conflict though in how many systems of school evaluation are we going to have? (Larry)

Initiative overload and therefore the lack of time for SSE was referenced by many of the participants. Due to the introduction of other major initiatives the participants highlighted the challenges of finding time for SSE:

Schools are very, very busy places. It is a challenge having the time for it and getting it implemented. (Larry)

These differing but overlapping perspectives on the lack of time were strongly reflected in the interviews with the principals in the study.

4.6.2 Initiative Overload

A recurring sentiment in the participant's responses revealed fatigue due to the increasing number of concurrent initiatives being embedded at once. A level of frustration in the participant's responses verified their concerns about initiative overload and reform fatigue. One participant stated clearly that:

The challenges are that it keeps coming hard and fast, along with these other initiatives and a lot of other stuff running in the school at the same time. (Jack)

The participant's felt that a more simplified approach and process of SSE would increase its effectiveness. There was a concern that the importance of SSE would subsequently diminish due to other emerging initiatives and due to its complex process:

I think they have made SSE a little too complicated. (Larry)

This sentiment would echo the simpler version of SSE, as outlined in the literature review, as adapted by the Scottish Inspectorate (HM Inspectorate of Education 2001).

Some of the participants expressed concern regarding the difficulty of maintaining staff momentum with the ongoing, continuous nature of the SSE process:

A challenge was for all staff to keep their focus. (Amy)

4.6.3 Evaluation Fatigue

A variety of inspection models are employed by the DES and the Inspectorate to evaluate schools (See Appendix 6). Within the interviews it was evident that there were concerns over this 'evaluation fatigue'. The participants spoke about the numerous evaluation models that now exist within the school system (The Inspectorate 2016):

I do see a bit of a conflict though in how many systems of school evaluation are we going to have? We have different models of WSEs; subject evaluations, incidental visits, and special education inspections. There are that many different forms of evaluations now. It can be a bit confusing. (Larry)

Although the participants outlined the challenges of paperwork, time, initiative overload and evaluation fatigue associated with SSE, these clearly did not outweigh the benefits of reflection, improvement, collaboration and autonomy that were highlighted by the participants.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 LIMITATIONS

Although this study was appropriate in answering the research questions, it is not without some limitations. The research was undertaken to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of the attitudes and experiences of six primary school principals towards SSE. In particular it looked at the cognitive, affective and behavioural compartments of their attitudes. This qualitative research necessitated having a small sample due to the intensive and detailed work required for the research. While the views held by the six primary school principals were important to answering the specific research questions, further research would benefit from including the views of a more extensive cohort of principals and teachers.

At primary school level a teacher's role is pivotal and is acknowledged by the researcher. The lack of involvement of the pupils' and parents' voice could be also considered a limitation. Partnership consultation is considered an important component in education and this research would have benefitted from including their voices. However, due to the time constraints and limits pertaining to the scope and size of the research, the inclusion of all these groups was not feasible. This research may resonate with fellow practitioners and begin to provide an insight into an area that has a lack of literature regarding the attitudes and experiences of primary school principals towards SSE. A longitudinal study into the attitudes and experiences of primary school principals towards SSE may be beneficial.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Three important recommendations emanate from this study. Firstly, schools must be provided with the adequate allocated time to guide and enhance further their skills in reflection and collaboration. These were clearly viewed by the participants to be important factors for effective SSE. Secondly, a more simplified approach to the process of SSE, similar to Scotland (HM Inspectorate of Education 2001), would reduce some of the challenges of paperwork and time constraints experienced by many primary school principals. The researcher believes this would ultimately result in an improved and more effective approach to the SSE process. Thirdly, that the Inspectorate continue to support schools to ensure that schools retain the autonomy to conduct their own SSE. These recommendations would certainly further enhance the positive attitudes and experiences of primary school principals towards SSE.

5.3 CONCLUSION

This research study had the overall aim of exploring primary principals' attitudes and experiences of SSE. Figure 5.1 summarises the research findings. The findings of this research that emerged from the themes identified, concludes the significantly positive experiences of participants engaging in the SSE process which is largely reflective of findings throughout Irish and international literature.

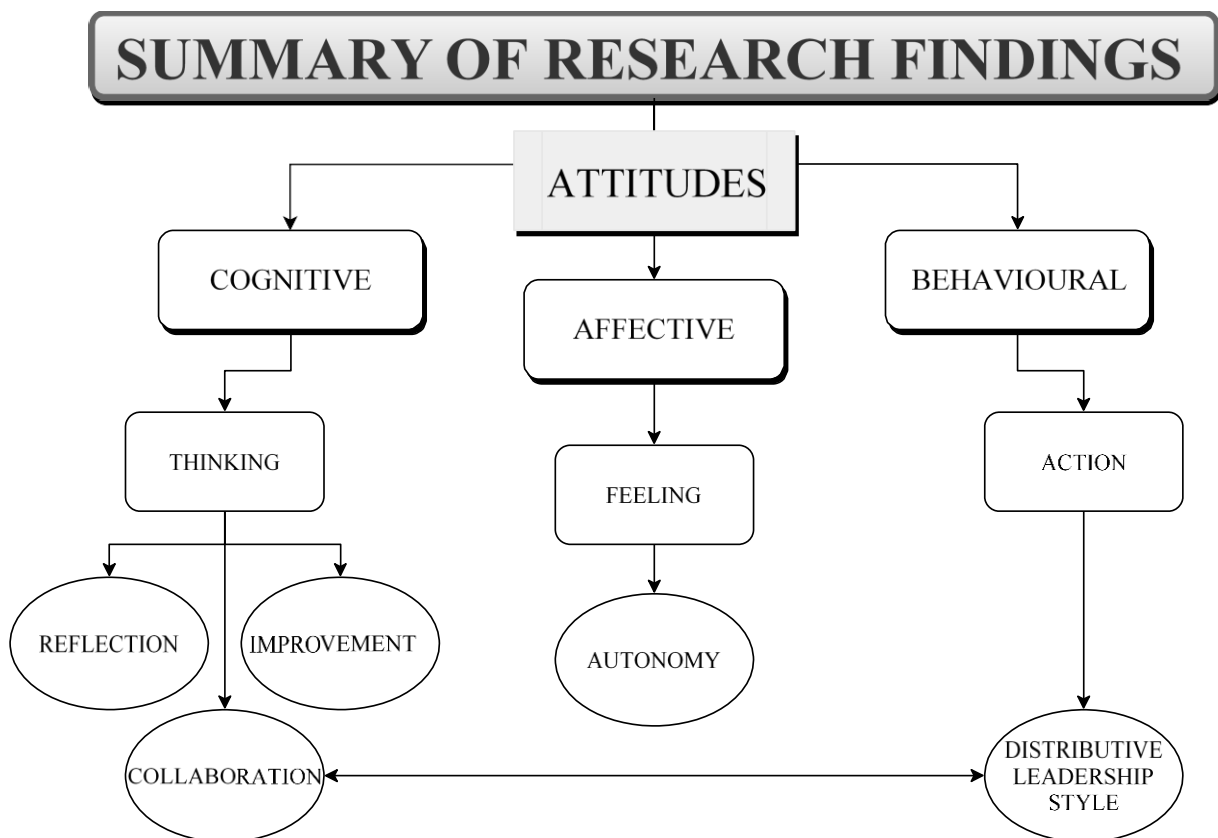


Figure 5.1 Summary of Research Findings

After analysing the data gathered through semi-structured interviews, the researcher can confidently conclude that the participants unilaterally have positive attitudes and experiences towards SSE. As previously revealed in prior research, SSE is perceived as a process that allows and develops reflection and collaboration (Fullan 1991; Brownell *et al.* 1997; Blase and Blase 2002; Spillane *et al.* 2004; MacBeath 2005; Van Petegem *et al.* 2005). The participants predominately employ a distributive leadership style towards implementing the SSE process as supported and promoted by the DES (2016a). However, contrary to some of the literature,

the research data demonstrates a positive attitude and experience of principals towards SSE partly due to the autonomy that it gives schools to decide and implement their own evaluation (McNamara and O'Hara 2006).

The findings clearly show that the participant's view of the purpose of SSE is to accomplish improvement within the school and therefore they view it as a worthwhile initiative. This finding would correlate with the study by Clift *et al.* (1987) and align with the DES (2016a) who advocate that SSE should be linked with school improvement from the outset. The participants' positive cognitive, affective and conative elements of their attitude towards SSE are only slightly overshadowed by the paperwork and time constraints, initiative overload and evaluation fatigue that they experience.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Interview Topic Guide

General

What is your understanding of the term SSE? The purpose of SSE?

How did SSE contribute to and inform your school improvement target area? Did SSE impact on school improvement? Why/Why not?

What worked well in SSE? What were the critical success factors?

Who is involved in SSE in your school? Whole school approach? The ‘vital few’?

What Leadership style is necessary to meaningfully engage in SSE?

Inspectorate

Is it possible for a school to reflect on its own practice with the necessary distance and objectivity without the help of external agents? Welcoming of the external eye? The Inspectorate?

Which is more beneficial – External Evaluation or Internal Evaluation? Does External Evaluation (WSE) complement Internal Evaluation (SSE)? Can External Evaluation stimulate Internal Evaluation?

Change

Can SSE be used as a tool to bring about change/implement change/curriculum change in a school context? How?

Challenges

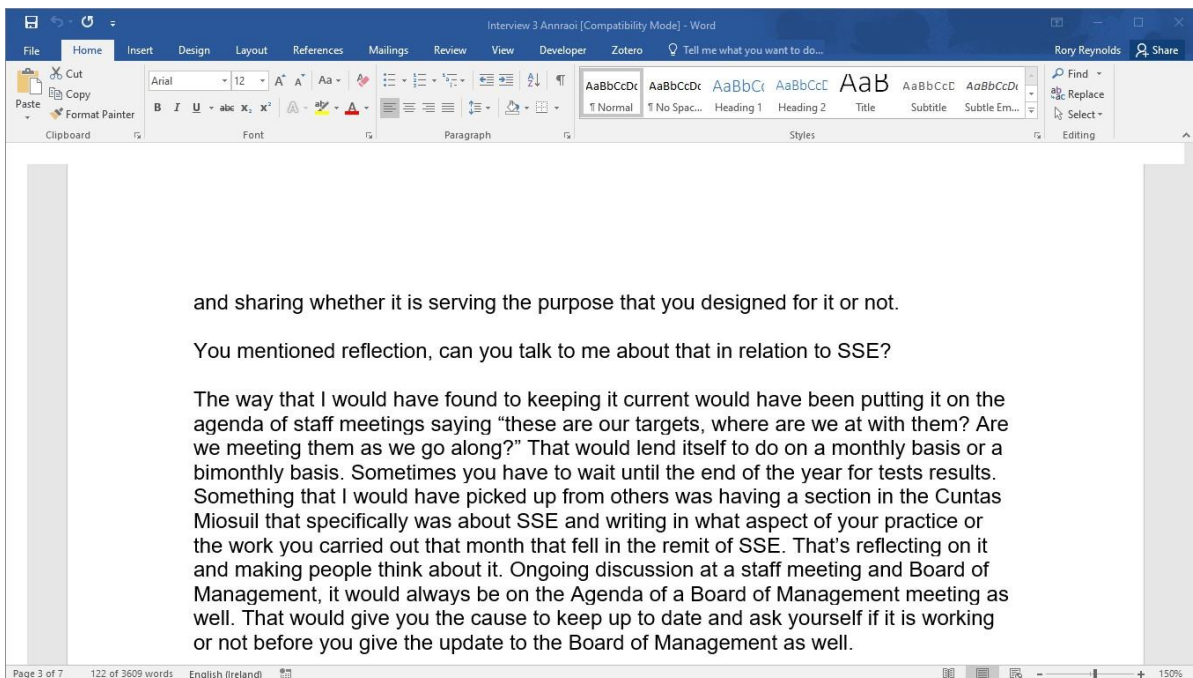
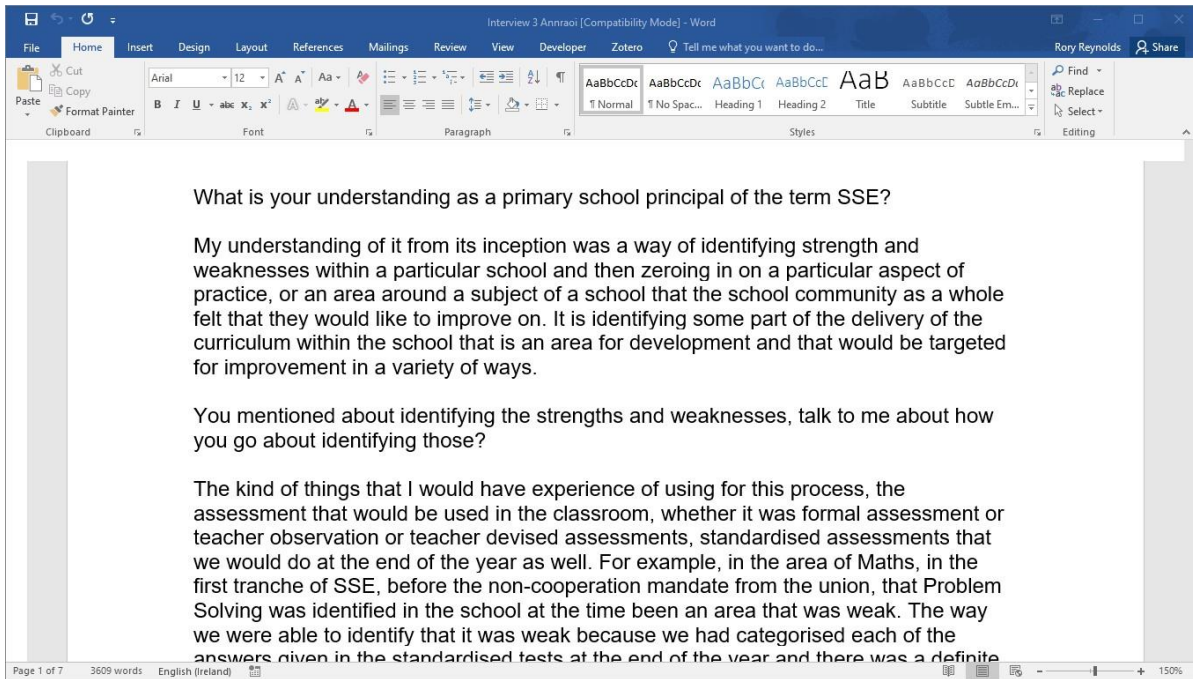
What were the challenges and how were they overcome? What are the limits and merits of current school self-evaluation practices?

Is SSE a process of continuing development/a process rather than an event?

Can schools make the right decisions to take actions, based on the results of a self-evaluation process?

What structures, processes and supports need to be put in place to enable an approach based on SSE to be successfully implemented?

Appendix 2 Sample Transcripts of an Interview



Appendix 3 Sample of Line by Line Coding

Interview Transcription (Clive)	Coding Categories
The challenge is always paperwork.	Cognitive/Affective
From an administration side of it I wonder is there any need for a lot of the paperwork.	Affective
It has skimmed down to be fair but things like a 3 year plan and all that kind of stuff, putting in a yearly plan.	Cognitive/Behavioural
A lot of these things you are writing for the sake of writing.	Cognitive/Behavioural
There is other things going on in the school, along with SSE, that are happening kind of organically anyway and you are not going to be putting into paper.	Cognitive/Behavioural
That is a challenge, the paperwork is always a challenge.	Cognitive/Affective/Behavioural
Teachers don't like doing it, the committee members don't like doing it and I don't like doing it.	Affective/Behavioural
Paperwork becomes an issue when somebody is looking for it, "where is your proof of SSE?"	Cognitive/Behavioural

Appendix 4 Sample of Excel Thematic Analysis

INTERVIEW 1 Sean

2 SSE is for all schools to look at themselves reflect on what is going on well in the school what we need to improve in the school.

3 Reflection for me happens on a daily basis.

4 Being able to look at your surroundings and how you can make yourself better. I would make myself look back on a term or something I have done and be able to reflect on it.

5 My leadership and management is getting better because of my reflection. I can use this then in schoolwide so for example in school self-evaluation.

6 I could then look at it and use my reflection methodology to impact change within the school.

7 It is good that we can actually sit down and say "what we are doing good in the school?" It's good to look at that at least once a year. What we do good in the school, what we need to reflect on make ourselves a little better.

8 there is a kind of structure there for you to go about it and put in the improvement plan and to look back at the end of the year and look at standardised test results and see did we improve or didn't we? Did actually improve?

9 We evaluate everything and go right back to the roots of the problem.

10 You looking at what we do well, what we don't do well,

11 But SSE is basically you looking at your school and finding out how you can improve it.

12 We would use the Scott Analysis to figure out how the school is getting on and what are the challenges and opportunities in our school. I always think that is a good thing to start on at the start of a year. It is a good thing to start on.

13 The Scott Analysis is a really good way to focus the teachers on what's going well and what other teachers look at as well. I think mentimeter etc. gives a voice to everybody on your staff, not just the 3 or 4 who talk.

14

INTERVIEW 2 Larry

16 My understanding of SSE is that it's a process for schools to take a look at what they are doing, where it is that they might improve and what they can do to improve.

17 SSE is going to come initially from the teaching staff of the school.

18 I suppose, it will be led by the teachers in terms of taking a look at the curriculum, one of the 11 curricular areas and trying to identify an area where they feel the school could improve.

19 Discussions around trying to identify some particular focus. I do think it's kind of important that schools would identify something specific. Not too wide like a whole subject, pick an aspect of a subject, it could be a particular area.

20 They have some base evidence that backs up their choice of particular area to focus on. They can see that it needs improvement, rather than just feel that it needs improvement.

21 Teachers could sit down and say that there are twenty different things to improve in a particular school at any particular time but what is there to say that there is actually a need for improvement in a particular area?

22 When they have their focus and they have their little bit of research done in terms of they have gathered up some sort of evidence, the work out some sort of a plan to work on, to improve, a target in a particular area.

23 Teachers were always. I think, professionally discussing and examining their own practice, what was working well for them and what wasn't working well.

Reflection | Collaboration | Buy in Staff | Improvement | Change | Inspector's Visit | WSE | Challenges | Who is Involved | Principal's Role | Autonomy ...

INTERVIEW 3 Adam

20 First of all educating people and making them aware of the philosophy of it, what SSE was, what it is that we had to do from a Circular point of view.

21 Making everyone aware of the fact that this is what we are being asked to do, so how do you suggest we go about it?

22 In my instance, it would have been myself as Principal making people aware.

23 Initially the Principal giving the load down to what this might have been.

24 Certainly initially it would have been the Principal down to the teachers and then wider questioning of the school community and the setting of targets to operate within the school.

25 To give people opportunities to engage with CPD in the first instance, to engage with the curriculum.

26 To engage with an examination of what is current practice.

27 So giving people the opportunity to look at these things and to think about what is their current practice, what are they teaching currently, what do they want the children to learn, what would we like the children to learn?

28 Making people aware of it as much as anything else.

29 As a school Principal you are aware of these things, you are engaging in further study, you are very much aware and au fait with what is going on and what the recommendations are as well.

30 So to keep that current and to give people the opportunity to collaborate and plan together on a set of agreed targets that you can continue to push and refresh.

31 The responsibility, at a very nitty gritty point of view as Principal is to keep that current, to put up that note on Aladdin to remind people

32 Really and truly you are talking about the Principal to keep thing current and the post holder for that particular subject and then you are leaving it to the class teachers to drive it within their rooms.

33

INTERVIEW 4 Amy

35 My role as Principal to lead this and to ensure that there is good collaboration, that it is a team effort. That everybody is on board.

36 It's important that there is Distributed Leadership there.

37 So as a leader it is important for me to have and to lead that discussion and to give opportunities for that discussion.

38 It was then up to me though as well, as the Principal, to ensure that, for example, I had all the resources together.

39 That I relayed the information from the Inspector clearly.

40 There is Distributive Leadership and Transformational Leadership involved.

41

| Reflection | Collaboration | Buy in Staff | Improvement | Change | Inspector's Visit | WSE | Challenges | Who is Involved | **Principal's Role** | Autonomy ...

Information Sheet

Invitation

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Purpose

The purpose of this research and data collection is to write a dissertation as part of the award of a Master of Arts in Learning and Teaching with Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT), Donegal, Ireland

This research will investigate School Self-Evaluation (SSE) processes and culture at the level of primary schools. The study will offer an analysis of principals' perceptions and understandings of SSE. The aim is to understand principals' attitudes, experiences and different perspectives at a time of considerable change in schools, both in terms of practice and in terms of theoretical models.

The research and interview will be conducted by Mr Rory Reynolds. The supervisor for the dissertation is Ms Claire Galligan (LYIT).

Participation

The objectives of this study are to gain an insight into primary school principal's perceptions on SSE. The data collected can be used to add to the current literature on SSE in Irish Primary Schools. As you are a primary school principal located in Co. Donegal, your participation in this interview would be greatly appreciated.

As a participant of this study you would be agreeing to take part in a one-to-one phone interview with the researcher. This interview would last approximately 20 - 45 minutes and will be recorded using a recordable device.

A possible disadvantage to you is the time it takes to complete the interview. Breaks and/or rescheduling of the interview will be offered, should these issues arise. You are also free not to answer any question you may feel uncomfortable with.

Confidentiality

Your involvement in this study is voluntary and will be kept completely confidential. Any data gathered will be kept confidential and you have the right to withdraw from the study up to the data analysis stage. Your identity will remain confidential throughout the study and all data collected will be kept safely on a password protected laptop. Data will be stored in a password protected electronic file. All data will be collected, processed and stored in compliance with relevant data protection legislation and in compliance with the Letterkenny Institute of Technology's guidelines for electronic data storage.

You will be permitted to view all research and transcripts that have taken place concerning your involvement. You can also request a copy of the study from the researcher on completion.

Contact Details

If you require any more information please contact XXXXXX

Thanking you in advance,
Rory Reynolds

Research Participant Consent Form

Title of Project: School Self-Evaluation – Primary Schools Principals’ Perspectives

Name of Researcher: Mr Rory Reynolds

Name of Supervisor: Ms Claire Galligan

I, _____ agree to take part in the above study and consent to my data being used for the purpose of this research study as outlined in the information sheet.

- I confirm that I have been given and have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above study and have asked and received answers to any questions raised
- I understand that I will participate in a 20-45 minutes phone interview which will be audio recorded
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, up to the data analysis stage, without giving a reason and without my rights being affected in any way
- I understand that the researcher will hold all information and data collected securely and in confidence and that all efforts will be made to ensure that I cannot be identified as a participant in the study (except as might be required by law) and I give permission for the researchers to hold relevant personal data on me
- If I withdraw from the study, there will be no negative consequences
- I am aware that should I at any time I feel uncomfortable with being recorded, I can request that the recording equipment be turned off
- I am aware that I am permitted to view all research and transcripts that have taken place concerning my involvement. I can request a copy of the report from the researcher
- All information will be confidential and used only for the purposes of the research study
- I understand that ID codes/pseudonyms will be used to protect my anonymity and confidentiality and names of people and places will be changed
- I agree that quotations may be used for the research

I agree to take part in the above study and consent to my data being used for the purpose of this research study as outlined in the Information Sheet.

Signature of participant: _____ **Date:** _____

Investigator’s signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix 6 Inspection Models

The seven inspection models used in primary schools:

- Incidental Inspection
- Curriculum Evaluation
- Evaluation of Provision for Pupils with Special Educational Needs
- Evaluation of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS Schools
- Whole-School Evaluation-Management, Leadership and Learning
- Whole-School Evaluation
- Follow-through Inspection

(Department of Education & Skills 2016b)

Appendix 7 List of Acronyms

BERA	British Educational Research Association
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ISMT	In-School Management Team
LAOS	Looking At Our School
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SICI.	Association of National and Regional Inspectorates of Education in Europe
SIP	School Improvement Plan
SSE	School Self- Evaluation
WSE	Whole School Evaluation