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From generic skills to behaviour monitoring: exploring materialisations of the key skills framework in public–private relationships

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how responses to a generic skills framework are materialised in Irish schools, and the main aim is to shed light on multiple dimensions of policy enactment. The Key Skills Framework (KSF) was introduced as part of a curricular reform in Irish lower secondary schools – a reform that has met substantial resistance locally and nationally. This study investigated local responses to the KSF specifically by interrogating its particular materialisations in practice through Actor-Network Theory ('spaces of prescription' and 'spaces of negotiation'). The findings indicate that there is an inherent multiplicity to the KSF that nevertheless suggests it has been reduced to represent national traditions of behaviour monitoring and disciplinary routines, rather than intentions of enhancing thinking, learning and living more commonly found in generic skills frameworks. These findings are coupled with discussions of the nature of governing actors in Irish education, including the presence of (new) private vendors.

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Introduction

This article will provide insights into how generic skills (as part of a curriculum reform) are enacted in Irish schools by examining the Key Skills Framework (KSF) in practice. In 2012, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (n.d.) and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) announced a reform plan for post-primary education in Ireland by presenting the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES 2012). The framework introduced significant changes to assessment, and subject syllabuses were now renamed as 'subject specifications' to give significance to generic skills. The changes were, however, heavily contested and were subject to continuous negotiations between DES and the teacher unions (MacPhail, Halbert, and O'Neill 2018). These industrial disputes eventually led to a renewed framework in 2015 (DES 2015). The policy negotiations of the reform have been given vast attention in the literature, especially in relation to changes in external and internal assessments, while simultaneously coupling

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these discussions with other policy initiatives such as school-self-evaluation (Lenihan, Hinchion, and Laurenson 2016; MacPhail, Halbert, and O'Neill 2018; O'Brien et al. 2019). The empirical material of such research focuses primarily on policy actors, teacher unions and local schools, and the negotiations between them. The local negotiations and responses to the Key Skills Framework (KSF) have received less attention, despite it having sparked fundamental changes to subject curricula.

In the wider international discourse, the KSF can be compared to various twenty-first century skills initiatives and reforms, aiming at equipping children with necessary skills and knowledge to be able to adapt to future uncertainties and the future labour market. Such generic skills have been written about vastly in policy research, and it tends to target large international and transnational actors, and connections to neo-liberal reforms (Hilt, Riese, and Søreide 2019; Printer 2020). There has also been some research on the enactment of such generic skills, identifying factors that allow for successful implementation (i.e. González-Pérez and Ramírez-Montoya 2022; Tan 2017; Ward and Parr 2011). Such research usually centres on:

- Contextual factors, i.e. in national and local policy initiatives
- Organisational factors, i.e. school size and governing hierarchies
- Individual factors, i.e. teacher and school leader background and experience.

These literature are characterised by conceptual approaches that work with *a priori* of what key skills mean and as such contribute to establish these types of frameworks as taken-for-granted objects. This follows the logic of the twenty-first century skills agenda in general where it is assumed that educational targets such as learning outcomes and generic skills are the same across different contexts (Edwards 2012). They also set forward distinctions between internal-external, inside-outside, and top–bottom, which in this particular case would prescribe powerful roles to human actors that authorise and execute the main intentions of the framework. This focus can shed light on important negotiations between organisations and human actors, however, these tend to be wider negotiations that are based on professional relationships between schools and governmental agencies. In other words, there has been an emphasis on explaining and foregrounding human actors such as teachers. Such a focus would aim to explain why differences occur in different policy enactments, and generalisations across contexts are common. However, the approach I take in this article, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), works in a different way. I understand education and its policies as a process that necessitates constant micro-negotiations to produce their intended and unintended effects. Rather than looking at the factors of successful implementation, or the factors that contribute to certain differences in implementation, I instead focus more closely on different actors and their actions. This approach is insightful to policy research based on two rationales in particular.

First, it does not reduce a framework like the KSF to a single ontology, and it aims to *show how* rather than explain why (identify factors), by working with multiple negotiations at once. This puts forward a view of practice as inherently multiple, even in activities connected to standardised frameworks like the KSF. It illustrates exactly how these types of frameworks have certain standardised elements while at the same time suggesting uncertainty and flexibility. This two-sided view of policy suggests that frameworks like the KSF need perpetual (negotiating) work. Second, it actively opens up practice by

acknowledging how different materials are enrolled in moments of decision-making, and their role in doing policy. This view positions policy frameworks both as actors in practice by representing an activity and taking part in that activity, as well as it is relational by connecting to a reality that is external to the policy itself (Asdal and Reinertsen 2022). This extends an understanding of policy found in more critical approaches (i.e. Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010) as something more than discursive processes by studying policy as materials with distinct properties that can affect their own content as well as how they are used in practice (Asdal and Reinertsen 2022). The KSF will therefore be examined by looking closely at how practice does and produce the KSF, to shed light on multiple dimensions of policy enactment. The main research question I ask is: how do different responses to the KSF materialise within two different school settings?

The article will continue as follows. The contextual introduction will follow with some brief clarifications of the Irish education system and the KSF. The analytical framework (ANT) will then be presented, and the data and methods section continues the analytical discussions by highlighting how the study is designed to uphold an ANT lens. The analysis will be presented by concentrating on one school at the time. Lastly, the discussion and concluding remarks will point to important empirical findings derived from the analysis, and how these findings can inform on local policy enactments from a theoretical point of view.

Contextual clarifications of the KSF and the Irish education system

In Ireland, 'Junior Cycle' refers to the first 3 years of post-primary education, and kids enrolled in JC are between the ages of 12 and 15. Junior Cycle is usually offered in connection with Senior Cycle (upper secondary), meaning post-primary levels are represented within the same school building under collective school names such as 'Clontarf College' or 'Dublin Secondary School' (fictive names). While the ongoing reform targets both Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle, they belong to separate curriculum frameworks. This paper will only reflect the KSF of Junior Cycle.

The changes promoted in the New Junior Cycle include eight principles that inform the planning, development and implementation of post-primary programs, 24 statements of learning and outcomes to be achieved at the end of junior cycle (lower secondary), classroom-based assessments as a way to balance external examinations, and eight overarching key skills that underpin all parts of the curriculum. The KSF can be divided into two main components: one that targets knowledge skills (being literate and being numerate) and one that targets attitudes and ways of regulating own learning and wellbeing (staying well, communicating, managing myself, managing information and thinking, being creative, and working with others). This implies a shift from content driven learning to skills-based and outcome-based learning, while also encouraging the explicit evaluation of generic skills.

There are mainly three types of secondary schools in Ireland: voluntary secondary schools, comprehensive schools and educate together schools. The school types have different governing structures, whereas voluntary secondary schools and community/comprehensive schools are typically owned and managed by the Catholic Church or a religious community, while educate together schools are non-fee paying schools that are state-funded under Education and Training Boards (ETB). The main difference between their governing structures relates to whether they are privately or publicly

run (with or without religious connections). The majority of post-primary schools in Ireland remain under the patronage of the Catholic Church, and represent a private–public relationship that suggest the Irish school system is 'not strictly public, nor strictly private, but a hybrid' (Rougier and Honohan 2015, p. 73). The educate together schools belong to an independent NGO ('Educate Together') that promotes learning about several religions as opposed to one specific faith and as such represent a different governing structure to that of the public–private schools (Skerritt and Salokangas 2020). The data in this paper draws from two different schools: one voluntary secondary school and one educate together school. These two schools were chosen based on their different governing structures to invoke further examples of local responses, whereas contrasting governing actors may be present. Their role in these enactments will be further problematised in the discussion.

Students in Junior Cycle sit for the Junior Certificate examination at the end of the 3 years. It is an external examination given by the state and is considered to be a 'dry run' for the Leaving Certificate which they have at the end of Senior Cycle (Looney 2006). Irish schools have a long tradition of disciplinary routines in schools, embodied in school uniforms and notebook entries in various formats, but also in more worrisome practices such as corporal punishment. Throughout the 1900s, the Irish Department of Education developed several disciplinary measures for corporal punishment through Rules and Regulations documents that were renewed around every ten years (see for instance Department of Education 1965), before it was officially abolished in 1982, and made a criminal offence in 1996 (Quinlan 2021). However, loopholes in the Common Law were interpreted as delegating parental authority to teachers, allowing them physical punishment all the way up to the Children First Act in 2015 (Quinlan 2021). Research within education, psychotherapy and theology attribute the strong rules of conduct, and corporal punishment, to discourses in the Irish Catholic education system (Pembroke 2019; Quinlan 2021; Walsh 2016). In the last two decades, there has been an effort to develop positive discipline programs in Irish schools that favour students' modification of behaviour, students' participation in reflecting on appropriate behaviour and positive re-enforcement strategies (Martin 1997). For teachers and school leaders, it often includes making such programs and strategies operational, favourably through codes of behaviour or school charts (O'Hara, Byrne, and Mcnamara 2000). Discipline continues to be an important concern within the Irish school system; however, it has evolved to encompass a more student-centred approach where the students' wellbeing and interdependency is valued.

The Catholic Church represents a long history of public–private partnerships in the Irish education system and has as such been the main private actor in Irish schools where different Catholic patronages have had important governing roles (Skerritt and Salokangas 2020; Verger, Fontdevila, and Zancajo 2017). This entails that publicly funded education remains controlled by the Catholic Church, although adhering to public regulations such as the national curriculum. However, in later years there has also been new ways of privatising Irish education such as through online providers for teacher education, private tuition centres and the promotion of self-managing schools (Skerritt and Salokangas 2020; Verger, Fontdevila, and Zancajo 2017), mirroring international waves of privatisation in the education sector (Ball 2018; Skerritt and Salokangas 2020; Verger, Fontdevila, and Zancajo 2017).

Analytical approach

ANT is a relational approach that aims to collapse dualisms such as object–subject and inside–outside by narrating the complexity of social life as networks of heterogeneous actors. In its early developments, the main focus was on tracking how an actor gained agential characteristics (including material ones, such as standardised tests, curriculum frameworks and textbooks), and how these actors came to be enrolled, or not enrolled, in networks of practice. Such studies have given insight into exactly what and who were excluded from these networks by building on strong empiricism (Callon 1984; 1999; Latour 1987). They also suggest a certain *multiplicity* between the forces that enable certain actors to become performative or to obtain a strategic position in the networks. For instance, when comparing the enactment of the KSF, one school may emerge as highly resistant to the standardisation of skills-learning and materialising such resistance by *not* engaging with the standards and thus disconnecting with the intentions of the reform. Another school may show a different type of network, where the KSF is frequently taken up in classrooms and can thus provide a different response to the reform. By comparing these two schools' responses to the KSF, and showing how different material actors are involved, ANT can shine light on contrasting examples of policy enactment *between* two networks (here: schools).

While these early conceptions of ANT were fruitful in showing how actors and networks are heterogeneous amongst each other, a common critique of ANT is its failure to capture the same heterogeneity and multiplicity *within* networks and as such breaking with its intention of collapsed dualisms (Mol 2002; Mol and Law 1994). 'Resistance' (or 'acceptance') may therefore be treated as just *one* visible enactment amongst many other types of circumstances and opportunities (Fenwick 2010). In this analysis, multiplicity therefore relates to the heterogeneity within the KSF itself, and within the enactments at each school (rather than between schools). This suggests that various materialisations of the KSF coalesce in several layers that are juxtaposed and overlapping and that heterogeneity is maintained within the schools (Mol 2002). Along these lines, I build on Murdoch's (1998) conceptualisations of 'spaces of prescription' and 'spaces of negotiation'. Spaces of prescription are tightly connected spaces, meaning actors are pulled closely together, and there is a clear boundary in what is included and excluded from the network. Spaces of negotiation are created through connections between actors that are provisional, meaning enactments are frequently changing. For instance, when introducing generic skills in secondary education, a framework like the KSF might mobilise prescription by connecting to other important policy changes such as assessment and evaluation. As such, the framework gathers allies that help stabilise its main ideas and ambitions. But the KSF may also actuate contentions and compromises amongst local actors like school leaders and teachers, as the overall reform of the New Junior Cycle has shown. This suggests a dual existence of multiple spaces and builds on the overall collapse of dualisms in ANT. A key concern in the analysis has been to show how these spaces co-exist, rather than how they stand in opposition to each other.

Murdoch's conceptualisations were used as analytical entry points to the data. In other words, 'spaces of prescription' and 'spaces of negotiation' were used to identify the stable *and* fluid presentations of practice as events that exist simultaneously and in duality. Deciding what counts as prescription and negotiation was, however, a challenging

task. If an activity was described as particularly adaptive to the KSF, where certain standardisation had been put in place, I coded this as prescription. If, on the other hand, the activities were described as particularly resistant (i.e. negative annotations to the reform, or lack of interest in the KSF), these were coded as negotiations. However, I quickly found that there were also a number of micro-negotiations in prescriptive spaces, where school leaders navigated between different values inscribed to the KSF, but that were also effectuated by other governing actors, as well as being sensitive to their own needs and traditions. I also found that (some) spaces of negotiation emerged as far more stable than what is intended in Murdoch's conceptualisations. 'Multiple spaces' thus refers to the inherent multiplicity of spaces where the KSF is materialised, and I have identified two main spaces within each school, while still acknowledging a bridge between these spaces. Each space will problematise the 'clear-cut' boundaries of spaces of prescription and spaces of negotiation (that in my analysis have emerged as far less clear), and the relationship between and within these spaces.

Data and methods

In this article, ANT methodology describes how the networks of the KSF materialise multiply (as point system, colours, physical tokens), and how these materialise multiple spaces (digital, hybrid, local traditions). The data which this article draws on comes from a larger study on datafication in school leadership and educational governance. The project explored different datafication practices in Irish schools, and the KSF emerged as a datafied practice based on local intentions of behaviour monitoring. Here, the KSF is treated as a 'telling case' that bares significance beyond the larger study. The data is generated from two secondary schools in two different parts of Ireland, one Educate Together School referred to as 'East School' and one Catholic Voluntary Secondary School referred to as 'West School'. Keeping in mind the arguments made in the previous section, 'multiple spaces' refer to spaces within the schools, rather than between or across the schools. The two sites offer examples of schools that have different governing systems and as such it gives certain variation in the data, and the analysis will show how these variations are materialised in multiple spaces.

Common data collection methods in ANT studies include ethnographic approaches with an emphasis on observations. However, document analyses and interviews are also common (Author 2021; Landri 2018; Wæraas and Nielsen 2016). In this article, data were derived from interviews with the school principals at both schools, teachers, and with members of middle management (special needs coordinators, year heads, and assistant principals). In East School, there were a total of six informants, and in West School there were five informants (the number of informants depended on the size of their leadership team). I was especially interested in the key skills that target attitudes, behaviour and learning management, as they emerged in activities that necessitated a lot of work to stabilise and standardise across classes and groups of students. To uphold ANT also methodologically, I employed specific 'tricks' in how the interviews were designed. They were designed as 'hearings' (Decuypere and Simons 2014). Conforming to the ANT ontology, such hearing interviews do not focus on the experiences or perceptions surrounding a specific activity, but on the interactions that have taken place in that activity. The informants described situations when they used KSF, and I

probed by asking questions such as 'how?', 'with who?', and 'with what materials?'. As such, the interviews were designed as an implicit alternative to observation. The interview data were accompanied by digital (digital documents and platforms) and physical presentations of the KSF, which were observable actors in the interviews. Screen shots from the documents and platforms were either retrieved from the school's webpage (with guidance from the informants) or taken within the platforms by the informants themselves. In the latter case, the informants anonymised the screen shots. These materials were used in the coding scheme together with transcripts from the interviews, to better visualise exactly who and what participated in the identified spaces and to uphold ANT's relational symmetry. These materials were thus identified as actors in practice, or as representing certain actors such as private companies. Together, the data set allowed the analysis to identify the interactions between various actors, and the way they produced the KSF.

The multiple spaces of the key skills framework

In this section, I draw on the empirical data to show various ways in which responses to the KSF materialise within the two schools and the spaces they created. The descriptions will therefore be divided according to the school setting (one subsection for each school).

East school

Spaces of prescription – the digital space. East school emerged as a school that interacted with the KSF on a regular basis, and the staff reported that they had worked extensively with the incorporation of the framework to their daily rhythms. While there were discussions on which subject should focus on which key skills, the informants' main concern was on effectively assessing the key skills. In doing so, they utilised a learning management system (VSware) and a behaviour point system offered on the platform (rather than the digital guidance material provided by the DES and the NCCA). The behaviour 'tab' offered teachers and year heads the opportunity to give positive and negative points based on behaviour. All Key Skills were represented in the positive point system (including numeracy and literacy), in addition to self-customised categories.

The informants describe two main ways of interacting with the point system on VSware; (i) to enforce positive behaviour and (ii) as a link to home (by focusing on continuous negative behaviour). During my interview with the school principal, which took place by the end of the second class, the total amount of behaviour points given at the school that day were 229 (the principal had live access to these numbers). The points were visualised according to colours; green for positive points and red for negative ones. The school has a positive reinforcement strategy and would focus on giving positive behaviour to students as a way to motivate them to do better. Important key skills that were frequently rewarded were communicating, working with others and managing information and thinking. Within this digital space, the KSF thus materialised as a point system, as colours, and as a source of information on individual students. However, the KSF extended its materialisations to reach other spaces outside of the digital platform and connected to particular school events. Data generated from the VSware points were used in a monthly assembly at the school to reward student of the month and class of the month:

> It's generated from VSware. So whether we are looking at positive VSware notes, lots of the greens, we'd look at the total for every tutor group and who is leading the way, or who has the least number of negatives. –East School, Assistant Principal

Still, negative behaviour was also carefully monitored by using a 'Top Offenders' feature on the platform. The top offenders offer a list of the students that have had the most negative behaviour points recorded by providing the total number of records and their overall score. These would typically be used to communicate with home and encouraging parents/legal guardians to check their kids' behaviour records. Both examples, the rewarding of positive behaviour and the monitoring of negative behaviour suggest durable spaces where the KSF is enacted through material means (points, colours, reports) and social events (school assembly, home–school communication). Together, these spaces encouraged in-house assessment of behaviour, although the premises and rules for these assessments were largely developed by the company behind VSware, and as such it presents a new dimension to the debate of internal and external assessments in Irish schools by introducing a new actor: private vendors.

Spaces of negotiation – the self-customised space. Digital platforms are generally understood as relatively durable spaces where a type of data, a user guide, or a command has already been scripted and stabilised for the user to be able to interact with it. The same can be said about a curriculum framework – once produced and distributed, the framework presents itself as a finished product, ready to be implemented at school level. At the same time, what is often prevalent in the literature on policy negotiations, is that 'things' such as digital platforms and curriculum frameworks, are black-boxes that contain a myriad of negotiations that become hidden once stabilised. These negotiations often stem from the development processes, between different actors involved in the design and planning stages of the objects.

While the previous space of prescription (the digital space) identified rather stabilised practices, spaces of negotiation also refer to the various micro-negotiations that take place *after* stabilisation, implying that even in stable environments there are continuous mediations taking place between various forces. We find an example of this in East School's work with the KSF, and in particular with the key skill 'Staying Well'. The NCCA's guidelines refer to 'Staying Well' as a skill that supports students' overall well-being alongside their intellectual development (NCCA, n.a., p. 2). This includes a focus on being healthy, physical and active, being social, being safe, being spiritual, being confident, being positive about learning, and being responsible, safe and ethical in using digital technology. When discussing points given to students on their ability to 'stay well', the informants largely connected it to other initiatives such as growth mindset and resilience. They reported that they rarely gave points in the 'staying well' category, but rather used other customised categories that they considered appropriate.

Customised categories for behaviour monitoring are possible to add within the VSware platform. This means that school leaders and teachers are able to reflect their schools needs by adding new categories. East School had added categories such as 'growth mindset' and 'perfect weekly attendance', and would typically use these instead of referring to the KSF. Local numeracy and literacy strategies were also reflected in the self-customised space within the platform, such as 'you spotted

math's!' to promote numeracy across subjects, 'sin I Gaeilge!' to promote the use of the Irish language, and 'word of the week' as a way of promoting increased vocabulary.

As a space of negotiation, the self-customised space can be said to challenge the KSF *and* VSware's interpretation of the KSF, to promote local priorities and needs. The KSF thus materialises in connection to other school initiatives through negotiations between teachers, school leaders, and the digital platform. Still, the 'customised stuff' (as the principal referred to it), is largely formed within the digital space. The self-customised space, can therefore be said to be a 'space within the space' of the digital, and indicates that even in a division between prescription and negotiation, these spaces also have an inherent multiplicity to them.

West school

Spaces of prescription – physical tokens and school houses (local traditions). The informants in West School reported slow incorporation of the changes in the New Junior Cycle and connected the KSF to already established routines in the school. They expressed 'no need' in incorporating the KSF, as they already had a code of conduct at the school that would cover most of the intensions of the key skills.

The code of conduct is a document developed by the Board of Management in the school that details norms of expected behaviour within the school, including expectations set for the principal, teachers, parents/legal guardians and students. It connects to appropriate national policy documents, as well as it is grounded on a juridical foundation by being compliant with the Education Act and other relevant legislations such as health and safety, and data protection laws. For the students, the code of conduct details a set of standards, specifically in terms of working with their peers, attendance, appearance (i.e. rules of school uniform), and behaviour within the school (including how to handle school property). While some of these standards are similar to the key skills in terms of regulating general wellbeing for themselves and others (i.e. working with others, managing myself, staying well), the learning management and knowledge skills cannot be said to have been materialised within the code of conduct.

The document details strategies for promoting positive behaviour as well as the possible sanctions that would be put in place in case of misconduct. The informants explained that points would be written down in a notebook for each student, typically negative points, as positive points would be reinforced by using physical tokens. The school has a 'house system', operated by the students (prefects), where each house is awarded points (in terms of physical tokens) when they do something particularly good. There are transparent tubes outside the houses, and as such, anyone can see the number of points the particular house has built up. Like in East School, West School had regular school assemblies where students would be rewarded for good behaviour or a special achievement.

In a space of prescription, there are clear boundaries of what is included in the space. This could for instance be the inclusion of certain key skills, while purposely leaving out others. However, as Murdoch (1998) understands these spaces, they are also stabilised networks that are strongly prescribed by a 'centre' that enforce rigid and foreseeable behaviour. While the code of conduct bears some similar standards to that of the key skills, the KSF is not produced as a standardised framework within the school and the KSF has not been materialised per say. This cannot solely be explained by looking at which of the key skills are represented within the code of conduct. Rather, the schools'

active decision to *not* incorporate the KSF in their daily practice highlights the prescription of local (and national) traditions. What has been stabilised, and thus exerting a certain power by being a central force, is thus not the KSF, but particular rules of conduct that have been influential in a school system that has traditionally favoured strong discipline. This implies certain disconnect between the intentions of the KSF and the local practices, as well as a 'space within the space' as the informants express certain ambivalence between the reform initiatives and teachers' and school leaders' professional discretion.

Spaces of negotiation – negotiating with the overall reform. The KSF can be said to have been materialised as a certain disruptive force to local traditions and professional values in West School. Between the governmental intentions behind the reform and localised practice, tensions furthermore emerged in connection to the overall changes in the New Junior Cycle. When teachers and year heads were asked how they interacted with the KSF (other than the codes of conduct), their response was in unison that they *did not*, and when trying to explain why, two-year heads expressed:

> I don't know whether they [the key skills] are coming or gone. Maybe at last. I just suppose I just know the name of the Key Skills – West School, Year Head 1

> We probably have enough with the whole Junior Cycle – West School, Year Head 2

A third-year head expressed discouragement in the reform because 'it is so flawed in terms of children and how children work' (Year Head 3), describing difficulties for special needs students, or students struggling with specific academic achievements due to changes in learning levels and Junior Cert examinations. This example highlights a ripple effect that can emerge when a reform is highly contested; although the KSF has not directly altered assessment regimes in Irish schools, the framework seems to be judged by the same views that guide some of the defiance in the overall reform. In this regard, there is an attempt to partially cancel out all changes in the New Junior Cycle, including the introduction of key skills by highlighting teachers' professional knowledge:

> Students who would work their socks off to pass an ordinary level paper, which would be the limit of their capabilities, are now expected to take a common level paper. And they are not going to be reported in terms of grades, but by the lovely phrase 'yet to achieve'. So as a teacher, I cannot and will not ever understand the values in giving a child a report at Junior Cert that starts off with their name and then 'yet to achieve', 'yet to achieve', 'yet to achieve'. It's like slapping them in their face ten times, and my professional background tells me that this [the New Junior Cycle] is failing in accommodating a huge portion of kids – West School, Year Head 3.

The negotiation with the KSF, and the overall reform, is thus materialised by referring to the human side of practice and what professionals know about children in terms of academic achievements, relationships and general wellbeing. While seeking out zones of autonomy is common for local enactments, interpretations and implementations of school reforms and standardised frameworks (Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010), this example shows that this type of negotiation rather demonstrates a more profound refusal to the overall changes in junior cycle and the fluidity in this case is presented as the ability to not engage in specific reform changes that have not been rolled out yet.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The main research question in this article was to explore how different responses to the KSF are materialised within two different school settings. Empirically, the analysis has shown that local responses to the KSF materialise as certain point systems, colour codes, physical tokens, as well as various forms of local traditions. On the one hand (and at first glance), the two schools show two different responses to the KSF; one of (seemingly) acceptance materialised through a digital platform and one of resistance materialised through a code of conduct document. On the other hand, however, the various notions of prescription and negotiation *within* the two schools show quite similar responses in the way that they connect the KSF to established routines. The governmental intentions of the KSF, that is, giving students the ability to participate in school, society, community, and work-life, emerged as a somewhat secondary concern. Rather, the continuous evaluation of the key skills suggests that the framework has been reduced to types of point systems that reinforce discipline programs in Irish schools (Martin 1997; O'Hara, Byrne, and Mcnamara 2000). This is the case within both schools: one presented in a 'new' and shiny digital platform, and the other as a locally produced document. Key skills have in these cases been materialised as disciplinary practices that do not necessarily stem from an international discourse of twenty-first century skills, but from a national and local practice that precedes the reform. This suggests considerably durable spaces of prescription in these (different) Irish schools, namely disciplinary and acceptable school conduct, that continue to materialise through the KSF, through digital platforms, and through document materials produced in schools. Another way of interpreting this analysis is therefore to see national/local practices and traditions as a space of prescription, and the KSF as a space of negotiation.

Despite the connections to behaviour monitoring within the two schools that aided practice to steer the KSF towards similar paths, the spaces identified still suggest certain multiplicity. This is especially evident in the way that teachers and school leaders' professional discretion and autonomy were materialised. In East School, the informants' negotiated with the KSF (and the digital platform), by promoting several of the schools' self-initiated whole-school development projects such as growth mindset and numeracy/literacy strategies through customised VSware-categories. In West School, negotiation was largely connected to teachers' professional knowledge, and insights into the general changes of the New Junior Cycle. These forms of negotiation should not be seen as problematic, on the contrary, they express a multiplicity of knowledge, values, and practices that take place when a centrally mandated framework is enacted locally. The key skills thus mobilise several materialisations, despite having a certain standardisation inscribed to them. In these cases, it also presents a certain type of policy work that necessitates considerable integration between long-lasting routines/traditions and new changes.

The spaces of prescription and negotiation were largely framed by two main actors. In East School, this actor became VSware (the company and their platform), and in West School the Board of Management was the main actor framing these spaces by developing particular codes of conduct. In other words, the conditions of these spaces were fixed by one private company in one publicly run school and by school professionals in one

privately/catholic run school. This raises important educational concerns about the governing status of the two schools, and the types of actors that are allowed a significant position in decision-making within them. Specifically, there are two points worth stressing relating to the governing status of these actors: how private vendors have gained power in practice, and the level of transparency of the involvement of these actors in comparison to other private actors like the Catholic Church. The use of the digital platform VSware to assess the Key Skills speaks to some of the overall disputes surrounding the New Junior Cycle reform, that is, changes in assessment. These are changes that have gained immense concern and debate in the Irish school system over the last years and are reflected at policy level as well as in teachers and school leaders' concerns related to the KSF (MacPhail, Halbert, and O'Neill 2018). By offering a point system that incorporates the key skills, VSware have thus connected to common concerns and demands in schools, while also connecting to the national curriculum. As such, the company dives directly into school life by offering quick solutions to the schools in an era of distress whereas assessment is seen as the most pressing problem in Irish schools. This connects to international waves of privatisation where private actors are given power in practice by structuring immediate concerns (i.e. the environmental crisis, the future uncertainties of the labour market, low results on large-scale assessments), and the solutions to these problems (Verger, Fontdevila, and Zancajo 2017). In this specific case, the private vendor has also to a certain extent replaced other common private actors in Irish schools and their roles in defining rules and conduct, which implies that private vendors now provide what has traditionally been the service of the Catholic Church in Ireland (Skerritt and Salokangas 2020). They have as such taken over an important governing role in (some) Irish schools although this might not be as transparent because the school is not affiliated with any religious order to begin with. The second point, that of transparency, is therefore a direct consequence of the first point. There is certain transparency in East School in their disciplinary measures as students and parents have access to the behaviour monitoring system on VSware (as opposed to West School where the system with physical tokens is located at the school and parents would not necessarily check this on a regular basis). Behaviour data is thus shared outside the walls of the school. The informants were also largely aware of the presence of the platform in their daily practice. The lack of transparency is rather connected to the values imbedded in the platform. While the code of conduct has direct annotations to common disciplinary expectations of the Catholic Church, the digital platform does not tell the same story. In other words, it is easier to trace religious philosophies of discipline and routine outside of the digital platform, although it is as much present within it. The role of religious and historical traditions therefore lack transparency through the use of VSware, as these values have been given a new, fresh suit presented in a digital format. These examples thus suggest new considerations in the discussions surrounding the New Junior Cycle and the status of Irish education, as this analysis shows that negotiations are not solely taking place between governmental institutions (DES, NCCA), the Catholic Church, teacher unions and schools, but also between schools and private vendors. For future research, the rather blurred relationship between these private vendors and religious orders (and their values and morals) would be worthwhile exploring to further conceptualise how policy enactment is negotiated between private actors themselves.

Theoretically, what this analysis can tell us about policy enactments, is that there needs to be a change in a research focus of explaining changes or differences in enacting a reform or a framework, to exploring the various actors, values and practices that such frameworks connect to (beyond the hierarchical governing relationships). While spaces of prescription and spaces of negotiation can show two differing enactments that suggest certain multiplicity, these spaces can also (and preferably) be further unpacked and connected. As this analysis shows, there are several notions of stable and fluid relationships *within* spaces of prescription and negotiation. This implies that these spaces do not exist separately, but simultaneously and multiply. These spaces, as presentations of differing enactments, suggests that we do not treat practice as several networks that exist separate from each other, but as multiple networks of practice that can exist alongside and inside one another. Put in other words, acceptance and resistance in policy enactment are not separate phenomena and one notion does not exclude the other; both responses, and a variety of other responses, can be expressed at the same time. To examine these overlapping spaces in schools without a set *a priori* is not an easy or comfortable task, and does require a change of worldview and methodological considerations. However, it is highly necessary to understand that there is more to local policy enactment than simply agreeing or disagreeing with new changes (and the cognitive, intentional understandings of these changes), as standardised and generic frameworks like the KSF materialise with a myriad of intended and unintended responses.

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