Teachers' attitudes to risk-taking in the secondary school classroom

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Abstract

Taking risks in the classroom is essential for enhancing the capacity of teachers and improving outcomes for pupils (Fullan, 2009). This study investigates teachers' attitudes to taking voluntary risks to develop their own teaching practice to find out which teaching approaches are considered more risky; whether attitudes change as teachers progress through their careers; and to identify the barriers to risk-taking in the classroom. The research took place in the Southwest of England during the Covid-19 pandemic. A qualitative methodology was employed consisting of semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers from two contrasting, non-selective, stand-alone secondary schools, and supported by data generated through an online survey.

My findings show these teachers have positive attitudes to risk-taking, enjoying opportunities to be creative, and expressing a preference for constructivist teaching approaches. These positive attitudes persisted throughout their careers driven by a need to provide the best for their pupils. While attitudes remain positive, barriers to risk-taking change during a teacher's career as knowledge, experience, confidence, and responsibilities change. An optimum point exists between 6- and 12-years' experience where teachers have both the confidence and capacity to take risks.

The barriers to risk-taking fall into three categories: practical considerations, teacher time, and curriculum time. The first two are largely a function of the lack of funding and resources available to schools. Teachers respond to these with pragmatism distributing their risk-taking to compensate. This thesis highlights how a lack of curriculum time linked to examination teaching, preparation, and government control, is the greatest barrier, leading to a narrowing of teaching methods and reduction in risk-taking. The resulting lack of teacher agency makes this the hardest barrier to overcome.

Contents

List of abbreviations

CPD – Continuing Professional Development

DfE – Department for Education

EBACC – English Baccalaureate

ECF – Early Career Framework

ECT – Early Career Teacher

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

ITT – Initial Teacher Training

LCI – Literacy Change Initiative

MAT – Multi-Academy Trust

Ofsted – Office for Standards in Education

QTS – Qualified Teacher Status

SEND – Special educational needs and disabilities

SWS – School Within a School

TPRS – Teachers' Perception of Risk Scale

List of figures and tables

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Declaration

This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

I declare that the word-length of this thesis, 44,862 words, conforms to the permitted maximum.

Signature: K Foster.

Chapter 1 Introduction

This study seeks to understand the attitudes of teachers to taking risks in their classrooms, particularly in the development of their own practice over the course of their careers. The motivation for this research came from my own experiences as a senior leader working in secondary education in England. Having moved from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) category of 'Requires Improvement' to 'Good', our school needed to further the capacity of our teachers to continue to improve outcomes for our pupils (Fullan, 2009). Planning the next phase of development, we received interesting feedback from an external advisor. They felt behaviour around the school was good because teachers built strong relationships with pupils. However, in the classroom this translated into behaviour for compliance, rather than behaviour for learning. Lessons were quiet and orderly, but passive. Behaviour for learning teaches pupils *how* to learn, developing their emotional, social, and cognitive behaviours to become independent, intrinsically motivated learners (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021a), but requires teachers to take more constructivist, open-ended approaches. The advisor thought our teachers needed to take more risks in the classroom – to trust in the strong relationships they had with pupils and develop more active, independent, challenging lessons. Taking risks is considered essential for driving forward improvements in education (Short et al., 1991; Le Fevre, 2014), but how could we encourage our teachers to take more risks? To answer this, we needed to understand what teachers perceived to be risky in terms of classroom teaching; how they felt about taking risks; and what might prevent them from taking those risks. It was these questions that formed the focus for this research.

Initial reading revealed little research had been completed looking at teacher risk-taking, with only three major studies described over the last 50 years (Spitzer, 1975; Short et al., 1991; Ponticell, 2003), all of which took place in the United States. Most existing literature focused on teacher responses to implementing change imposed by others, such as integrating new technology into lessons (Howard and Gigliotti, 2016) or implementing a new literacy initiative (Le Fevre, 2014), or on the practicalities of managing and leading

change (Doyle and Ponder, 1977; Short et al., 1991). However, I wanted to understand teachers' attitudes to risk taking from the perspective of developing their own personal classroom practice. The most effective improvements in teaching practice occur when teachers take control of their own development (Muijs et al., 2014) and as the Teachers' Standards (Department for Education, Updated 2021) and ITT curriculum (Department for Education, 2019a) acknowledge, from engaging critically with research and evidence; reflecting regularly on performance; and drawing on advice and feedback from colleagues. I wanted to understand teachers' attitudes towards taking risks in the incremental development of their daily teaching practice as opposed to how they responded to change imposed from above by school leaders.

The existing literature also contained a common narrative of teachers as conservative (Ponticell, 2003), risk-averse (Bowen et al., 2015), habit-forming (Hobbiss et al., 2021) and unwilling to embrace change unless it fitted with teachers' own views (Doyle and Ponder, 1977). Reflecting on my own experience, I had certainly come across instances of teachers being resistant to, and suspicious of, change - but were teachers simply resisting the initiative overload that has become prevalent in English schools, or were they really risk-averse and unlikely to embrace change on either a personal or institutional level? Furthermore, Teo and Le Fevre (2017) identified a gap in our understanding of whether, and how teachers' attitudes to risk-taking change as their careers progressed. Did teachers take fewer risks with experience as habits became ingrained, or did they take more as their expertise grew? Understanding how teachers' attitudes change across their careers could help school leaders tailor professional development more effectively to match the needs of their staff.

This review of existing research enabled me to refine my initial thoughts into three key research questions. In answering these questions, I contend teachers have more positive attitudes to risk than those described in existing literature and that by putting teachers at the centre of the research, rather than treating them as management units, exposes the importance of teacher autonomy for encouraging risk-taking. I also demonstrate that while personal and school-level

considerations are important for understanding teachers' attitudes to risk and the barriers they face, it is factors at the level of the education system that have the greatest impact, not only on teachers' behaviours, but also on outcomes for pupils.

1.1 Research questions

The first question related to teachers' perceptions of risk in passive classrooms compared to in active, constructivist classrooms. Paul Slovic's dual thinking process (Slovic et al., 2004) suggests we have different initial and analytical responses to risk, and I thought these differences might reveal the barriers faced by teachers. The second question looked for patterns in how attitudes to risk might change throughout a teacher's career, and the third sought to identify and understand the barriers to risk-taking and the significance of these barriers to teacher development.

Research question 1

What classroom teaching activities or methods do teachers perceive as risky, and do these perceptions change on consideration? In particular, are there any differences between the perceptions of active, constructivist approaches to teaching as opposed to more passive, banking, transmission methods?

Research question 2

Do the perceptions of risk and attitudes to risk change as teachers progress through their careers?

Research question 3

What are the main barriers to taking risks in the classroom and how is this impacting on teacher development?

1.2 Context and scope of the study

This research was situated in two contrasting state secondary schools in the Southwest of England. This region is relatively poorly funded compared with the rest of England with educational outcomes significantly below those of London and the Southeast (Winchester, 2022). The two schools served catchments with very different socioeconomic backgrounds with one largely made up of the 10%

least deprived households in the country and the other including wards with the 10% most deprived households (gov.uk, 2019). Neither school was selective or part of a Multi-Academy Trust at the time the data were collected. As the participants came from different schools and from a variety of subject areas with a range of career experience, I was able to explore research question 2 but also consider whether different schools, subject areas or levels of experience were relevant to research question 3.

The research was planned and undertaken against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. In England, this included three national lockdowns and a range of restrictions around how and when people were able to meet face to face when lockdowns were not in force. In addition, schools were open to disadvantaged pupils and the children of key workers whilst also providing teaching online. There were frequent directives and regulations schools had to respond to and enact with little or no notice, including implementing the mass-testing of pupils and staff for Covid-19. This had an impact on the methods chosen and the ability to recruit and interview participants, but importantly, required sensitivity to the enormous additional workload taken on by teachers at this time, and the difficult personal circumstances many of them were facing.

Although much research into risk-taking uses quantitative methods, I adopted a mixed methods approach, focusing largely on qualitative methods to obtain rich data from participants and allow opportunities for them to reflect and discuss not only what they did, but why. This included some aspects of constructivist grounded theory applying a flexible, iterative approach where data collection and analysis informed my methods as the research progressed (Charmaz, 2014). Working around the constraints imposed by the pandemic, I used two rounds of semi-structured interviews and an online survey to gather data.

I look in detail at risk theories in Chapter 3, but it is worth noting this study considers socio-psychological risks taken in the classroom as opposed to physical hazards or the health and safety considerations of working in a school. It is difficult to pin down an agreed definition of risk (Aven and Renn, 2009), but the teachers involved in the study described risks as trying a new approach, or using an existing approach in a new context, such that they could not predict

the outcome, and that outcome may have a positive or negative impact on themselves and their pupils. These risks are considered social in the sense teachers may be concerned about how a negative outcome could affect their social standing among their pupils and their colleagues, and psychological in that teachers' psychic well-being is closely related to their pupils' outcomes (Rosenholtz, 1985).

Finally, critical pedagogy was used as a framework for planning and analysing the research alongside risk theories. Initially, it was the similarity of Freire's (2000, p.72) banking education to the description of passive classrooms that led to this theory informing the interview design, but as analysis of the first round of interviews began, it became clear many of the results could be explained and understood by considering power relationships, hegemonic practices and reproduction of attitudes. A review of critical pedagogy and how it was used in the research design and analysis is therefore included in Chapter 4.

1.3 Significance of this research

Unlike previous studies, this research considered risk-taking from the viewpoint of individual teachers developing their practice throughout their careers, rather than as units required to implement change within an institution. The findings suggested teachers have positive attitudes towards risk-taking and should be seen as agents of change and development, and supported to overcome the practical barriers that stand in their way. The main barrier to risk-taking was shown to be a function of the education system itself, and by using critical pedagogy as a framework for analysis, the reproduction of attitudes within the teaching profession as well as from education to the rest of society was revealed. This suggests a paradigm shift is required at least at institution level if teachers are to be supported to take more risks.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the existing literature, covering teachers' risk-taking in the classroom, identifying four key studies and the current gaps in the research which informed the choice of research questions. Chapter 3 draws together existing risk theories, considering how they relate to classroom

teaching. This includes a focus on the factors affecting risk perception and an overview of the dual thinking process theory developed by Paul Slovic, including how it was used as a framework for designing the research process and analysing the results. A summary of the key principles of critical pedagogy and their additional contribution to the research design and analysis follows in Chapter 4. I also indicate how these principles informed the consideration of implications for future teacher development and how we educate our children. Chapter 5 describes the methodology chosen and considers my role as an insider-researcher. There is an explanation of the rationale behind the methods chosen, particularly in the context of education during the Covid-19 pandemic, and of the iterative process of simultaneous data collection, data analysis and method design. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 present my findings with reference to research questions 1, 2 and 3 respectively, providing analyses with reference to existing risk theories and using the lens of critical pedagogy in Chapter 8. The conclusions to this research are summarised in Chapter 9, including an outline of the contributions to knowledge; the implications of my findings for teacher development; and the limitations of the study along with suggestions of areas for future research.

Chapter 2 Review of existing research into teachers' attitudes to risk-taking

The focus of this research was rooted in the attitudes of teachers to taking individual risks in the classroom to develop their own teaching practice. I directed my initial review of existing literature to key phrases around 'risk-taking in schools', 'risk-taking in the classroom', and 'risk-taking in teaching' using the Lancaster University online library OneSearch facility, open access articles via internet search engines, and searching through gov.uk. While I found plenty of research regarding pupils' risk-taking, there was little concerning classroom teachers' attitudes to risk (Ponticell, 2003; Howard and Gigliotti, 2016; Teo and Le Fevre, 2017). I widened my search to include themes around school improvement, teacher development, and professional vulnerability, and finally reviewed the references of the literature already identified. This resulted in 22 sources of which 15 specifically considered teachers' attitudes to risk-taking, and only 1 was situated in England. The consensus from existing literature was there have been three main pieces of research into teachers' risk-taking. In this chapter, I evaluate these three studies and offer a fourth, more recent study I consider to be of equal value. I also consider the results of some smaller studies and how they relate to my research and finally identify the gaps in the existing literature and how they informed the design of my research questions.

2.1 The effect of group discussion

The earliest study, by Spitzer (1975) in the United States, concerned the socio-psychological phenomenon of 'risky shift' which suggested people are more likely to take risks, and continue taking risks, after discussing them as part of a group. Spitzer wanted to move this research, which had previously taken place in laboratory conditions, into the school environment. At that time, Spitzer was interested in the conservative nature of American public schools and by investigating risky shift in an education context hoped to find practical suggestions to reduce what he saw as rigidity in how schools were organised. There was a pleasing parallel with the aims of my own research, seeking to understand attitudes to risk-taking to support school development, against a backdrop of schools being viewed as conservative. The socio-psychological

aspect to risk-taking which was the focus of my study was clearly established in Spitzer's work and would form a thread through subsequent research up until the present time.

Considering methods, Spitzer provided teachers with a range of educational scenarios, measuring their responses using three different quantitative methods to see whether risk-taking increased following group discussion, and whether these positive attitudes persisted when faced with new scenarios later on. Spitzer's scenarios were based on real education situations, although related to whole school policies rather than to individual teaching practice, which was my area of interest. The quantitative methods, including one which asked teachers to consider probabilities – a common method for assessing attitudes to risk – worked for Spitzer's study, which sought to determine whether laboratory findings were replicated in a real-world context. The focus was on *what* was happening, where my focus was on *why*. Earlier literature had considered *why* risky shift occurred, suggesting group discussion might allow for shared responsibility or high risk-takers might influence their more hesitant colleagues (Wallach et al., 1962), but Spitzer confined himself to establishing that group discussions had a profound effect on teachers' attitudes to taking risks, reflecting the laboratory findings.

This early study mirrored my interests to understand teachers' attitudes to risk-taking in their education context and consider the socio-psychological influences involved but did not focus on developing classroom practice or understanding which approaches teachers considered risky. The use of quantitative methods revealed how teachers' attitudes changed following group discussion, suggesting Spitzer's idea that more collaborative work in schools would promote innovation was worth pursuing. However, the study did not seek to understand why risky shift had occurred. Where I wanted to find out whether teachers took risks and what barriers made this difficult, Spitzer started with a possible solution and sought to determine its viability. The importance of this study was clear from its influence on later researchers, and since examples of risky shift were described by some of the teachers I interviewed, it also provided useful insights when analysing results.

2.2 Risk-taking and decision-making

Short et al.'s (1991) study focused on school culture and showed how sharing, or not sharing the decision-making processes in schools, affected risk-taking. As with Spitzer's (1975) research, this study considered the socio-psychological environment needed by teachers to support innovation. The researchers hypothesised greater teacher autonomy would result in a climate of experimentation leading to greater risk-taking. This was interesting as it suggested the climate established by school leaders could represent a possible encouragement or barrier to risk-taking, I might encounter from my teachers. I did not look specifically at school climate in my research but did include questions in my interviews to establish the role of school leadership in supporting or discouraging risk-taking.

Short et al. (1991) also used quantitative methods, this time to measure teacher perceptions of both their involvement in decision-making and their perception of the climate for risk-taking in their schools to investigate any link between these variables. They found three narratives within their results. The first described real collaboration between school leaders and teachers, followed by teachers making their own autonomous decisions. This scenario led to a positive climate for risk-taking reflecting my own findings that the level of autonomy afforded to teachers is significant. In the second, leaders still sought the opinions of teachers, but made the decisions themselves. This resulted in a poor climate for risk-taking, with researchers suggesting teachers might be left feeling frustrated, untrusted, and powerless. In the third, leaders did not involve teachers at all and made all the decisions themselves. Researchers were surprised this also resulted in a climate that supported risk-taking. They speculated teachers might appreciate not having their time taken up contributing to leadership decisions, preferring the freedom to get on with what they wanted to do in their own classrooms. Where Spitzer found discussion and collaboration led to greater risk-taking, Short et al. found who made the final decisions was also significant. Short et al.'s research was situated in the United States over 30 years ago and considered the effect of school climate on what went on in teachers' classrooms, not just the impact of whole school projects. However, the research did not investigate the detail of teacher approaches or techniques, or consider

other barriers; rather it concentrated on teachers' perceptions of whether they were encouraged to be experimental, whether they went on to take risks or not.

2.3 Enhancers and inhibitors of risk-taking

The third study also took place in the United States (Ponticell, 2003) and like Spitzer used the psychology of risk-taking as a lens for understanding teachers' choices in a school context – in this case referencing the elements of loss, significance of loss, and uncertainty, as described by Yates and Stone (1992). This approach enabled Ponticell to identify the positive and negative outcomes of implementing new strategies. Ponticell's including the significance of loss was valuable as it recognised the importance of emotion in risk-taking, especially as teachers' senses of well-being is so closely related to pupil outcomes (Rosenholtz, 1985; Lasky, 2005). This individual focus on risk-taking behaviours, responses, and emotions enabled Ponticell to investigate not just what was happening, but to understand why. A qualitative approach was required – in this instance a single case study over three years, accessing multiple data sources to achieve rich data. This methodology was a closer fit to that necessary for my own research, but the case study chosen was that of a school within a school (SWS) – a project set up to support pupils who were in danger of dropping out of education. This project was established by school leaders rather than devised by teachers and therefore investigated teachers' responses to imposed change, rather than driving their own development.

Interestingly, twenty-five years on, part of Ponticell's drive for the research echoed Spitzer's wish to understand risk-taking in American schools described as controlling environments, resistant to change, and staffed by conservative teachers. The theme of collaboration described by Spitzer emerged in Ponticell's findings as the SWS team felt empowered to be more innovative as a result of working closely together. Analysis had initially focused on the loss, significance of loss, and uncertainty associated with changing relationships, finding teachers felt the loss of relationships outside the SWS, and the loss of professional distance between themselves and their pupils keenly. They also felt constant pressure from taking part in a high stakes project which had attracted a lot of investment. On the other hand, teachers formed stronger

bonds with colleagues and pupils, felt trusted by leaders, and that they were afforded a greater sense of autonomy. Having started the research determined to look at risk-taking through a psychological lens, the importance of relationships in her findings compelled Ponticell to ask if a sociological theory of risk-taking might not be emerging. Later studies by Hills (2007) and Haas (2008) also highlighted the social aspects of risk-taking, so it was clear I needed to consider both the social and psychological aspects in my research.

One final point Ponticell made was that the terms risk-taking and change are often juxtaposed. To me, change suggested something initiated at whole school, or department level, where risk-taking suggested an action resulting from personal choice. This clarified the importance of distinguishing between change management or risk imposed by leadership, and risk taken as an individual personal decision when designing my study.

These three key studies (Spitzer, 1975; Short, et al., 1991; Ponticell, 2003) ranging from almost 50 to 20 years ago, all situated in the United States, show personal relationships and collaboration are key to encouraging risk-taking, and the significance of potential losses is a crucial factor for teachers deciding whether or not to try something new. Since Ponticell's research in 2003, Le Fevre, working in New Zealand, has also studied risk-taking in education, focusing on the barriers faced by teachers (Le Fevre, 2014), and in my view, this research, along with a later study with Teo (Teo and Le Fevre, 2017) is equally significant.

2.4 Teachers' perceptions of risk

Le Fevre's interest in risk and barriers to risk-taking in education emerged from an existing study into the implementation of a Literacy Change Initiative (LCI) in a school in New Zealand. It quickly became clear that despite careful planning and initial buy-in from teachers, the LCI project was not running smoothly. Le Fevre became interested in the barriers to implementation and decided to investigate these through the lens of risk – considering loss, significance of loss, and uncertainty as Ponticell before her. Le Fevre echoed Ponticell's view that further research was needed into teachers' risk-taking, confirming there was a

gap in understanding teachers' attitudes to taking risks and this topic was worthy of further investigation.

Le Fevre used a range of qualitative methods including interviews, observations, and documents to understand what risks teachers faced and how these prevented effective implementation of the LCI. It emerged teachers did not engage with the project where they *perceived* the risk to be high. This reference to perception was significant as it described barriers in the form of imagined failures in scenarios that had not yet taken place. The perceived risks identified included using textbooks less frequently and increasing pupil voice in the classroom, which were interesting as they represented a shift away from banking or transmission practice to open-ended constructivist techniques, mirroring the advice given to our school. I consider these different teaching approaches in detail in Chapter 4. Le Fevre distilled her findings into teachers having three fears: public failure, losing control, and losing teaching time. The use of the emotive word *fear* harks back to the importance of understanding emotion in risk-taking and I subsequently found similar examples in my own research. There were also echoes of sociological aspects of risk in that teachers' professional relationships within the existing school culture made teachers feel exposed rather than providing the close collaboration required from the project. From Le Fevre's work I established I wanted to understand which classroom approaches were considered more risky by teachers, and recognised the need to consider the language used by my participants when talking about risk.

Le Fevre went on to complete a piece of work designing a Teachers' Perception of Risk Scale (TPRS) with Teo (Teo and Le Fevre, 2017). This was a tool school leaders and individual teachers could use to identify and manage perceived risks. Qualitative methods were used to generate the survey questions to be used – a process I later considered using for my own research – with four factors around risk emerging as a result. These were: analysing and using student data; de-privatising classroom practice; questioning the beliefs and practices of others; and changing assessment or teaching practices. The questionnaire considered a range of activities both in and out of the classroom

where I wanted to focus solely on teaching approaches and practices. The last factor bore the greatest resemblance to my aims and informed the design of my interviews. It involved questions focused on how teachers felt about being asked to make changes to their practice without adequate time, training, support, or belief in the change proposed. In my view, this was the first study which drilled down into teachers' attitudes to risk-taking, considered some of the barriers that might exist, and that they could be managed or removed. Moreover, while it started from the perspective of introducing whole school change, the authors considered the tool might be used by teachers to inform their own individual development. They also felt more investigation was needed to understand the attitudes of teachers with different characteristics, including those with different lengths of service.

Having considered the key literature on risk-taking in schools, the following themes informed the design of my own research. First, schools were considered conservative places and teachers resistant to, or fearful of, change. Second, there was a need to consider both the sociological and psychological aspects of risk including school culture, professional relationships, and collaboration. Third, it was the perception of risk and teachers' emotional responses to those perceptions that created barriers to risk-taking. In summary, there was clearly a large gap in our current understanding of teachers' attitudes to risk-taking and plenty of scope to take this research further.

I have established there is little existing research looking at teachers' attitudes to risk-taking and most of our current understanding is covered in the summary of the studies above. Beyond these, however, there are a few other studies of note that provide insights into risk-taking in schools and are relevant to my choice of research questions. The main points are summarised as follows.

2.5 Other studies

Returning to the United States, Doyle and Ponder (1977) investigated how teachers react to change. Although studying change imposed by others, their research offered valuable insights referring to a '*practicality ethic*' where teachers considered the instrumentality, congruence, and cost of any proposed change. That is, the change is communicated clearly and can be carried out in a

practical sense; it reflects the teacher's own values and views of education; and outcomes are likely to be worth the cost of implementation. The issues of practicality and congruence stood out as possible barriers or encouragement to teachers' risk-taking to be considered, and the idea of cost, along with loss and significance of loss, provided a useful lens through which to view teachers' responses. Ritchie and Rigano (2002) looking into teachers' motivation for embracing change found a care for pupil outcomes and wellbeing was a strong factor, suggesting teachers might weigh up the likely positive outcomes for their pupils against the cost of implementing a new project.

The work of Hills (2007) and Howard et al. (2018) both referred to the social risks associated with teaching approaches moving away from banking or transmission methods towards dialogic, constructivist practices. Hills considered the social risks associated with a constructivist classroom, asking whether the greater uncertainty associated with the use of open-ended tasks resulted in a greater perceived threat to teacher competence. Howard et al. were concerned with preparing teachers to deliver 21st century skills to their pupils. These are generally considered to include creativity, critical thinking, metacognition, communication, collaboration, digital literacy, and the ability to access and analyse information (Binkley et al., 2012; Saavedra and Opfer, 2012) and require constructivist teaching methods, especially the ability to share lived experiences of these skills with pupils. What struck me about both studies was the focus on teaching approaches, particularly those open-ended methods which stretch and challenge pupils and deepen learning. This convinced me I needed to understand whether the teachers in my study felt differently about the risks associated with constructivist teaching methods.

Before explaining how the literature above informed my research questions, one final study of interest was carried out by Bowen et al. (2015) in the United States which suggested teachers resisted the introduction of performance-related pay because they are more risk-averse than the general population. This was an interesting idea – what if teachers themselves were the biggest barrier to risk-taking? The study used quantitative methods based on gambles to compare how risk-averse trainee teachers and trainee lawyers were, finding

trainee teachers were indeed more risk-averse. While this was only one study looking at one aspect of risk-taking and did not inform my research questions or interview design, it was useful to reflect that individual teachers themselves might turn out to be a key factor.

2.6 Designing the research questions

It was clear from existing literature that there were plenty of gaps in our understanding of teachers' attitudes to risk-taking. Previous research had largely been situated in the United States with more recent studies in New Zealand and Canada, concentrating on the risks teachers are asked to take resulting from imposed change, rather than those teachers choose to take developing their own practice. There was plenty of scope for further research, but I focused on my original motivation, to understand what prevented teachers from developing techniques that support pupils to become independent, intrinsically motivated learners.

Research question 1 sought to understand whether there were particular teaching approaches teachers considered riskier than others. This emerged from Le Fevre's findings that an increased use of pupil voice and move away from textbooks were perceived as riskier, and Hill's questioning whether open-ended constructivist techniques were more socially risky. Hence, I asked specifically if teachers view active, constructivist teaching as more risky than passive banking approaches.

Research question 2 asked if attitudes change during the course of a teacher's career referring directly to the gap identified by Teo and Le Fevre. Although I focused on length of service, rather than age, there was evidence that attitudes to risk-taking change with age in the general population (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003) and I discuss this in Chapter 3.

Research question 3 sought to identify the barriers to risk-taking in the classroom and the impact on teacher development. From the literature discussed in this chapter, opportunities for collaboration, school climate, professional relationships, teaching techniques, practicalities, time, and pupil behaviour had all been suggested. I hoped to develop a more comprehensive

list of barriers and understand how and why they impacted on professional development.

Having conducted a review of existing literature and used the results to generate my research questions, I now needed to look in depth at the theories of risk-taking which informed the design of the research methods and provided a lens for analysis. These theories are summarised in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 Theories of risk-taking

In this chapter, I summarise those theories of risk-taking used to design my research methods and analyse my findings. I start with a description of Beck's Risk Society (1992) and how this explains why developing teaching practice can be seen as a risk, with a particular focus on the impact of the rise of personal freedom and associated blame culture. I look in depth at Beck's work on risk perception – a focus for Le Fevre and Teo's research (Le Fevre, 2014; Teo and Le Fevre, 2017) and consider the factors affecting how risk is perceived. Here I draw on the work of Tulloch and Lupton to understand everyday, personal concepts of risk, and that of Douglas and Adams on how perceptions of risk-taking are situated in our cultural lives. Next I turn to definitions of risk and how these allow us to understand teachers' conceptions of risk-taking, followed by a discussion of the positive aspects of taking risks as these are often overlooked. Finally I explore the work of Paul Slovic and others, describing their dual process thinking model of risk-taking which was a key factor behind the design and analysis of the initial interviews undertaken with teachers.

3.1 The risk society

In the early 1990s, Beck's concept of the Risk Society and Giddens's writing on risk and responsibility sought to explain the social evolution of risk – how risk developed with the modernisation of society. From this concept we begin to understand how actions such as trying new ideas in a classroom might be described as risk-taking. In the past, the risks faced by traditional, or non-industrial societies were concerned with survival: hunger, disease, injury, flood, etc., and might be called hazards today rather than risks (Giddens, 1999a). These were associated with what '*nature could do to us*' (Giddens, 1999b, p.3) with survival depending on a community's ability to anticipate and mitigate these hazards (Beck, 1992). The industrialisation of societies led to the rise of '*manufactured risks*' (Giddens, 1999b, p.4) resulting from human, particularly scientific development. Beck referred to examples such as nuclear power and environmental disasters – risks arising from technical advances where the consequences of these developments were not fully understood (Giddens, 1999b). The Risk Society went further exploring how changes in our social

structures, not just technical developments, led to new ways of conceptualising and responding to risk.

Beck (1992) identified changing family structures; reduction in community ties; more freedom for women; and changing labour markets as factors contributing to societal change (referred to as an '*end of tradition*' by Giddens (1999b, p.3)). These changes led to our self-identifying as individuals responsible for our own choices rather than as part of a family or community group sharing collective responsibility. The result was an increased tendency to see negative outcomes as personal failure since they are the consequence of personal decisions. Applying this to schools today, a teacher choosing to try a new approach in the classroom is making an individual decision and feels they take personal responsibility if it fails, rather than being part of a communal drive to improve outcomes for pupils in their school. The increase in personal freedom and choice in society might have been considered a positive development, but it was accompanied by increased personal responsibility and accountability. This became problematic as accountability turned into a culture of blame – especially damaging when individuals blame themselves for each choice that does not result in an optimum outcome – shedding light on how professional choices became psychological risks. This concept of blame culture is a powerful one when thinking about teaching. Teachers are continually making decisions, not just in planning what and how to teach, but in their interactions with pupils during each lesson. Beck's theories suggested the teachers in this study were likely to take poor outcomes for pupils personally, seeing them as resulting from their own poor decision-making, leading to what Rosenholtz (1985) described as a psychic debilitation. This theory of risk and personal accountability was likely to provide a strong psychological rationale for teachers' decisions about risk-taking, so I included follow-up questions in my initial interviews about the consequences of risk-taking for teachers and analysed positive and negative outcomes for teachers as part of my thematic analysis of results.

3.2 Risk perception

Another important aspect of Beck's work was the distinction drawn between risk *measurement* and risk *perception*. He described risk measurement as

undertaken by experts, such as scientists or financiers who considered their approach to be rational, as opposed to a perception of risk which experts regarded as irrational. Beck's placing of experts and the laity in opposing positions was a bit simplistic (Mythen, 2004). Breakwell's (2007) description of risk measurement as formal analysis, versus risk perception as subjective analysis, was perhaps better as it allowed for experts and lay people to respect each other's intelligence and insights (Slovic, 1987). Risk perception refers to how we feel about a risk, and while our feelings might be illogical, it does not mean they are irrational. Many people overestimate the risk of a nuclear power station failing despite decades of verified data to the contrary (Slovic, 1987), but when we consider the consequences of such a failure, it is not irrational to be overly fearful. For this research, new approaches being introduced in the classroom were viewed as subjective, perceived risks and my research methods were designed to find out which teaching approaches were *perceived* as more risky and why.

Having established risk perception as the focus for this research, I now consider the following key factors affecting how risk is perceived: an individual's propensity to take risks; socio-cultural influences; whether the risk taken is voluntary or imposed by someone else; the potential rewards and benefits of taking the risk; the level of knowledge the individual possesses about the risk; and how familiar the individual is with the risk.

3.2.1 Individual propensity

Place two people in the same situation and all else being equal, one is more likely to take a risk than the other – they have a greater propensity to take risks. Adams (1995, p.42) ascribes these different propensities to individuals' cultural constructions of risk, requiring the addition of a '*cultural filter*' to our understanding of how individuals respond to risk. I suggest our constructions are also social since it is the lifetime of social experiences and interactions as well as our cultural location that influences our own propensity to take risks. While there are a range of tools available to measure an individual's propensity for risk-taking, this was not included as a factor in my research as I was focusing on teaching approaches and barriers to taking risks. However, the

nature of the interviews I conducted allowed participants to share their personal stories where they felt comfortable to do so, so I looked out for any specific sources of social influence or any systemic or institutional constraints that might have affected their psychological approaches (Breakwell, 2007).

3.2.2 Socio-cultural influences

Here, I am not referring to the socio-cultural influences that construct our personal propensity to take risks, rather those influences that exist at the point of deciding to take a risk. While there are varying perspectives on the socio-cultural aspects of risk, in general, risk in modern western societies is seen as increasingly prevalent. Despite having better medical care, safer roads, a welfare state, for example, new risks arise for us to worry about – environmental hazards, job security or mental health concerns, to name a few. These risks are also increasingly subjective, resulting in personal ideas about what risks we face and how we feel about them (Lupton, 2013). Whilst investigating risk-taking in a school context, I had to acknowledge the importance of individuals' viewpoints, regardless of whether they fitted with my own opinion. Just because I did not see constructivist techniques as risky, for example, did not mean they would not represent a genuine risk for someone else.

In addition to considering risk to be on the rise, inhabitants of modern western societies increasingly assume risks can be managed or controlled by human intervention. They habitually turn to science or government institutions to reduce or remove risk, whether it is producing more food, preventing flooding, or managing the crisis arising from a global pandemic. This has changed our attitudes to risk-taking (Wildavsky and Douglas, 1982) meaning we find it more difficult to accept that risk exists and that we, or some institution or organisation in society cannot control the outcome of everything we do. In consequence, when things go wrong, we look to see who is to blame, or expect to be blamed if a risk we have taken does not result in the required outcome. If teachers are led to believe they should be able to control everything that happens in their classrooms, the pressure could quash any will to take risks. Just delivering a lesson and maintaining good behaviour requires a lot of skill. In a society where taking risks can be seen as irresponsible, trying new approaches in the

classroom may require a certain moral courage, as to step out of line could expose teachers to criticism (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003, p.10). I wanted to understand not only whether teachers were willing to take risks, but whether they felt it was acceptable to do so. In my initial interviews, I asked teachers what they felt the consequences of taking risks would be for them, and in the second round we discussed who exerted pressures on them and how that affected their risk-taking behaviour.

Another aspect of the socio-cultural influences affecting risk-perception is an individual's personal characteristics such as age, gender, race, etc. Research question 2 sought to establish whether there are any patterns in the attitudes of teachers to risk-taking as they progressed through their careers. Tulloch and Lupton's (2003) study found for many, attitudes to risk changed with increased age and experience. Sometimes risk-taking decreased with age as responsibilities increased, especially involving family, and sometimes older adults reported feeling less worried about risk-taking as they had fewer responsibilities to concern them. These personal histories suggested changes in attitudes resulted as much from changing responsibilities as from simply growing older. It was this that convinced me studying the effect of length of service would be more revealing than simply studying the effect of age. It directed me to listen to participants' personal stories and look for any patterns as careers progressed.

With over 75% of the teacher workforce in England being female (Department for Education, 2023) and the consensus of existing research being that men are more likely to take risks than women, gender would make an obvious focus for researching risk-taking in schools. However, as so little research into teacher risk-taking exists, I returned to my original motivation for this study and concentrated on teaching techniques and barriers to risk taking. Interestingly, recent research by Maxfield et al. (2010) suggested women were as likely to take risks in the workplace as their male counterparts, but more likely to disguise such behaviours as society still expects women to be risk averse. Morgenroth et al. (2022) suggested women with the same propensity for risk-taking as men might be discouraged from taking risks in the workplace as they

benefitted less from doing so. These findings suggest society's perception of how women, and possibly how teachers, should behave might affect risk-taking behaviours.

When considering wider characteristics, there are groups within western societies who feel more vulnerable (Breakwell, 2007) due to a lack of power and control in their lives. Risks such as physical safety, health, job security, risk of arrest, discrimination, etc. were all perceived as greater by those not identifying as straight white males, with one study in America showing white males had lower risk perceptions than any other group (Finucane et al., 2010). Overall, the consensus was your place within society – your socio-cultural identity and socio-economic background – has an impact on your perception of risk and risk-taking behaviours, but more research is needed to understand how and why. While there is clearly a large gap in knowledge here, it would have been difficult to ensure adequate representation in my small sample, so while I examined my data for themes around personal characteristics, I did not make any of them a factor in this research.

The final social aspect of risk-taking to consider is shared risk. It seemed to me there were two aspects illustrated in the literature. Tulloch and Lupton (2003, p.20) described an example where a risk taken by one parent might affect the whole family. In this instance, the *outcome* of the risk is shared. On the other hand, the *decision* to take the risk could be shared – and therefore the burden shared - making the decision seem less risky. A group of people could take the *decision* together which may affect just one of them, or the whole group. The phenomenon, known as 'risky shift', investigated by Spitzer (1975) and described in Chapter 2 showed how groups of teachers working together were more likely to take risks. At the time, Spitzer was concerned teachers spent a lot of time working alone with few opportunities to take decisions together, allowing fewer occasions for risky shift to occur in schools. Practically speaking I'm not sure much has changed since 1975. The will to work collaboratively may exist, but I was interested to find out whether teachers found opportunities to do so or if group dynamics appeared as a factor in this research. I included a couple of examples of collaborative tasks in my initial interviews and later asked about

teachers' opportunities to work with colleagues to see if any evidence of shared risk-taking existed.

3.2.3 Voluntary versus involuntary risks

I have already explained that certain groups might feel vulnerable leading to an increased level of risk-perception. These vulnerabilities could be physical, social, political, or financial, but in each case result from a lack of power or agency. This vulnerability also manifests itself in the form of involuntary risks. Being told to carry out an action you consider risky puts you in a very different psychological position to choosing to take a voluntary risk. It might remove the responsibility for making the decision, but not the responsibility for the outcome or the sense of powerlessness to affect the result of taking the risk. Research showed voluntary risks were seen in a more favourable light (Wildavsky and Douglas, 1982; Tulloch and Lupton, 2003), but when it comes to involuntary risks, the greater the differential between the authority imposing the risk and the person assuming the risk, the greater the risk was perceived to be (Adams, 1995). The differential could result from seniority (a headteacher compared to an early career teacher) or from size (such as a government rather than a senior leadership team). Teachers' working lives are overseen by a variety of stakeholders including school leaders, governors, parents, pupils, and government departments. As most existing research has considered risks imposed by school leaders, it has been limited to involuntary risks, whereas in this study I focused on teachers' attitudes to voluntary risks – their decisions to take risks to develop their own practice. This change of focus was fundamental to finding a different understanding of teachers' attitudes to risk than previous studies and is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

3.2.4 Other factors

While a greater risk of loss, and a greater significance of loss leads to risks being perceived as more risky (Yates and Stone, 1992), so the reverse is true. We consider risks with higher benefits to be more acceptable (Adams, 1995; Douglas, 2002). Writing in more detail, Slovic and Peters (2006) described this as a negative correlation between risk perception and benefit – the greater the benefit, the lower the perception of the risk. This was interesting as in reality the

opposite is often true – in general, greater rewards result from greater risks. Theoretically, if teachers have evidence a particular approach will have a positive impact on pupil progress, they should see it as less risky. For example, metacognitive techniques are recognised as highly effective for supporting pupil progress (Education Endowment Foundation, 2023) and should therefore be perceived as less risky. However, this assumes teachers are confident in their understanding of metacognition since a high level of expertise leads to a greater tolerance of risk-taking (Slovic, 1987; Tulloch and Lupton, 2003; Slovic, 2018). Teachers are therefore more likely to take risks where they had been provided with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources (ij and Fullan, 2008). To investigate this, I presented a range of teaching techniques for teachers to discuss in our initial interviews and dug down to find out whether a lack of knowledge or skills contributed to risk decisions.

3.3 Defining risk

Before suggesting a definition for risk in the context of classroom teaching, it is important to recognise this research focuses on socio-psychological risks. Going beyond Giddens's (1999b) concept of categorising risks into natural risks (hazards) versus manufactured risks, other writers and researchers have offered further sub-categories, including financial, health and safety, medical, physical, environmental, recreational, ethical, criminal, political, emotional, social, psychological, or aspirational (Adams, 1995; Weber et al., 2002; Tulloch and Lupton, 2003; Lupton, 2013; Le Fevre, 2014). While all these types of risk are likely to exist in a school, if not in the classroom at some point, they are not the focus of this study. As Biesta (2016) recognises, risk exists in education because teaching involves interactions between real social individuals – teachers and pupils – which are often unpredictable and do not necessarily submit to external efforts to control and standardise education. It is these social, emotional, and psychological risks faced by teachers when they try new ways of developing their practice, therefore, which are the subject of this research.

There is no agreed definition of risk (Aven and Renn, 2009), but for the purpose of this study I wanted to establish a definition that could be used to understand risk-taking in the context of classroom teaching. One distinction made (Adams,

1995; Lupton, 2013) was to consider a *risk* to be technical, objective, and where the odds or probability of the event occurring can be known as opposed to an *uncertainty* where the odds or probability cannot be known. Lupton (2013) added a layer to that description by allowing that the outcomes could be negative or positive. Technically, my study was focused on *uncertainties*, rather than risks. However, when conducting interviews and discussions during my research, teachers already had a concept of *risk-taking* as taking deliberate action as opposed to *uncertainties* which were perceived as the myriad unforeseen events that occur during a normal school day. As previous research in educational contexts also used the term *risk-taking* rather than uncertainy, I continued to refer to *risk-taking* throughout my study, whilst understanding the term *uncertainty* is a better description from a risk theory viewpoint.

Aven and Renn (2009) provided a useful starting point describing risk as an uncertainty about the outcomes of an activity with respect to something we value (such as pupil progress), that might be at stake (Aven et al., 2011). Tulloch and Lupton's (2003) view that a decision made could also constitute an action taken was useful as I was looking at teachers' decision-making processes. This also encompassed Beck's description of personal decision-making and personal responsibility. Finally, I wanted to include the notion that when teachers take risks, they are making professional and personal judgements about the possible outcomes of different approaches when planning and teaching lessons, in effect, weighing up the gains and losses (Zinn, 2008).

For the purposes of this research, I defined risk-taking as **taking a decision, or choosing an action where the outcome is uncertain, and the teacher has taken that decision based on a balance of probabilities considering possible positive and negative outcomes and the significance of those outcomes.** As discussed further in Chapter 6, the teachers involved in this study conceptualised this as trying out new approaches in the classroom, or trying existing approaches in new contexts, such that the outcome was unknown.

3.4 Positive outcomes of risk

Beck's descriptions, and indeed many discussions of risk, lacked references to the positive aspects of taking risks. Existing literature largely describes risk in terms of anxieties about negative outcomes, and how fears depend upon personal, social, and cultural circumstances. Some balance was provided (Adams, 1995; Giddens, 1999a; Giddens, 1999b; Scott, 2000) with suggestions that while opportunities for innovation and changes to traditional societal structures may bring insecurity, they were necessary for developing additional freedoms. In effect, a lack of risk led to immobilisation, while risk could be dynamic and drive change for the better, agreeing with Short et al.'s (1991) description of risk-taking, trying new approaches, and experimenting as necessary to empower teachers to drive improvements. For teachers, this suggested having autonomy to take risks in the classroom provided opportunities for development. Taking a wider view, an education system where teachers do not take risks was one that remains at best, static, and at worst, unable to cope with change. When thinking about interview questions, I wanted to investigate whether teachers viewed risk-taking as a negative or positive act. In the first round of interviews, my questions regarding how teachers felt about risk were quite general, so it was with this positive view of risk-taking in mind, along with wanting to understand some of the initial responses better, that I designed more specific questions for the second round, including investigating the consequences of *not* taking risks.

3.5 Dual-thinking process

We have seen the risks faced in a modern westernised society have changed over time from hazards to risks largely borne of the lifestyles now led and seen as matters of individual choice and responsibility. But what of the *process* of decision-making? How might we make sense of a process that considers the myriad variables associated with teaching in a modern classroom of 20-30 teenagers? Taking a utilitarian approach where a teacher rationally calculates all the possible outcomes of different educational approaches and selects the one judged to produce the best outcome would require computations that would challenge a supercomputer, but a model where teachers simply rely on gut

instinct is equally unsatisfactory as it removes any requirement for pedagogical knowledge or professional expertise. A model is needed in which both instinct and rational thought have a part to play.

From a neurological perspective, Damasio (1994) believed not only that both reason and emotion played a part in decision-making, but both were needed for decision-making to be effective. If we model risk-taking as a series of decisions taken, it suggests both logic and instinct should be considered. These ideas came together in the work of Paul Slovic, who wrote extensively about the dual process model for understanding how risk-taking is approached. This comprises an initial automatic response to the risk, followed by a slower analytical response (Slovic et al., 2004).

The initial response was referred to as the *experiential* response. When faced with a decision to take a risk, this is the automatic, emotional, instinctive gut reaction that we feel, like an intuitive reaction to danger or a threat (Slovic and Peters, 2006). It typically involves rapid processing relying on associations with images and past narratives. Slovic developed this into what he termed the 'affect heuristic' – the judgement made, positive or negative, resulting from the short cuts the brain takes based on years of previous experiences (Bateman et al., 2010). In the past, when most risks we faced were natural hazards, these quick, efficient short cuts ensured our survival (Slovic, 2018). If something snake-shaped appeared on the edge of our vision, we jumped first and considered our actions later. However, although these reactions are instinctive, they are still rational – based on past experiences or the knowledge and warnings of others.

As human lives became more complex, the need to be able to think more analytically emerged – a kind of look before you leap mentality needed by a society that plans ahead. This *analytic* response requires more time, uses evidence, and applies logical conscious thought in a way we might consider more rational and scientific (Slovic and Peters, 2006). This response typically delays action, seeking logical justification based on evidence. Deciding to take out a loan or change jobs, for example, probably requires some research and

thought for the long-term consequences in a way that avoiding a snake does not.

The dual thinking process not only *allows* for both these responses – an immediate instinctive reaction, followed by a slower analytical moderating response – but *requires* them both for effective risk-taking. Taking risks or making decisions based purely on instinct does not take account of the consequences that might arise but applying only logic leads to equally poor outcomes as prior experiences are ignored. Both the experiential and analytical responses are continually active and interacting (Slovic et al., 2004), enabling us to make better decisions. In a classroom context, teachers make dozens of small decisions every lesson. As they become more experienced, these decisions are increasingly based on experiential rather than analytic responses. Therefore, there might be a difference between how beginner and experienced teachers perceived classroom risks. On the other hand, planning and choosing teaching approaches does not require an immediate response, so this is where there is an opportunity for the analytic response to emerge, however experienced or otherwise the teacher is.

Another implication of the dual process model is teachers might have different initial and analytic responses to different teaching techniques. If teachers had a negative initial response to, say, groupwork, would this change given time to reflect? I wondered if some of the barriers to risk-taking might be revealed if teachers were given the chance to provide rapid responses and then reflect on their answers. This became the cornerstone of the design of my initial interviews and is explained in detail in Chapter 5.

3.6 Contribution to research design

The risk theories laid out in this chapter were central to the design of my interview questions. Most significantly, from Beck, the importance of considering teachers' subjective perceptions of risk directed me to using qualitative evidence, and since I was investigating the risks teachers take as part of their own personal development, an understanding of voluntary risk as described by Adams clarified the questions I put to participants. The greatest influence on interview design came from Paul Slovic's dual process model for understanding

risk-taking, which guided me to design specific activities to separate out teachers' initial and analytic responses and learn from any gaps that existed between the two. I was careful not to include too many formal questions to allow plenty of space for participants to reflect during the interviews so I could draw out their slower, analytic responses. Finally, I included questions in both the initial and second round interviews about the importance of past experiences in informing future teaching practices to tap into the experiential responses of participants.

Other aspects of risk theories that informed the interview design included follow-up questions that established the significance of losses identified by participants; asking about the positive outcomes of risk-taking separately from the negative to ensure the positive aspects of risk-taking were covered; probing to find out if collaboration was a key factor; and including questions and activities that investigated how the views of other stakeholders affected risk-taking.

In this chapter I have outlined the key risk theories used both to design my research methods as detailed in Chapter 5 and analyse my findings as set out in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. The final factor contributing to the design and analysis of this research comes from critical pedagogy, which I describe next.

Chapter 4 Critical pedagogy

As explained in Chapter 1, the motivation for this research emerged from wanting to support teachers to take the risks required to move their classroom practice from managing behaviour for compliance to leading behaviour for learning. The portrayal of pupils as passive learners had echoes of Shor and Freire's (1987) description of the banking model of education as a passive process of knowledge transmission. In developing research question 1 to consider how different teaching techniques were perceived, the overlap with Freire's (2000) dialogic teaching also came to mind and became part of the design of the initial interviews. In addition, as I completed the summary of risk theories, I noticed examples where descriptions of power relations and social pressures resembled aspects of Freire's narratives about the oppression of the majority and hegemonic practices – particularly around involuntary risks, the social acceptability of risk, and blame culture. Finally, as I began to analyse my findings, other characteristics of critical pedagogy emerged, including the political nature of education and reproduction of behaviours. I therefore decided to use critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework for my research alongside the risk theories detailed in Chapter 3. This chapter provides an overview of critical pedagogy as it relates to this research, followed by an explanation of how it contributed to the research design, and a summary of the main points used to support the analysis of my findings. Before that, however, a brief account of developments within the English education system in recent years provides context for later sections.

4.1 Developments in the English education system

The English National Curriculum was introduced in 1988, followed by the first examinations league tables in 1992, which ranked schools by their GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) results – taken when students are 16 years old. Under the Labour government of 1997-2010, a range of skills-based, coursework-assessed, vocational courses were introduced which enabled more pupils to gain qualifications equivalent to 'good' passes at GCSE (grades A to C). By the time the Conservative-Liberal coalition government came to power in 2010, there were already concerns that schools were

assigning pupils to these courses to boost their league table rankings. This was confirmed by the Wolf report (Wolf, 2011) which found pupils taking vocational courses were often unable to progress to their preferred post-16 routes. Michael Gove, the Education Secretary at that time, described providing a knowledge-rich curriculum with a rigorous academic core that enabled all pupils to progress to appropriate post-16 courses as a moral purpose, and work began preparing a new National Curriculum to be introduced from 2014. Influences such as Young's (2008) book 'Bringing the knowledge back in', convinced Gove that courses should require pupils to cover more content and engage with more complex material. Young (2008) identified certain 'powerful' knowledge as that which brought benefits to everyone, regardless of their social background, and therefore as a matter of social justice, all pupils were entitled to access this knowledge. Interestingly, little was made of the actual content of the new courses as consultations were carried out in 2013; rather, the focus was on the structure and grading of the new examinations. The majority of courses were now to be assessed entirely by examination at the end of two years of study with number grades 9 (highest) to 1 (lowest) awarded in place of letter grades A to G. Reforms to league tables followed in 2016, with schools achieving higher rankings if they entered pupils for 'traditional' academic subjects including English, mathematics, science, humanities, and languages. This led to a sharp increase in the numbers of pupils taking these courses (Gill, 2017), with the greatest increases occurring in schools with higher numbers of disadvantaged children. Thus, the government ensured more pupils were accessing an academic curriculum using league tables to manipulate schools' behaviour.

Alongside changes to curriculum, examinations, and league tables, came an appetite for more evidence-based practice in the classroom. In 2011, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) was founded to fund, review, and summarise education research so it was accessible to busy classroom teachers. Following the Carter review (Carter, 2015), a new curriculum for training teachers was developed, promoting the need to integrate education theory effectively with classroom practice. An initial framework in 2016 evolved into the Core Content Framework (CCF), implemented in September 2019 (DfE, 2019a), followed by the Early Career Framework (ECF) in 2021 (DfE, 2019d) –

a curriculum for teachers in their first two years of teaching – ensuring three years of training and support for those entering the profession. Where teacher training courses had previously studied pedagogical approaches such as constructivism and behaviouralism, these new curricula focused on the need to understand curriculum knowledge: eliciting prior knowledge; identifying foundational knowledge; sequencing learning of knowledge; anticipating misconceptions; linking ideas to existing knowledge; and remembering knowledge using learning theories of cognition, memory, and knowledge retrieval. Putting the final piece in the puzzle, references to knowledge and retrieval have been making appearances in Ofsted inspection handbooks from 2017 onwards.

One final structural change that has occurred since 2010 has been an acceleration of schools converting to stand-alone academies or joining Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). The Labour government initially introduced academies to fund and improve educational standards in disadvantaged communities, but subsequent coalition and Conservative governments have made it clear they would like to see all schools convert. Academies are state-funded, but independent of local council authorities, meaning they theoretically have more freedoms to choose how they are run, although in practice, they are subject to the same inspection frameworks and ranked in the same league tables as other schools. Schools can be forced to convert if they receive poor Ofsted ratings. In 2023, approximately 80% of secondary schools in England were academies with approximately 20% part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). The number of schools joining MATs has increased in recent years, which is significant in terms of classroom teaching, as many Trusts specify, to varying extents, how lessons are taught in their schools. This has largely been done in response to difficulties recruiting teachers, and especially experienced teachers, in schools in disadvantaged areas. This can lead to more directed learning in silent classrooms, focusing on learning and retrieving key knowledge. It is arguably easier to plan directed lessons, and they are easier for less skilled, or less experienced teachers to deliver, ensuring curriculum content is covered. However, while constructivist approaches might require more skill on the part of the teacher (Hills, 2007), the EEF (2023) toolkit lists collaborative approaches,

and metacognitive techniques as having high impact on pupil progress, and the CCF (DfE 2019a) refers to constructivist techniques including questioning, modelling, metacognition, and high-quality classroom talk, suggesting these higher level skills are valued by educationalists working with or for the government.

At the time this research was carried out, participants had been teaching the new curriculum for between 4 and 6 years depending on their subject, and none were working in a Multi-Academy Trust. Having provided some context relating developments in the English education system, I now provide an overview of critical pedagogy.

4.2 An overview of critical pedagogy

The origins of critical pedagogy lie in the work of Paulo Freire who focused on the role of education in improving social justice. Freire was clear critical pedagogy is not a technique, rather a way of educating (Shor and Freire, 1987) that seeks to increase social justice, promote equality and reflect the everyday realities of the communities served (Apple, 1999). In the following sections, I look at some of the key principles of critical pedagogy as they relate to this research.

4.2.1 Power relations

Freire (2000) saw societies as comprising a dominant minority or elite who held the greater part of society's wealth and power and dictated how the rest of society – the oppressed majority – live. In westernised democracies, dominance tends to be achieved by manipulation and cultural invasion rather than force, allowing enough success and freedom that the majority do not realise the extent of their oppression. The dominant class determines what represents the *right* knowledge and culture, using this as a tool of exclusion and control. State organisations such as schools are mechanisms for disseminating and embedding such cultures, playing a part in ensuring these societal norms are reproduced in future generations so the behaviours of the oppressed remain the same and the dominant class retains control. These cultures are so embedded, the majority often believe they need to take on the behaviours of the elite to

achieve success, becoming oppressors in their turn. Teachers, for example, are in danger of falling into this trap. Having achieved a certain level of success within society, they naturally want the same or better for their pupils but can assume the goals and aspirations of those pupils match success as defined by the dominant class. Oppression arises where teachers tell pupils they have to conform to be successful. This is how the dominant elite manipulate society – they induce those who genuinely want to make the lives of others better to reinforce the dominant culture.

Apple et al. (2009) believed it was the role of critical pedagogy to expose and challenge unequal power relations in education. The reproduction of dominant culture described above is one example; another centres around the power relationships between teachers and pupils in the classroom resulting from Freire's (2000) banking model of education. In this model, teachers are placed in authority over pupils, having the power to discipline and transfer or bank the 'right' knowledge directly into the minds of those pupils without discussion or critique. Pupils are required to be passive recipients of this knowledge with no say in what or how they learn, and with no consideration for their backgrounds, needs, or aspirations. The model reinforces and reproduces dominant culture, and in so doing, reinforces and reproduces social inequalities. Interestingly, the same Michael Young who influenced Gove's thinking was clear that a National Curriculum should limit itself to key concepts in each subject to allow individual schools autonomy to take account of the cultural difference in their populations (Young, 2013). While he thought 'powerful' knowledge should be accessible to all, he wanted schools to have opportunities to go beyond this common base. The portrayal of passive learners caught my attention when considering the behaviours of the pupils in my own school. Most twenty-first century teachers in England trained in the use of cognitive science, questioning, modelling, and dialogic learning (Department for Education, 2019a) might see a banking model as old-fashioned and ineffective, and yet aspects had crept into lessons in my own school. We might infer from Hills (2007) that teachers might use techniques falling under the banking model because they were considered less risky. I had thought this might have consequences for the quality of teaching and learning and thus outcomes for pupils, but Freire goes further suggesting they contribute

to reinforcing social inequality. This added a new dimension when investigating and analysing findings related to research question 1.

Teachers and pupils are not the only stakeholders in education – others include school leaders, governors, government, parents, and society. The power relationships between any of these and classroom teachers might have an impact on teachers' attitudes to taking risks. As indicated in Chapter 2, previous research found the culture of school leadership had an impact on whether teachers felt encouraged to take risks (Short et al., 1991), but I was also interested in the impact the level of agency afforded to teachers by school leaders might have. Greater agency suggests any risks taken are more likely to be voluntary, and according to Adams (1995), voluntary risks are seen as less risky. Adams also pointed out when it comes to involuntary risks, the greater the power differential between the person imposing the risk and the person taking the risk, the greater the perceived level of risk. The greatest power differential exists between schools (teachers and leaders) and the government, which in England sets the National Curriculum and largely dictates how schools are run. Although in theory schools have a wide range of freedoms, they are controlled by a combination of league tables and inspections, reflecting the global increase in benchmarking in education as countries compete in international league tables (Shields, 2013). I was interested to investigate whether, and to what extent, school leadership or government impacted on teachers' attitudes to risk-taking.

The final point in this section is teachers find themselves in the peculiar position of being both subject to power and domination whilst also having power and authority over their pupils. They are both done to and doing. Apple (2012) describes this as sitting in two social classes at the same time. As members of a graduate profession in England, teachers may align themselves with the middle-class attitudes of the educated, whilst at the same time aligning themselves with the working classes they may teach. Either way, power lies in the hands of the dominant group (Giroux, 1983) – in this case represented by the government – and schools reinforce and reproduce social and cultural structures that produce workers who continue the economic interests of the

dominant class. There are several different power relations that might impact on teachers' attitudes to risk-taking, and critical pedagogy provides a useful lens to consider the nature of these relationships.

4.2.2 The political nature of education

Education is often seen as a politically neutral pursuit. Teachers are required to show tolerance and respect for all (Department for Education, Updated 2021) and tend to see education as a benign enterprise in which they pass on their knowledge and expertise to the next generation. Critical pedagogy, however, understands education is not neutral and schools are not neutral places (Apple, 2012). Someone makes decisions about how education in England is organised, delivered, assessed, and monitored and pursues their own motives when making those decisions. Critical pedagogy requires us to consider not only *what* knowledge is taught in schools, but *who* decided what should be taught; *how* it is being taught; *why* it is being taught; and who benefits from it.

What is taught can be divided into overt, curriculum knowledge and covert knowledge (Apple, 2012) which forms part of a hidden curriculum (Giroux, 1983). This hidden curriculum refers to the way we run our schools – the rules and practices that make up the school day and how pupils and teachers interact within them. These convey strong messages to pupils about what is expected of them in the adult world, especially around discipline and authority, and communicates cultural values to pupils, conveying messages not only about what culture is acceptable, but also what culture is expected for certain social groups.

In England, teachers are required to follow the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2014) which is set by the government. When governments decide which knowledge is to be included, and which is not, decisions are often based on ideology (Young, 2013), sending a clear message identifying what knowledge is important, consequently devaluing that which is not included (Foley et al., 2013). The changes in the English education system in 2014 did not just add more content to the curriculum, suggesting that *knowing more* was important, but also changed assessments sending the message that being able to *remember more* was important as well.

There is, in addition, a hierarchy of importance within the subjects of the National Curriculum in England depending on how long the subject is compulsory for, whether it is examined, and the extent to which results will affect league tables. Thus, English and mathematics are double weighted in league tables and appear at the top of the list. Science is compulsory to GCSE level (aged 16 years) and humanities, languages, and computer science form part of the English Baccalaureate (EBACC) measure, putting them on the next level down. The other examined subjects including the arts, technology, and vocational qualifications come next. Finally, citizenship and relationships, sex and health education are also compulsory, but not examined, putting them at the bottom of the list. As a result, we end up with high stakes and low stakes subjects (Giroux, 1983) and for those who complete predominantly low stakes courses, particularly vocational qualifications, social inequalities are reproduced post-16 and post-18 years (Shields and Masardo, 2018).

At subject level, curriculum knowledge is chosen by the government, reproducing decisions about what knowledge confers power (Shor et al., 2017). For example, controversy over the new English literature GCSE in 2014 (Kennedy, 2014; Morby, 2014) regarding what many saw as a constricted curriculum, lacking diversity, still rumbles on (Lough, 2021). When governments decide what is to be taught in schools, fewer materials tend to be included about minorities and protected groups, leading to the reproduction of social discrimination (Santomé, 2009). Critical pedagogy on the other hand requires education to legitimise other kinds of knowledge (Foley et al., 2013), both in terms of diversification and legitimising knowledge not on the curriculum. This does not mean squeezing more content into what is already a crowded curriculum, rather giving children the skills to seek and access knowledge we do not have time to include in our school lessons.

Critical pedagogy requires us to consider not only what is taught, but what education is for. Jackson (2012, p.95), referred to Dewey to understand what education is for:

'Education is a socially facilitated process of cultural transmission whose explicit goal is to effect an enduring change for the better in the character and psychological well-being (the personhood) of its recipients and, by indirection, in their broader social environment, which ultimately extends to the world at large.'

This suggests individuals should benefit individually from their education, with society benefitting indirectly from the improvements in individual citizens. The focus is on the cultural wealth and well-being of each individual pupil. Contrast this with the reality of global education today which sees pupils as human capital to be trained as future workers to satisfy a country's economic needs (Giroux, 1994; Apple, 2012) with increased assessment and benchmarking (Shields, 2013) to measure schools' effectiveness at delivering on this production line model of education. The government's use of league tables in England to both measure and control what is taught in schools is an example of this. Critical pedagogy sees schools as vehicles for increasing social justice and building capacity for democratic change (Giroux, 2018), rather than as mechanisms of social control and accountability.

In summary, education is political from the content chosen for the overt curriculum to the cultural messages pupils receive, and from the purpose of education to the way schools are assessed and benchmarked. This aspect of critical pedagogy did not inform my initial research design in terms of the research questions or the script for the initial interviews, but it did play a key part in the analysis of my findings and to a lesser extent in the later iterations of interviews as detailed in Chapter 5.

4.2.3 Hegemonic practices

Hegemony means consenting to the order imposed by the dominant class (Au and Apple, 2009). We may accept this order because we do not see an alternative; because we believe what is communicated to us is common sense; or because we think the current order is good for us (Brookfield, 2017). We can end up accepting what we are told, even though it is doing us harm. In westernised societies such as England, this is likely to exist as a kind of moral and intellectual leadership where the majority accept and align themselves with the stated morals of the dominant class (Giroux, 1983). This represents

leadership by consent which is all the more powerful because subordinate groups buy into their own domination.

Schools are both victims and agents of hegemony. Teachers buy into practices they believe to be common sense and in the interests of their pupils, but which reproduce the dominant culture. These practices may harm pupils and suppress their progress in education, and many harm teachers who accept long hours and difficult working conditions as the norm. On the other hand, schools are part of the state apparatus and are as such reproductive. They pass on the culture that is acceptable to the dominant class and provide the knowledge and skills that ensure pupils occupy their place in society (Giroux, 1983).

As victims of hegemonic practices, teachers make it easier for the government to blame them when any policies they introduce fail to produce the required improvements. The blame is put at the door of schools and teachers – if only they had done what the government wanted, then it would have worked (Giroux, 1988). Teachers end up thinking they have failed, not because they have done a poor job, but through a lack of funding, time, or resources. It is just how the system is. As agents of hegemony, teachers, as graduates – intellectuals – lend legitimacy to how education is done to pupils (Apple, 2012). Teachers are generally trusted as professionals and the practices they use in schools are therefore believed by parents and the wider community to be in pupils' best interests. In this way, schools become sites for domination and social reproduction (Giroux, 1983; Brookfield, 2012; Foley et al., 2013) and teachers the agents of that reproduction. As in the previous section, hegemonic practices did not form part of my research design, but were evident in my findings, hence they are summarised here.

4.2.4 Social justice

Critical pedagogy requires education to contribute to greater social justice (Apple et al., 2009), and align itself with the oppressed (Foley et al., 2013). Santomé (2009) reasoned that since the rate of failure within schools globally is high, many children are not succeeding, so education is therefore not socially just. For example, in England approximately 30% of pupils leave school without achieving a standard pass in English or in mathematics (Department for

Education, 2019b) and unable to access a wide range of education and training opportunities. These pupils are increasingly likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Department for Education, 2019c; Department for Education, 2022a). Children who struggle to conform to the requirements of the system often miss out on their education (Giroux, 2011). In England, somewhere between 200,000 and 1,000,000 children do not attend school full time (Parish et al., 2020; Children's Commissioner, 2022), resulting in increasing inequalities in educational outcomes.

Of course, education also has a role to play in securing fairer cultural recognition and fairer political representation (Fraser, 2009). Critical pedagogy seeks to make pupils socially aware (Foley et al., 2013), or in Freire's words to '*unveil the world of oppression*' (Freire, 2000, p.54) and then provide them with the tools to further social justice through their own means. On their own, schools cannot solve social injustice (Shor et al., 2017), but teachers can act as agents of social change (Zeichner and Flessner, 2009), providing pupils not just with knowledge and skills to become economically useful, but with an understanding of how they can contribute to making their society a more equal one. Analysing my findings through the lens of critical pedagogy allowed me to consider the longer-term consequences of compliant classrooms and examination culture on pupils' opportunities to develop the independence and self-determination that would support greater equality.

4.2.5 Reproduction and resistance

We might consider education to be an instrument for increasing social equality, offering disadvantaged children a route out of poverty. Reproduction theory on the other hand sees schools as mechanisms for perpetuating inequality by reinforcing dominant ideologies – they reward certain capacities and behaviours and penalise others (Bowles et al., 1999). Schools pass on the knowledge and skills pupils require to occupy their designated places in society and legitimise government ideologies. Giroux (1983) felt reproduction theory ignored the fact that schools are not homogenous – different schools have different cultures and respond to dominant ideologies in different ways. In addition, he felt reproduction theory overlooked the importance of teacher and pupil agency and

their ability to resist dominant social practices. In effect, reproduction theory considers education as a whole, assuming all schools conform to dominant ideologies in the same way. Resistance theory, however, requires us to look at the interplay between the dominant and subordinate cultures within individual schools.

In general, reproduction and resistance theories refer to what is being done to, or resisted by, pupils in schools, but as with the discussion above on power relations in education, I was interested in whether these theories might be applied to teachers. Were teaching practices being reproduced between generations of teachers, for example? Might this explain why schools were considered to be conservative, risk-averse institutions? Themes of reproduction and resistance emerged during the interviews as discussed in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 following, and being sensitive to these theories, enabled me to pursue some of these themes through supplementary questions.

4.3 Contribution to research

The main contribution critical pedagogy lent to research design was in the selection of the teaching techniques presented to participants at the start of the first round of interviews. Research question 1 asked whether teachers had different responses to passive, banking teaching approaches compared to active, constructivist approaches.

For banking techniques, I referred to Freire's (2000) banking concept of education which described teachers as depositors of information into pupils' minds. Here I considered techniques involving purveying information from teacher to pupil with little or no requirement for the pupil to interact with or transform the information as they receive it, such as teacher talk or pupils reading information from a website or textbook.

Constructivist techniques include using cognitive terminology; using explanation and questioning; promoting pupil discussion before sharing teachers' own ideas; encouraging pupil dialogue; allowing pupil responses to drive lessons; applying concepts to real-world problems; and developing pupil independence and critical thinking (Watson, 2001; Pritchard and Woollard, 2010).

Constructivism is a broad term describing ideas, attitudes and practices that see learning as a social, collaborative process where new knowledge is built cooperatively upon prior knowledge (Bentley et al., 2007; Pritchard and Woollard, 2010). Radical constructivism describes us as individuals living in our own self-constructed realities but needing social interaction to develop further (Von Glaserfeld, 1990), particularly to cultivate higher cognitive skills (Roth, 1999). Social constructivism sees robust understanding, knowledge and higher order skills being socially constructed through talk and interaction. Hence, these techniques are more open-ended and unpredictable than banking approaches.

Critical pedagogy requires teachers to be aware of the relationship that exists between power and knowledge (McLaren, 2015) so they can build democratic classrooms which legitimise a variety of kinds of knowledge and actively promote equality (Foley et al., 2013). Learning should be situated in pupils' lives to give them a concrete base on which to build a critical understanding of the wider world and be designed to meet their individual needs. Young's (2013) description of 'powerful knowledge' enabling pupils to generalise from their own contexts to a wider experience is not much different. Shor and Freire (1987) emphasised the importance of dialogic learning to achieve these aims, which has a large overlap with those techniques teachers would recognise as constructivist. However, where many teachers trained in England might recognise many of those constructivist approaches listed in the previous paragraph from the Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019a) or the EEF Toolkit (EEF, 2023), I believe few are aware of critical pedagogy, or engage as often with democratic techniques targeted at raising social equality in the classroom. If constructivist techniques might be considered risky as they have open-ended, uncertain outcomes, critical pedagogic approaches, which involve teachers developing democratic relationships with their pupils might also elicit a similar response. I used this understanding of critical pedagogy to select teaching approaches which focused on teaching from different perspectives and encouraging pupils to direct their own learning and added these to the banking and constructivist techniques already selected.

Beyond research design, the main contribution of critical pedagogy was to the analysis and evaluation of my findings. The main themes that emerged were the role of power relations between different stakeholders; the political nature of what is taught and how; understanding what education is for; the acceptance of current systems; and the reproduction and reinforcement of behaviours amongst pupils and teachers. I also found critical pedagogy a useful tool for considering the socio-cultural contexts of risk-taking in the classroom.

Chapter 5 Methodology and methods

In this chapter, I describe my research position as a serving teacher carrying out this study during the Covid-19 pandemic. I discuss my role as an insider researcher, the advantages and disadvantages of this approach, and the additional ethical considerations required. I explain why I chose a mixed methods approach, favouring a qualitative methodology, and using aspects of constructivist grounded theory to allow for a flexible, iterative approach to data collection and analysis. A description of the specific methods chosen, and the activities designed to open up discussions with teachers follows, with an account of how these methods were implemented, focusing on the iterative nature of data gathering and analysis required for my chosen methodology. Finally, I reflect on the outcomes of the study in terms of the suitability of the methods chosen and the ethical considerations put in place.

5.1 My position as a researcher

I carried out this research whilst serving as a full-time senior leader in a secondary school in the Southwest of England. My ontological position, or view of the world (Grix, 2010), falls firmly on the side of constructivism – where social phenomena result from the interaction of social actors, as opposed to objectivism – where social phenomena are independent of these actors. This view arises from over twenty years' experience in education, witnessing how social interactions and relationships affect the behaviours and experiences of our pupils and teachers. I was also influenced by my training in the constructivist tradition, resulting in classroom approaches rooted in dialogue and active learning. My constructivist standpoint was further reinforced during the Covid-19 pandemic when teaching and pastoral support were largely provided online, and I witnessed the negative effect the lack of social interaction had on the progress of my pupils.

My epistemological position is more complex. My background in science favours a foundationalist stance where we attempt to remove assumptions, influences, and biases in our pursuit of knowledge, where my training and experience in education supports an anti-foundationalist position which views reality as socially constructed, reinforced by my constructivist perspective. On

the one hand, I see the daily reality of teachers' experiences in the classroom, and their approaches to taking risks as socially constructed and resulting from their interactions with others within the education system. On the other, I appreciate the value of trying to isolate and investigate one variable at a time, to discover patterns or relationships within data. In practice, my twin roles of scientist and educationalist have resulted in my feeling comfortable occupying what Grix (2010, p.56) refers to as a '*shaded area'* between research paradigms. This study largely required an anti-foundationalist position, but a foundationalist perspective was useful for keeping me alert to assumptions and biases, especially when considering any patterns emerging from my data.

When considering a positivist versus an interpretive approach however, it was clear applying a positivist, scientific method would not have enabled me to identify how teachers felt about aspects of their practice or understand their social and emotional responses to taking risks in the classroom. An interpretivist approach was needed to take account of teachers' feelings and emotions and how they were shaped by their interactions with their pupils, colleagues, and other stakeholders and by the personal, social, and educational contexts in which they worked. This approach also allowed me to interpret data subjectively, recognising my role as an insider researcher and the impact this had on my research (Radnor, 2001).

In summary, my current role, background, and training have led to a constructivist view of the world, whilst employing a practical approach to research when it comes to deciding where I sit on the continuum from foundationalist to anti-foundationalist. This study required an interpretive approach as I was considering teachers' *attitudes* to taking risks, but also researching from within my own profession. In the next section, I consider the significance of working as an insider researcher in more detail.

5.2 The insider researcher

Brannick and Coghlan (2007) describe an insider researcher as a complete member of the organisation they are researching, as opposed to someone who joins an organisation temporarily to complete their research. In my case, I did carry out some of the research in my own institution and was therefore an

insider researcher in the true sense of the term for that part of the study. I had always intended my own school would form part of my research, but as lockdown came into force it became a practical necessity and at one point, I had to consider it might form the sole source of my research. In the event, I managed to interview and survey teachers from other schools, but a level of insider-ness still existed. Having worked in the same geographical area for over twenty years, and held roles in teaching, leadership, and teacher training, I had a good understanding of the contexts of the schools involved and knew many people working in them. Finally, I had to acknowledge I was working within the education system I was researching and had not only a great deal of insider knowledge, but also my own opinions and views of that system. I therefore experienced different levels of insider-ness during the course of my research (Kelly, 2016), at a system, location and institutional level and had to be prepared to respond flexibly to each situation (McNess et al., 2016).

There were advantages to being an insider researcher. I understood the context of the English education system and of our local schools. Good relationships with those schools made it easier to gain access and recruit participants, even during the pandemic, as senior leaders were happy to recommend supporting the research. An understanding of teachers' working patterns made it easier to arrange interviews to have least impact on participants' busy days. My in-depth knowledge of the language, jargon, procedures, and routines that are part of everyday life in local settings led to a deeper understanding of the data gathered and allowed me to guide participants to provide richer information (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). For example, where a participant referred to '*spec changes*' and '*latest fads*' I knew they were referring to imposed changes and could move quickly to determine how these were seen differently to teacher-led risk-taking.

The disadvantage of researching within my own context was being perceived as lacking objectivity or conducting research that lacked validity or intellectual rigour (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). Outsider researchers could be considered more objective and detached (Mercer, 2007). While I made every effort to design a valid research process, once data gathering and analysis began, I had

to be aware of my position as insider researcher and guard against prior knowledge leading to assumptions. This sometimes required me to ask clarifying questions where not only I, but the participant, might assume I understood what they meant. For example, when a participant talked about time pressures, I asked them to describe a typical day rather than assume I knew where those pressures lay. I also had to be sensitive to participants seeking to provide the answers I wanted (Mercer, 2007) and accordingly designed the research process to include opportunities to check responses using an iterative, reflexive approach which also supported greater objectivity. I discuss this in more detail in the section on methodology following.

Finally, there were additional ethics associated with being an insider researcher. I had to guard against my role as researcher falling into conflict with my regular roles in local education and to consider the extent to which I had a personal stake in the outcomes of the study. I hoped what I learned would inform my practice so my lessons would be more effective; enable me to support the teachers I train and mentor to teach better; and provide evidence to support my school with their teacher development programmes. I was therefore under no pressure to come to any particular conclusion. Of greater concern was ensuring my roles as a researcher, a senior leader, and teacher were kept separate both in my own mind, and for my participants. In any research, the data gathered depends on the relationship built between the researcher and the participant (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). Since there were pre-existing relationships with some participants, I had to be sensitive to interactions that might alter, or even harm, any future relationships I had with those teachers (Hawthorne, 2016). I was asking participants to trust and understand my researcher role would not overlap with my other roles, especially as a school leader. This included the possibility teachers might reveal personal or distressing information during our conversations, or as professionals who are driven by a deep commitment to their pupils (Ritchie and Rigano, 2002) they might find it upsetting to discuss the negative aspects of risk-taking. I needed to ensure participants were comfortable sharing that information with me in my role as a researcher, and understood I was not speaking to them as a colleague or line manager (Humphrey, 2013). I was mindful participants might open up to me as someone

they already knew, and needed to be reminded the information would form part of my research, where others might open up to me as a researcher and need to feel confident in their anonymity. I found it useful to keep a prompt sheet during interviews, not only to ensure I asked participants to elaborate when I might make assumptions about their responses, but to ensure I reminded them of my role if discussions became personal, and confirmed participants were happy to continue to share the information with me.

To summarise, my role as researcher existed at different points along the insider-outsider continuum. This brought advantages in terms of access to participants and an understanding of the education system and local context, but required careful consideration when designing the research methods; a need to engage in a reflexive process about my position and role in the research (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017); and continuous sensitivity to existing and future relationships throughout the process. In the previous section, I identified the need for an interpretive approach for this study. Here I have shown this research required an iterative, reflexive process to maintain its validity. In the next section I show how choosing a qualitative methodology with aspects of constructivist grounded theory allowed me to meet these requirements.

5.3 Methodology

The anti-foundationalist, interpretive stance described previously led to an inductive, qualitative methodology (Bryman, 2015). That said, I was open to a pragmatic approach incorporating quantitative methods (Grix, 2010) where this allowed for early indicators to develop for deeper investigation, and supported with triangulating data (Becker et al., 2012). Mixed methods research integrates qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis, and often has different research questions focusing on the numeric and narrative aspects of the study separately (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2016). There is no such distinction evident in my research questions, and qualitative methods were clearly required to understand the socio-psychological attitudes of teachers to risk-taking. However, a mixed methods approach enabled me to use quantitative data to identify patterns in behaviour early on in the research

process that could be explored in depth later using qualitative methods. It also provided a tool for triangulating data to maximise reliability.

Using a qualitative methodology allowed me to focus in on a particular setting or context – in this case secondary school education in the Southwest (Grix, 2010) – and gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes of a small number of teachers. I was able to elicit rich descriptions and insights into the experiences of those teachers (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) and consider the constraints of the social and educational contexts in which teachers worked (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Using these rich descriptions, I could discern patterns and theories to be tested more widely and since I did not start this research with a hypothesis in mind, a qualitative methodology was required to allow for an inductive approach.

In addition to selecting a methodology that supported an interpretive approach, my decision to focus largely on qualitative methods emerged in part as a reaction to the fact much research into risk and risk perceptions uses quantitative approaches, often statistically quantifiable risks such as gambles to compare how individuals perceive risk. For example, Bowen et al.'s (2015) use of gambling behaviours as a proxy for understanding the differences in the attitudes of future teachers and future lawyers to risk. Teo and Le Fevre's (2017) tool for measuring teacher perceptions of risk also relied on statistical analysis. While these quantitative approaches raise interesting questions, they do not provide the rich data needed to develop an understanding of teachers' perceptions of risk, tending to tell us *what* might be happening, but not *why*. I was interested to see whether the contextual insights gained from a qualitative approach might help to redress this balance (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Understanding *what* is happening is a useful starting point, but does not explain *why* teachers choose to take or not take risks in the classroom. We need to understand *why* if we are to support changes to practice.

Finally, I wanted to focus on teachers' individual risk-taking as part of their development as practitioners, rather than their response to imposed change. School improvement and development are often described in functionalist terms (Radnor, 2001) as a series of processes or actions to be carried out by

teachers, as though they are units working in the structure of the education system, rather than as social beings working in diverse contexts. Part of the drive for my research was to shift the focus from teachers as workers on the educational production line to that of social beings whose emotional and psychological needs deserve investigation. Again, this came firmly into the spotlight during the pandemic when teachers were expected to switch from classroom teaching to teaching online at a moment's notice and catch up missed time when pupils returned to school as though completing a curriculum were a purely mechanical task. Understanding teachers' social and psychological needs required a qualitative methodology that focused on teachers' feelings and experiences.

Having established that the majority of my data would be obtained using qualitative methods, I had to be aware of the disadvantages of using these approaches. Firstly, my research was small in scale, as is typical of qualitative studies, so it would be considered difficult to generalise to a larger population (Grix, 2010), and there was no guarantee my findings could be replicated in different contexts (Becker et al., 2012). However, it did enable me to drill down into specific contexts which were not visible taking a quantitative approach. My findings also provided insights that further research might investigate on a larger scale using different methods in the future. These insights would not have been discovered using quantitative methods. To understand teachers' feelings and the socio-psychological impact of taking risks with their practice, I needed to hear their personal stories and narratives. A quantitative approach would have required a fair degree of subjectivity on the part of the participants and would have lacked the context needed to explain the responses, so I would have missed key findings. For example, I might not have picked up on the difference between teacher personal time and curriculum time identified in my findings and the significance of curriculum time and external pressures would have been lost. A second disadvantage of small-scale research is the difficulty of ensuring reliability within small data sets. I built in processes to maximise reliability, including keeping verbatim transcripts; using a second round of interviews to test theories and check understanding; keeping a reflective research diary; and using a survey to triangulate interview data. Where

continuing to gather more data confirmed existing theories and no longer provided fresh insights, I could consider my results reliable for this sample.

The third issue, related to being an insider researcher, is that qualitative approaches can be considered to lack objectivity. As an insider researcher, I needed to use a reflexive approach putting in safeguards to avoid my own views and perspectives influencing my findings. The iterative approach was especially important, as it built in opportunities to evaluate and check my findings as data gathering progressed. Once I had identified these possible disadvantages, I revisited my methods to ensure I had done as much as possible to mitigate them, and the advantages of obtaining the rich data I needed outweighed any disadvantages they brought. This is where the use of a quantitative approach – using a survey – provided an opportunity to test my findings with a wider range of participants.

Having established a mixed methods approach was required, supported by an iterative, reflexive process to allow for new ideas and theories to be generated, I investigated specific methodologies that might support these requirements. Ethnography, phenomenology, and action research all suit insider research, but while they offer thick descriptions (Fetterman, 2009) and opportunities for reflexive approaches (Finlay, 2013), it would have been difficult to keep my research and leadership roles separate providing ethical difficulties. Instead, I considered aspects of constructivist grounded theory.

Grounded theory allows theory to be discovered from data (Glaser, 1973) as opposed to gathering data to test a hypothesis. This suited my research as I had no hypotheses to test and wanted to develop a new understanding of teachers' attitudes to taking risks in the secondary school context. It also exhorts researchers to avoid fitting theories to data, which could be a danger to an insider researcher. This constant need to be reflexive was crucial to producing meaningful interpretations of the data gathered.

The constructivist turn on grounded theory moves away from mechanical methods allowing for a more flexible approach (Charmaz, 2014). Data collection and analysis occur simultaneously as an iterative, inductive process, moving

between collecting data, analysis, developing ideas and testing them in new data (Charmaz, 2017a). In my initial pre-Covid-19 plan, I intended using focus groups to gather initial data, develop ideas and then respond with further focus groups, interviews, or surveys to test and develop those ideas. Although I had to change the methods used, the flexibility and systematic introduction of doubt into the process remained. I started with interviews, and as I gathered data on teachers' preferences, coded my findings, and formulated theories to be tested, I decided a second round of interviews and then a survey were needed to challenge and refine my ideas. The flexible nature of the process meant as I coded each set of data and reflected on those findings, I was able to respond to the data and refine my questioning between interviews *within* each round, as well as *between* the two rounds. This provided opportunities to check in on my relationship with each participant and examine transcripts for any assumptions I may have made. I used a research diary to record my thoughts and theories and then contest them to avoid falling foul of folk pedagogies (Bruner, 1986) or allowing theories to be formed according to my own point of view. While grounded theory is largely associated with qualitative approaches, there are examples of mixed qualitative and quantitative methods being used, especially where researchers want to address issues of data validity (Poth, 2023). Using a survey to triangulate data, therefore, fitted with this model, so long as I adhered to the key principles of iterative, reflexive, inductive analysis.

Another advantage of constructivist grounded theory is it does away with the concept of a neutral observer since it is impossible to be entirely objective, especially when researching your own profession and institution. This allowed me to acknowledge my place in the research context and my relationships with the participants, and then develop a methodological self-consciousness, constantly scrutinising the research process and my role within it (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz, 2017a; Charmaz, 2017b). I used the time between interviews to complete this scrutiny as described in the previous paragraph.

Finally, constructivist grounded theory is useful for critical inquiry in which research starts with concepts of social justice and emerges from the researcher's own value position (Charmaz, 2017b). My own values as a teacher

include wanting to improve the educational and life outcomes of children and wanting to address the woeful lack of attention paid to teachers' views, experiences, and needs when trying to support the development of their practice. This research is very much driven by these values. In addition, social justice forms a key part of critical pedagogy which informed the design of my research as explained in Chapter 4. The ability to develop new theories through flexible, iterative data collection and analysis, combined with the opportunity to reflect and question my place and values in the research made constructivist grounded theory a useful methodological approach.

In summary, a mixed methods approach, using largely qualitative methods supported by quantitative approaches, and incorporating aspects of constructivist grounded theory allowed for rich data collection to investigate the social and psychological attitudes of teachers to risk-taking, situated in the context of English secondary schools. The inductive, iterative nature of this approach enabled ideas and theories to emerge from the data and be tested, refined, and scrutinised to achieve valid results. In the following sections, I explain which methods were chosen; how they were designed and implemented; and how they were adapted and refined in response to emerging data.

5.4 Methods

5.4.1 Selecting the research methods

As explained, this research took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. The initial proposal, plan and ethical considerations were completed between the easing of the first lockdown in England in March 2020 and October 2020 when schools had reopened, albeit with many restrictions in place. At this point, I had planned to use focus groups to gather initial data and identify some common themes to develop working theories for further testing. Focus groups would have allowed me to gain a large amount of rich data from many people in a short space of time (Stewart et al., 2009; Wilson, 2016). Opportunities were available in December 2020 and January 2021 to hold focus groups away from school settings ensuring fewer interruptions (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999; Gill et al., 2008), and I had got as far as identifying the members of the first focus group,

producing materials, and making provisions to meet Covid-19 regulations. However, as cases in England rose, and Covid-19 restrictions increased, it became clear we were headed for a second lockdown and focus groups were no longer an option. When Wilson (2016) said one disadvantage of focus groups is they can be difficult to schedule, I doubt she had a global pandemic in mind. At this point, I switched to semi-structured interviews which could more easily take place online or in a Covid-safe way as lockdown eased. I went back to the materials already produced and adapted them for remote, one-to-one use.

Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences, feelings, and actions from their own perspectives and in their own words (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018), providing opportunities to dig deep and describe specific situations I might have missed in a focus group. On the other hand, when adapting my materials for the interviews, I had to avoid getting drawn into cosy conversations between two teachers, rather than extracting the views of my participants. I planned for circumstances such as participants giving only short answers, or my needing to distinguish between those comments I can reasonably interpret, such as '*when Andrew and I plan together*' to mean '*when I plan with the other art teacher*', and comments that require expansion such as '*well you know how it is, time is always an issue*'. To combat these concerns, I produced a card that sat alongside my interview script with reminders not to interrupt or give opinions; suggested questions to draw out longer answers; prompts to clarify any terms or responses where I might assume I understood their meaning; and cues to confirm participants were willing to continue where discussions became personal or appeared to forget I was present in the role of researcher. Restrictions and changes to school circumstances made it difficult to conduct a trial run, so I sent my proposed questions to teachers not working in the Southwest and used their feedback to ensure the questions and activities were clear. Organising and completing individual interviews took more time to schedule, complete and analyse, especially during lockdown, but I gained deeper data earlier in the process and was able to respond to my findings and refine some of my questions between interviews in the first round.

The choice of semi-structured rather than structured interviews required few formal questions allowing me to pursue specific themes whilst providing space for the participants to reflect as the interview progressed. Conversation and dialogue drew out personal stories and narratives to reveal participants' viewpoints (Tangaard, 2009). For example, when one of the participants talked about having to abandon creative lessons to complete an examination syllabus, I was able to follow this up, revealing a narrative of creativity being one of the most enjoyable aspects of teaching and a positive aspect of risk-taking. Hence, the choice of semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility to follow themes within and between interviews.

Having accepted my research methods had to respond to both the requirements of the study and the changing Covid restrictions, I carried out a first round of interviews, analysed the data and identified themes to be investigated further, then carried out a second round of interviews until I reached the point where new themes were no longer emerging. Having only worked with a small sample of teachers, I decided to use a survey to triangulate my findings with data from a larger group of teachers from schools across the region (Ruel, 2019a). I determined to use an online survey as it was easier for participants to complete – there was no requirement to complete a paper form and post it, for example – and easier for me to collate and analyse the data. One disadvantage of using surveys is you cannot guarantee the survey will reach the required people (in this case, classroom teachers), or that they will respond (Fowler, 2009). I had to hope headteachers from the schools across the region would read my request and forward my survey to teaching staff, and then hope teachers did not simply delete the email as one of the many they receive every day not directly related to their work. Again, carrying out the research during Covid-19 presented difficulties. Normally I could have contacted the relevant senior leader and asked for support, or to attend a staff meeting to talk directly to teachers about my research. However, restrictions meant fewer meetings were held, and rarely in person. I was also mindful of the extra workload carried out by school staff during the pandemic and sensitive about asking for their time. In the end, I received a lower number of returns than hoped, only 36 participants from 30 schools, but the data provided useful triangulation to follow up and test themes

that emerged from the interviews. Figure 1 summarises the data gathering process.

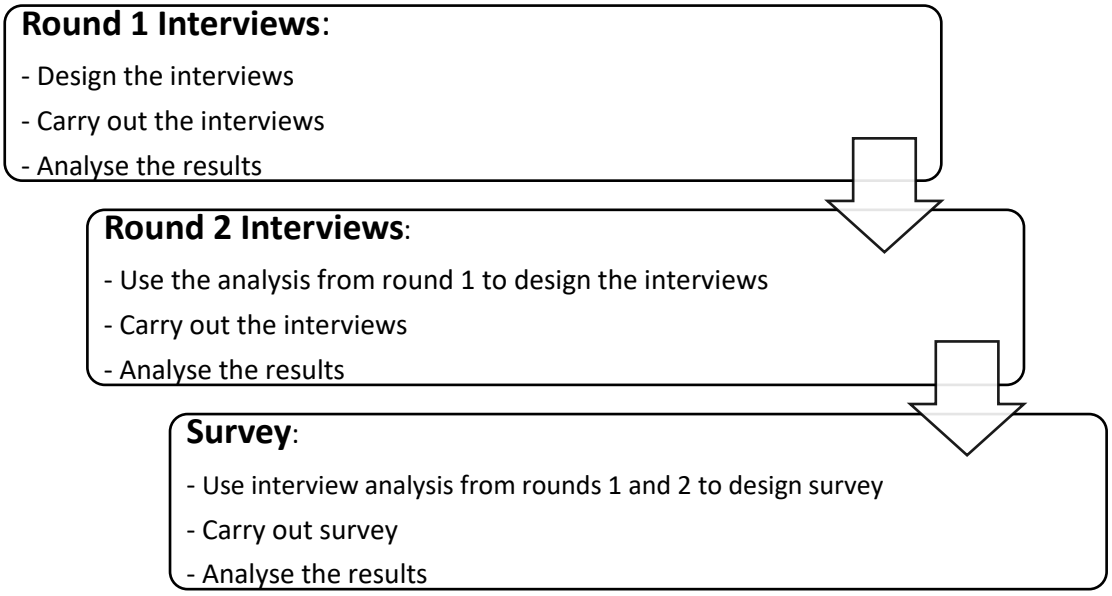

Figure 1 – Implementing research methods

5.4.2 Sampling

I originally assembled a focus group in my own school using a blanket invitation to all teaching staff. The decision to start in my own institution was driven by the restrictions and concerns arising during the Covid-19 pandemic. I had access to teachers, time, and a location in my own school to meet the first group. Even as this was arranged, it became clear another lockdown was likely and I switched to asking for interviewees. I selected 6 volunteers with a range of service lengths and from a range of subject areas, which meant I used a mixture of sampling for convenience, volunteer sampling and theoretical sampling (Becker et al., 2012). I then contacted a second, contrasting local school, approaching the headteacher first as a matter of courtesy. Another senior leader acted as gatekeeper, targeting my request towards teachers they thought would be interested. I asked for a range of teaching experience amongst the participants, but otherwise made no requests. I had 5 teachers respond, of whom 4 booked interviews with me, giving me a total sample of 10 teachers from 2 schools.

Ideally, I hoped to involve teachers from a third school, but finding participants and acquiring the necessary permissions was challenging during the pandemic,

and other schools approached were not able to respond in the necessary timeframe. Circumstances also required a reliance on volunteer sampling, as I did not want to add to workloads at a difficult time, meaning participants were self-selecting. Despite the difficulties, I achieved a range of subjects, roles, and backgrounds amongst my participants, and the age, race, and gender splits were representative of the national workforce. I also found a surprising level of consistency in the responses of those taking part which suggested, although the sample was small, I would be able to identify meaningful themes amongst the data. Working with just two schools made accessibility easier during the pandemic, especially as we had no idea how long restrictions would last or what the impact on those schools might be. As it turned out, restrictions of varying severity remained until the end of February 2022.

Pseudonym		Number on roll	% Free school meals
Abbey Secondary School	11-18	1375	4.8
Badgeworth High School	11-16	885	22.8

Table 1 – Key data on the two contrasting schools

Table 1 shows key data (Department for Education, 2022a) for the schools at the time the data were gathered. Pseudonyms are given for anonymity. Both are located in the Southwest of England. For context, the Southwest comprises 15 local education authorities of which 11 are listed in the F40 group of authorities (F40, 2022) which receive the worst funding per pupil in the country. The majority of these are rural authorities. The schools in this study are typical in that they are based in a rural, F40 authority and are contrasting in terms of size and demographics. Both are state schools, non-selective, and at the time were not part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT).

Main subject	Number of participants
English	2
Mathematics	1
Science	2
Geography	2
Modern Foreign Languages	2
Art	1

Table 2 – Subjects taught by interviewees

Number of years teaching	Number of participants
0-5 years	2
6-12 years	2
12+ years	6

Table 3 – Length of interviewee teaching experience

Table 2 and Table 3 show the characteristics of the participants by subject and length of service. The subjects in the English curriculum are categorised as ***core*** (English, mathematics, and science); other ***EBACC*** (humanities, modern foreign languages, and computer science) and ***open*** (all other approved courses). Even though the sample is small, I had a range of subjects encompassing all three categories, which was important as all pupils must study core subjects to GCSE, whereas other subjects are optional. The range of subjects, including two practical subjects, represent possible different teaching methods or approaches. That half come from core subjects is not a surprise as these are usually the largest departments in secondary schools, therefore offering a greater pool of teachers to volunteer to be interviewed.

I did not ask for teachers' ages in the interviews as I was interested in how their perceptions changed as their careers progressed regardless of current age, but to have 12 years' service would mean being a minimum age of 34 years. Since approximately 80% of the 465,526 teachers in England were aged 30+ years in the academic year 2020-2021 and approximately 47% were aged 40+, (Department for Education, 2022a) having a high proportion of respondents (in this case 60% or 6 out of 10) with more than 12 years' experience was

representative. I have not included any further personal characteristics such as gender or race as this would threaten the anonymity of the participants.

Returning to my research questions, a range of service lengths was important for research question 2 to understand whether attitudes to risk-taking varied as teachers progressed through their careers. Having a range of subject areas and two contrasting schools was useful as I found patterns across all participants that might apply to the wider teaching profession and could warrant further research. Overall, while a larger sample would have been preferable, I was able to gather enough data to develop clear answers to my research questions.

Finally, the survey went out to 30 local secondary schools via their headteachers. I could not tell from the results how many of the schools forwarded the survey or where the results came from as I kept the responses anonymous. However, I did receive emails from three headteachers informing me they had forwarded the survey, and they represented a range of schools including an academy chain, a stand-alone academy, and a local authority school. They also represented a range of school sizes and GCSE outcomes, so wherever the responses came from, they were likely to be reasonably representative of schools in our region. This was the part of the research where I had little control over the sampling of participants, but this is a frequent problem when using anonymous, online surveys. However, as with the data gathered from the interviews, the survey results supported answers to my research questions.

5.4.3 Designing the first-round interviews

The first-round interviews were an adaptation of the activities and questions originally developed for the focus groups. A key part of the process was the use of two card sort activities at the beginning of the interview which provided both an alternative way to express opinions (Colucci, 2007) and a set of artefacts to refer to during the later stages of the discussion. I kept these activities in the interviews, where they provided an equally useful focus for discussion, especially when the interviews had to take place online. The latter part of the interview comprised a series of questions largely referring to the responses to the card activities. A copy of the interview schedule can be seen in Appendix A.

In reality, the conversations jumped around as teachers followed their own trains of thought, but this provided a useful prompt and ensured all key questions were covered.

The card sorts were designed to uncover information and understanding in the gap between teachers' initial intuitive responses to the activities and their later, analytic discussions (Slovic et al., 2004). To that end, participants were first given a set of cards with a different teaching technique printed on each and asked to decide *instantly* whether they were happy using that technique, without being given any time to reflect, so I could gather their intuitive responses. There were 20 teaching methods – a mixture of banking, constructivist, and critical pedagogic approaches (see Table 4) sourced from a range of educational literature (Shor and Freire, 1987; Watson, 2001; Saavedra and Opfer, 2012) and my own pedagogical knowledge. It is difficult to truly categorise any one teaching approach, as in reality, teachers blend a number of techniques together in their lessons. The banking approaches were those where knowledge could be transferred directly to pupils; constructivist approaches involved social interaction leading to learning; and critical pedagogic approaches required engagement with what was being learned, and why. Participants were asked to consider each approach in isolation when making their decisions. To keep it simple, they had to put a red or green sticker on each card to designate a negative or positive response. The categories were not shared with participants. I wanted to find out how teachers *felt* about using different teaching methods before looking more deeply into research question 1 to find out which were considered riskier. These responses provided some basic quantitative data revealing participants' teaching preferences. In previous research, Hills (2007) suggested teachers might feel less comfortable using open-ended constructivist techniques as they pose a greater threat to teacher competency. If this were the case, I might have expected teachers' responses to constructivist techniques to be negative, and possibly their responses to banking techniques positive. The second activity required participants to identify for each technique whether they used it frequently, sometimes, or rarely, providing data about the relationship between preference and frequency of use for each teaching approach. Again, these responses were to be given instantly to elicit initial experiential answers.

Students will read through textbook pages and make their own notes	Banking
Students answer questions from a worksheet or textbook	Banking
Students use the internet to research and understand a new idea	Banking
The teacher uses a PPT or images to talk through an explanation	Banking
The teacher plans a lesson where they will learn or complete work alongside the student	Constructivist
Students work in groups to complete a task or solve a problem	Constructivist
Students are set a task with an uncertain outcome – neither the students nor teacher knows what will result	Constructivist
A flipped learning model is used where students arrive at the lesson having already studied knowledge content so they learn to apply it in the lesson	Constructivist
Students complete a task that requires them to make a number of independent decisions	Constructivist
The teacher demonstrates or models answers for students	Constructivist
Student voice is used in a lesson to determine the effectiveness of the lesson and inform future planning	Constructivist
Students teach or lead all or part of a lesson	Constructivist
Metacognitive questions are used throughout the lesson	Constructivist
Team teaching	Constructivist
A clear link is made in a lesson between what is being taught and how it will benefit students in the real world.	Critical pedagogy
Students are directed to question and critique what they are learning and why they are learning it.	Critical pedagogy
The teacher starts a lesson or topic by asking students what they want to learn about it.	Critical pedagogy
The teacher delivers a lesson using a different perspective to their own – gender/race/age/class	Critical pedagogy
Students are directed to identify and question their assumptions about a topic.	Critical pedagogy
A lesson is planned from a student's perspective (age, background, culture, etc.)	Critical pedagogy

Table 4 – Teaching approaches used in card sort in first round interviews

Ensuring I had instant responses meant participants could not see the resources in advance. For the earlier online interviews, this necessitated delivering sealed packs to teachers beforehand. However, my participants enjoyed receiving the packs and opening them at the start of the interview to find the card sorts and stickers inside, and the activities led to instant interaction and engagement. At this point in the pandemic, the social interaction (albeit largely online); novelty of the activities; and opportunity to talk to someone

about their profession was welcomed by participants during what was quite an isolated period, and everyone reported enjoying the experience.

The next section of the interview was designed to give participants time to reflect on their answers to the card sort activities and elicit the slower, analytical responses described by Slovic (2018). Questions were deliberately open-ended allowing for deeper discussion and to look for, and understand, any shifts in thinking as participants thought logically about their practice. First, we discussed why participants felt positively or negatively about each teaching approach. This focused on research question 1 seeking to find out which techniques teachers considered more risky. At this point, participants often qualified their opinions of the different approaches, explaining that how they were used was important. For example, talking through a pre-prepared MS PowerPoint presentation was considered poor teaching, but using an image, text, or problem on a slide as a focus for discussion was considered effective. Without being aware of the labels I used in Table 4, participants were making the distinction between banking and constructivist approaches themselves. Next, questions turned to the teaching methods participants used rarely or not at all, drilling down to find out why they were not used. This was directed at research question 3 regarding the barriers to taking risks. Thinking about Ponticell's (2003) references to loss and significance of loss, I asked participants what the negative consequences of using those methods might be to understand not just what might go wrong, but why it might matter. To ensure balance, and a clearer understanding of attitudes to risk, I also asked what the positive consequences of trying new techniques might be. Following advice from Charmaz (2014), I covered negative consequences first, then positive, to ensure ending on a positive note. I concluded this section with a direct question asking participants if they would change any of their responses to the first card sort activity having had time to reflect. This was to give participants a final opportunity to consider whether the discussion had moved their point of view.

In the final section, I addressed research question 2 asking participants whether how they felt about taking risks in the classroom had changed during the course of their careers. I also asked if any obvious teaching approaches were missing

from my list. I wanted to be sure I had not fallen into the insider researcher trap of assuming my chosen list of activities covered all bases. Again, following Charmaz's (2014) advice, I finished with a couple of lighter questions about the context of the participant's school and their approach to education. Finally, I offered to answer any questions participants had, ensuring the interview finished positively with an opportunity to address any concerns.

5.4.4 Analysing the results of the first round of interviews

I completed 10 initial interviews, six online and four face-to-face, albeit under Covid compliant circumstances. I found interviewing online a bit stilted, but most participants were glad to have something different to do during lock-down and saw the interviews as something to look forward to. Conducting interviews allowed for conversations resulting in very personal discussions, stories, and observations. Reviewing the language, conversations and laughter threaded through the transcripts, I felt I built trust with my interviewees and elicited honest responses, unimpeded by my status as an insider researcher. Interestingly, participants were protective of, and loyal to, their schools as institutions and cognisant of the outside pressures visited on them, but at the same time were happy to speak reflectively and critically about what went on.

After each interview I logged the results of the card sort activities so I could observe and respond to emerging patterns of teacher preferences for different teaching approaches and how often each approach was used. I also fully transcribed the interviews, including all hesitations, repetitions, sighs, laughter, etc. There were four reasons for this. First, I wanted to review each interview to check that I had maintained an appropriate distance as an insider researcher. Second, I wanted to be sure I had been attentive to how my participants felt as I had a duty of care. Third, it enabled me to check for any assumptions during the discussions. I found using phrases such as '*can you tell me how that works?*' or '*could you describe a typical…?*' or asking the participants to explain something as though I were not a teacher helped. The fourth reason was some of the language participants used to describe how they felt was emotive and sometimes catastrophic and yet delivered in a quite matter of fact manner and I found having a full transcript helped me understand this better.

As I transcribed each interview, I considered refining or adding supplementary questions to test ideas and clarify findings as I progressed through the first round of interviews. I found early on that teachers responded positively to most of the teaching approaches, so I altered the focus of later discussions to examine those methods teachers liked but did not use in the classroom first to understand the barriers stopping participants putting those techniques into practice. Assessment was raised in initial interviews, suggesting examination teaching might prevent good teaching, so I dug for deeper answers in later interviews. This turned out to be a key theme which is discussed in detail in Chapter 8. Time was identified as a barrier right from the start, so in later interviews I asked participants to describe a typical day or identify specific time pressures to enable me to develop clearer themes around time as a barrier to risk-taking. Finally, I found teachers using emotive language in early interviews, such as *fear* of letting pupils down, or feeling *devastated* when they made mistakes, and yet they spoke as though these negative feelings were simply part of being a teacher. This suggested a hegemonic practice worth further investigation. In later interviews, bearing in mind ethical considerations, I asked participants how they felt about the decisions they made and the outcomes that resulted. As well as providing useful insights into the psychological aspects of risk-taking, the results contributed to providing answers to research question 3.

Alongside recording these reflections, I coded as I went along. I completed my first attempt at initial coding after transcribing the first three interviews. Charmaz (2014) describes line-by-line coding as a useful first step for grounded theory, and as working well with detailed data, such as interview transcripts. I chose to code sentence by sentence, or clause by clause where this provided sensible chunks of data. This first effort yielded a long list of around 30 provisional codes. Once the next three transcripts were completed, I refined the codes and started to identify major themes and subthemes. After coding the final four transcripts, I refined the codes again and reapplied these codes to the ten transcripts. The process is shown in Figure 2 and the themes and subthemes identified after the initial interviews are shown in Table 5.

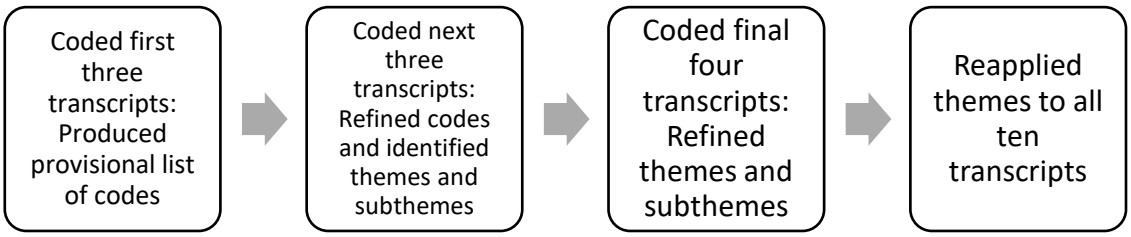

Figure 2 – Coding process for initial interviews

THEMES	**SUBTHEMES**
Barriers to taking risks	Practical issues Student abilities and skills Student behaviour Teacher knowledge Lack of support
Considerations	Confidence Feelings about risk Control, structure, planning Previous experiences Student groups Subject considerations Pedagogy
Examination teaching and coaching	
Outcomes of risk-taking	Student negative Student positive Teacher negative Teacher positive
Progression of risk attitudes over time	
Reflection	
Reproduction	
Student empowerment	
TIME – curriculum	
TIME – personal	
Quotes	

Table 5 – Themes and subthemes identified at the end of the initial interviews

This iterative process allowed for the rationalisation of some themes, and for others to emerge. For example, I initially had a theme called *barriers to risk-taking,* but it soon became clear the sub-theme of *time* was too large not to be a theme on its own and needed to be split into *teacher time* and *curriculum time* to make sense of the data. The theme of *examination teaching* emerged on the second round of coding as did the separate themes of *reproduction* and *power relationships*. I also found participants describing taking risks at different times within the academic year, which chimed with descriptions of distributed risk-taking (Douglas, 2002) that I thought warranted further investigation. Finally, I looked at the frequency of codes, finding five major individual themes: teacher time; curriculum time; reproduction; pupil empowerment and enablement; and examination teaching and coaching. There were a further three categories of themes: barriers to risk-taking; other considerations; and outcomes of risk-taking. Finally, following advice, I included a theme for quotes in which I recorded particularly poignant or revealing comments that informed my findings or the development of the research process.

After ten interviews I already had clear themes emerging, so I did not feel the need to broaden the number of participants. There were, however, some key themes and initial theories I wanted to explore in more depth. First, participants demonstrated positive attitudes to taking risks and towards open-ended constructivist and critical approaches to teaching, which contrasted with findings in previous research that described teachers as conservative and unwilling to change. I wanted to test the theory that teachers have positive feelings about taking risks in their classrooms. Second, participants had raised the issue of student skills as a barrier to accessing new approaches, making this one of the larger sub-themes, but the findings were not conclusive and warranted deeper discussion. Third, the theme of curriculum time as a barrier to risk-taking was a major individual theme. I wanted to test the theory that teachers saw non-completion of the curriculum as a greater risk than trying new approaches to develop their practice. Returning to the constructivist grounded approach, I decided to approach my ten participants to take part in a second interview so I could test my emerging theories and gain a deeper understanding of the existing data.

5.4.5 Designing the second-round interviews

The aim of the second-round interviews was to test theories and explore themes from the initial interviews in more depth rather than to find completely new data. This meant returning to original participants to continue our initial conversations. All participants were willing to be contacted again, but the pressures on schools and teachers resulting from the pandemic were continuing so I designed a shorter interview in recognition of that fact and focused on clarifying ideas that had arisen from the first set of data collected. A copy of the interview schedule can be seen in Appendix B.

During the first round of interviews, I concentrated on barriers to risk-taking and the consequences of actively choosing to take risks in the classroom. All participants had demonstrated positive initial attitudes to taking risks leading me to theorise teachers' attitudes were more positive than described in much previous literature. Conversations in the first round of interviews focused on why there was a discrepancy between the techniques teachers liked and those actually used, to identify barriers to risk-taking. This time I approached the discussion from a different angle asking what the consequences of *not* taking risks would be to see if the positive attitudes to risk persisted and to understand how this manifested itself.

Continuing with the theme of positive attitudes to risk-taking, all participants had described examples of fitting in opportunities to take risks into a busy schedule – perhaps taking risks at particular times of the academic year; spreading out their risk-taking across the year or across the classes they taught; or even sharing risk-taking across their departments. Douglas (2002) had described how households distributed financial risks and I wanted to test the idea that teachers might also distribute their risk-taking. I therefore included a question asking how and when teachers chose to take risks.

Next, I explored the lack of pupil skills further as this was the key barrier to risk-taking identified by participants after teacher time and curriculum time. Eight out of ten participants suggested pupils' lack of skills meant they were unable to access some teaching techniques, particularly those described as constructivist or democratic. This was one of the few areas where responses from

participants were not consistent in terms of which skills were lacking or how they affected risk-taking. I wanted an opportunity to dig deeper into this theme to see if any clarity could be achieved.

Having established curriculum time as a major barrier to risk-taking, with all participants raising concerns about losing teaching time and using emotive, catastrophic language when talking about not finishing the curriculum, I wanted to test whether teachers were more concerned about the risk of not completing the curriculum than they were about taking risks with their teaching. I chose a simple approach, putting a statement to participants and asking for comments. I followed this up with two card sort activities. The first identified where the pressure to complete the curriculum at all costs came from: school, pupils, parents, governors, their department, the government, themselves, or society. The second sought to confirm whether curriculum completion was a key risk in the eyes of classroom teachers when compared with other barriers. I asked participants to rank the scenarios shown in Table 6 according to which made them most uncomfortable.

Trying a new technique in a lesson with little time to prepare
Trying a new idea with a GCSE class, knowing it will take up 2 or 3 lessons and may mean you will be late finishing the topic
Trying a new approach others don't buy into
Trying an approach you used before but didn't go well
Trying a new approach which you think your pupils will put up some resistance to

Table 6 – Scenarios used in card sort in second round interviews

These scenarios emerged from comments made in the initial interviews. For example, *trying a new approach others don't buy into* came from teachers mentioning being affected to a greater or lesser degree by the opinions of others and appeared in Ritchie and Rigano's (2002) example of a teacher not introducing change as it did not fit with the existing views of their department. *Trying an approach you used before but didn't go well* was included as one participant discarded team-teaching because they had never seen it work, and risk theories suggest our perceptions are influenced by our experiences of

previous negative outcomes (Adams, 1995). The choice to use more card sorts was partly to keep the interviews focused, partly to allow for direct comparison of answers from different participants, partly to ensure discussion from even the most monosyllabic of participants, and partly because I knew my participants enjoyed these activities.

Finally, in response to themes around critical pedagogy emerging from the first round of interviews, I asked participants whether they thought education, as it was delivered in England at the time of this research, prepared pupils to live fulfilled lives and increased equality. I kept my questions deliberately open to avoid directing participants' answers, allowing them time to reflect on their own views. The opportunity to reflect was completed with a closing question asking participants if they had anything to add about the consequences of *not* taking risks in the classroom.

5.4.6 Analysing the results of the second round of interviews

I managed to arrange interviews with six of the original ten participants. Of the remaining four, one left the profession and three did not respond in time to complete my research. I chased for a response twice but remained mindful of teacher workloads during the pandemic. As data were collected, I coded each transcription using the themes identified at the end of the first round of interviews, adding in new codes which better described some of the themes that emerged or were confirmed during this iteration of interviewing. Once all six interviews were completed, I analysed the themes I now had and rationalised them, resulting in the final list shown in Appendix C. I added themes for distributed risk, different perspectives (in terms of gender, age, socio-economic background, race, and religion), relationships with students (which was viewed as differing from student behaviour), and 'the system' (referring to all aspects of the English education system). This final set of themes was reapplied to all my transcripts from both sets of interviews. The process is summarised in Figure 3.

By the end of the process, I had consistent and clear narratives of teachers' views on the consequences of *not* taking risks; how they distributed risk-taking; how attitudes to risk developed across a teaching career; and how completing

the curriculum influenced teacher attitudes to risk-taking and teaching practice in general.

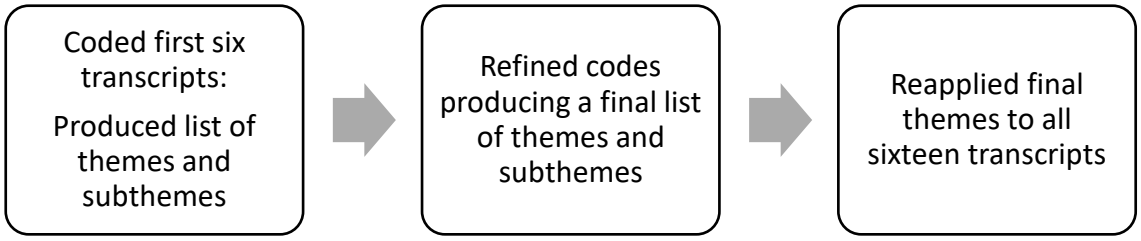

Figure 3 – Coding process for second round interviews

The results from the second interviews supported previous results, so I was confident I had enough data to draw conclusions related to my research questions at this point. In fact, I was surprised by the large degree of consistency in the responses from this diverse group of teachers. Having completed sixteen interviews in total, there were only three areas where the responses deviated. First, unsurprisingly, I found differences in the personal narratives and experiences of the teachers. Their backgrounds and experiences coloured their motivation, views of education, examples cited, and different narratives emerged concerning the negative influences the profession had had on their lives. Second, there was a discrepancy in teachers' opinions about the importance of pupil skills and their role in influencing teachers' attitudes to taking risks in the classroom. Despite appearing as a prominent factor in the first round of interviews, participants attached far less importance to pupil skills in the second round even though I questioned them specifically on this topic. Third, there were differences in the responses regarding whether the English education system prepares or empowers pupils or increases equality in society. Answers differed as participants largely referred to their own personal and educational contexts. There was general agreement that education did not increase equality in society, but participants were less confident in their answers and had not given these questions much thought before. In summary, at this stage of my research, for this cohort of teachers, I was confident I had developed clear answers to my three research questions.

5.4.7 Designing the survey

Although happy with the level of data saturation achieved, it was based on a small sample. As a result of the pandemic, the sample size was even smaller than I had anticipated as I was unable to run focus groups or involve a third school in the interview process. I had originally planned to use a survey to obtain a wider range of results, and while changing to interviews left me with a smaller timeframe to produce the survey and gather data, I decided to go ahead and survey as many teachers in the local area as possible to seek confirmation or otherwise of the data obtained from the two rounds of interviews.

The survey was produced using Qualtrix and emailed to local secondary schools. Using an online survey circumvented restrictions due to Covid-19 and enabled me to collect and collate data quickly and easily on a spreadsheet, making it versatile and efficient (Ruel, 2019a). Qualtrix has a tool for checking how user-friendly the survey is, which helped me ensure it was short, avoided ambiguous questions, and used simple language (De Vaus, 2014). I pretested the survey using volunteers outside my geographical research area (Ruel, 2019b) to ensure the questions were easy to understand, had the same meaning for all respondents and were not considered to be leading in any way.

The survey first identified the attributes of respondents. To protect respondent anonymity, I did not ask which school they worked in, only the main subject taught and number of years teaching service. The number of years were grouped into 0-3, 4-6, 7-12 and 12+ years to see whether they were any differences between those right at the start of their careers (0-3 years) and those with some experience (4-7 years), rather than the three categories I investigated in the interviews. As it happened, there was only one respondent with 4-7 years' experience, so the distinction was unnecessary. As other personal characteristics had not been a focus of my research and no themes had arisen from the analysis of interview transcripts, no other information was sought. The rest of the survey comprised multiple choice or rating statements with no text responses required to keep user time to a minimum. The questions asked are listed in Appendix D.

Question 3 considered the extent to which certain factors might influence whether teachers take risks in the classroom and were drawn from suggested factors in existing literature and from the results of the interviews. Question 4 focused on barriers asking to what extent teachers would be put off risk-taking by a range of factors, again drawn from existing literature and interview responses. Question 5 asked how often teachers tried something new in the classroom, looking at whether risk distribution followed a similar pattern to that identified in the interviews. Questions 6 and 7 focused on curriculum time as a barrier to risk-taking, looking at how much time teachers were prepared to lose to try a new approach and the extent to which teachers' practice is driven by a need to complete the curriculum. Question 8 asked to what extent respondents felt their role was to teach key stage 4 pupils to pass examinations. This was in response to *teaching to examinations* emerging as a theme in the interviews to see if this was a concern among the wider teaching profession. In England, key stage 4 refers to the curriculum leading up to GCSEs which are the first external examinations pupils sit. Questions 9 and 10 pursued the theme of pupil skills. The prominence of pupil skills as a barrier had varied between interview participants and between the two interview rounds, so I was interested to see what arose from the survey. Questions 11 and 12 focused on teacher professional development to see whether respondents thought risk-taking contributed to improved classroom practice and the role of making mistakes in learning to teach more effectively. This last question arose from a comment made by one of the participants during the interviews. Questions 13 and 14 echoed those asked in the interviews responding to themes around critical pedagogy. I knew I would not be able to qualify these answers in the context of a simple survey in the way I would be able to in an interview, but I was interested to see what teachers' gut reactions to these questions would be and whether they would match the responses of the interviewees.

In summary, the survey questions sought to confirm or refute previous findings regarding teachers' considerations when taking risks; potential barriers to taking risks; distribution of risk-taking; the role of curriculum time and examination performance as a barrier; the impact of pupil skills on risk-taking; attitudes to

taking risk as part of professional development; and the impact of education in England on social equality.

5.4.8 Analysing the Survey

The survey went to 30 local secondary schools and while the data were anonymous, responses from three senior leaders suggest the results represented a range of schools from the local area. I received 36 responses in total which is low but, given the timeframe available and the fact the survey went out as schools coped with the fallout of the pandemic, not surprising. The profile of the respondents is shown in Table 7 and Table 8.

Main subject taught	
English	2
Geography	3
Health and Social Care	1
History	2
Mathematics	7
MFL	1
Music	1
PE	5
RE	2
Science	10
EAL	1
Sociology	1

Table 7 – Subjects taught by survey respondents

Number of years of service	
0-3 years	7
4-6 years	1
7-12 years	6
12+ years	22

Table 8 – Survey respondents' years of service

English, mathematics, science, and PE tend to be the largest departments in secondary schools, so the higher numbers in three of these subject areas along with a range of other subjects suggests this cohort is representative. A high proportion of experienced teachers responded. In this survey 61% or 22 out of 36 participants had more than 12 years' experience. This is similar to the cohort of teachers I interviewed where 60% of the 10 participants had over 12 years' experience, and typical of the national teaching population as detailed in Section 5.4.2.

As the survey generated quantitative data, I analysed the results in Microsoft (MS) Excel. For those questions requiring participants to use a sliding scale to determine the extent to which they agreed with a statement, I added up the number of responses for each point on the scale and calculated a percentage. I also added up all the points for each statement and divided by the number of respondents to get an average score for each statement to give me a quick view on a scale of 0-5 of the extent to which the respondents overall agreed with each statement. Finally, I repeated this for each cohort of teachers in the different experience categories. This enabled me to see whether the responses changed as teachers progressed through their careers. Table 9 shows an example.

Q8. To what extent would you agree with the statement: "At keystage 4 my role is to teach pupils how to pass the exam"?

Teacher Experience	0-3 yrs	4-6 yrs	7-12 yrs	12+yrs	ALL	
0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
1	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
2	0	0	0	2	2	5.6%
3	1	0	2	7	10	27.8%
4	5	0	3	9	17	47.2%
5	1	1	1	4	7	19.4%
TOTAL	**28**	**5**	**23**	**81**	**137**	
MEAN	**4.00**	**5.00**	**3.83**	**3.68**	**3.81**	

Table 9 – Example of data analysis

In this example, the figure 3.81 out of a maximum of 5.00 showed teachers in the survey agreed with this statement, but not strongly. This is borne out by the percentages at the end of Table 9. Looking at the mean figures for the different levels of teacher experience, this suggests teachers feel this most strongly at the start of their careers. I had to be careful, however, when looking at the 4-6 years category as only one respondent fell into this group.

Questions with multiple-choice answers are represented later in this report as bar charts. As the data set was still small, I decided not to spend time on any further statistical analysis as it was unlikely to reveal any new insights. The main aim of the survey was to gather data for comparison with the interview findings to determine whether this small sample might be representative of the wider region. As I elucidate further in Chapters 6, 7 and 8, the consistency of the survey results with those in the interviews is high, lending support to my findings, and suggesting the views of the interview group represent a wider number of teachers in this region, albeit those willing to respond to surveys.

5.5 Reflection

5.5.1 Anonymity

A major ethical factor for this research was anonymity for the schools and teachers taking part. The topic researched was not a controversial one and did not focus on sensitive, distressing, or embarrassing topics. The focus was on the individual development of teachers, not the performance or behaviours of schools or school leaders, but in a climate of inspection reports and league tables, schools are understandably careful of their reputations. As expected, participants referred to their schools and colleagues during the interviews so I took care when selecting quotes and reporting on participants' views not to include any information that might identify each school or any of their staff. Some quotes in the findings sections have therefore been edited where deemed necessary to retain anonymity without losing the meaning of the statement.

To retain teacher anonymity, only an overview of the subjects and lengths of service of the participants is given. Again, I have been careful when selecting quotes or reporting on my findings not to include information that would allow

any individual to be identified. All participants had taught and trained in more than one school and referenced experiences across their careers, so any comments made do not necessarily refer to the schools the participants are working in at present.

5.5.2 Sensitivity

Before embarking on this study, I obtained approval from Lancaster University's Research Ethics Committee. Although the focus of my research was not of a sensitive nature, upsetting or distressing issues could have arisen during my conversations with participants. Before starting, I imagined this might arise from teachers' feelings about the effectiveness of their teaching as described by Rosenholtz (1985). In the event, while participants did talk about times when they got things wrong and how they had felt bad about it, this was largely in a philosophical sense. These teachers acknowledged they would not get everything right all the time and while they might feel bad in the short term, it was their responsibility to own their mistakes and try to do better tomorrow for the sake of their pupils. Teachers also spoke of their frustrations with the education system and its impact on pupils, but again, responses were very much in the vein of wanting to do the best for their pupils despite the constraints placed upon them.

What I had not foreseen were the personal stories teachers told about the negative impacts of the profession on their lives. This ranged from acknowledging that relationships, hobbies, and interests had been allowed to lapse, to significant impacts on physical and mental health. In each case participants were frank and open, and I checked they were happy to share these accounts, and in each case, they confirmed they were. Their stories were told in an atmosphere of considered reflection rather than distress or upset, and on reviewing the recordings it was clear each participant continued to talk with passion, interest, and humour for the rest of the interview. My main concern was to ensure they were comfortable revealing their stories to me as a *researcher* as opposed to a mentor, coach, or line manager.

5.5.3 The insider researcher

From a practical point of view, my role as an insider researcher afforded me easier access to teachers and schools, and while this was limited during lockdown, I did have a reasonable pool of participants willing and available to talk to me. The advantages of knowing the schools I worked with and understanding the local context described by McNess et al. (2015) were evident in that I understood education and school terminology; references to local places and organisations; and the two workplaces researched. Conversational short-cuts made sense to me, so the main challenge was ensuring my interpretation of these short-cuts was secure. I also experienced some conversations where participants gave very short answers (Humphrey, 2013) not realising they needed to elaborate, so some participants required encouragement to expand their answers. In some cases, I put myself in the role of an outsider (Robinson-Pant, 2016) to extract the detail I sought, encouraging participants to see me in that light too.

Despite maintaining the anonymity of the participants, I found some teachers in both schools revealed to each other they had taken part and discussed the content of their interviews with each other, so I had to keep myself apart from those conversations. I was asked regularly by colleagues in both schools and across the region how my research was going and again, had to be careful to maintain confidentiality. The best evidence I have that I was successful in maintaining good ethics was the frank, open discussions and revelations shared in the interviews; the feedback from participants that they had enjoyed the experience; and the continued positive relationships with those who participated.

5.6 Summary

When I started out on this research, there were three key points that informed my choice of methodology. I took a constructivist, interpretivist position to understanding teachers' attitudes seeking to understand not just *what* those attitudes were, but *why* they existed. I intended to situate at least some of the research in my own institution and would therefore take the position of an insider researcher. I did not have any theories to test and needed an approach

that allowed me to develop ideas and then test them. These considerations pointed me to a qualitative methodology, using aspects of constructivist grounded theory to develop and test ideas.

The methods I chose were driven by the choice of methodology, but also, necessarily by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Ethical considerations expanded from the impact of taking part in the research process might have on teachers, to ensuring procedures were in place to protect the health of participants and being mindful of the stresses and pressures on schools and individual teachers at this time. This resulted in two rounds of semi-structured interviews, returning to the original participants to test ideas arising from the first round, followed by a survey to triangulate and validate the data. All teachers involved were situated in secondary schools in the Southwest of England, with interviewees coming from two non-selective, stand-alone secondary schools with contrasting intakes.

Despite the difficulties, I gathered enough suitable data to develop answers to my three research questions. In the following three chapters I lay out my findings showing that when teachers' attitudes are considered from the point of view of individuals driving their own classroom practice, they demonstrate positive attitudes that are at odds with descriptions in much previous literature; their changing attitudes as careers progress relate to their changing professional and personal circumstances; and it is the curriculum and examination system that provides the greatest barrier to risk-taking in the classroom.

Chapter 6 The positive nature of teachers' attitudes to risk

Research question 1 asks which classroom teaching methods teachers perceive as risky, and are there any differences between the perceptions of active, constructivist approaches to teaching as opposed to more passive, banking, transmission methods? In this chapter, I show participants had positive initial attitudes to the full range of techniques discussed in the interviews. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the teachers involved had far more positive attitudes to risk-taking in the classroom than suggested in previous literature. First, however, I introduce the participants and contextualise what they considered risk-taking to be.

6.1 Risk-taking in the context of classroom teaching

Ten teachers from two different stand-alone, non-selective secondary schools in the Southwest of England took part in the semi-structured interviews. I have listed their aliases in Table 10 along with which school they were working at and the length of teaching experience at the time of the research. Other personal characteristics such as gender and race are again omitted and gender-neutral names chosen to maintain anonymity. As explained in Chapter 5, participants volunteered to take part in research into teachers' perceptions of risk-taking in the classroom. In the introduction to the initial interviews, the study was presented as exploring what risk-taking means in terms of teachers' everyday working lives (see Appendix A).

Participant	School	Teaching experience
Alex	Badgeworth High School	7 years
Bernie	Abbey Secondary School	17 years
Casey	Abbey Secondary School	7 years
Daryl	Abbey Secondary School	23 years
Eddie	Badgeworth High School	1.5 years
Frankie	Badgeworth High School	21 years
George	Badgeworth High School	1.5 years
Hayden	Badgeworth High School	17 years
Jesse	Badgeworth High School	20 years
Kennedy	Abbey Secondary School	21 years

Table 10 – Interview participants by school and teaching experience

These participants described risk-taking as trying out new, or different methods, techniques, activities, or strategies in the classroom, with the purpose being to improve teaching practice and pupil outcomes. Casey said it was about asking '*how could I do that activity differently?*' and in a similar vein, George described risk-taking as being about '*finding the best ways to teach*'. Alongside introducing change, participants identified uncertainty as a key ingredient in risk-taking and acknowledged this required a certain relinquishing of control. Jesse thought this meant they '*didn't know what was going to happen*', and participants described a range of outcomes from lessons going brilliantly, to losing some teaching time, to embedding misconceptions, acknowledging that the consequences of taking risks sat on a continuum from very positive to very negative. Participants all spoke of the need to plan for these risks, as the aim was always to improve pupil learning. Thus, the teacher descriptions of risk-taking included the four main principles of: deciding to make a change or try something new; knowing the outcome is uncertain; understanding the significance of possible losses; and taking action based on a plan that considers the probability of the lesson being successful. These principles all appear in the definition of risk-taking posited in Chapter 3. In the following chapters, therefore, when discussing teacher attitudes to risk-taking, I am referring to teachers making a planned change to their practice, knowing there is a level of uncertainty of outcome.

6.2 Positive attitudes to teaching techniques

In Chapter 2 I explained little research exists looking at teachers' attitudes to risk-taking, and much of that describes schools as cautious, and teachers as conservative and resistant to change. When faced with requests to change their practice, the literature suggested teachers typically adopted change where they considered it to be practical and congruent with their existing practice and values (Doyle and Ponder, 1977; Gilbert, 1992). However, evidence from the interviews and survey tell a different story, particularly when teachers discussed the consequences of taking, or not taking, risks for pupil outcomes. Here I argue, when we consider risk-taking from the perspective of teachers taking individual, voluntary risks to further their own practice, teachers' attitudes to risk-taking are positive and engaged rather than cautious and conservative.

The card sort activity described in Chapter 5 was designed for the first round of interviews in which teachers had to rapidly assign a green or red sticker to 20 different teaching techniques depending on whether they felt positively or negatively towards teaching using that technique. These techniques included a mixture of banking, constructivist, and critical pedagogic approaches. Since previous literature had suggested open-ended or unfamiliar approaches with uncertain outcomes would be considered more risky (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003; Hills, 2007; Slovic, 2018), I thought constructivist and critical pedagogic approaches might elicit negative responses. Between the literature and my own personal experiences, I expected clear divisions in the results with teachers preferring the predictable, banking activities and rejecting the others. I thought differences based on subject area might also emerge – perhaps science lends itself to group work and problem solving and geography lends itself to critical analysis, for example. What I had not expected was to find all the participants in my sample, from both schools, and across all subject areas, had positive initial responses to most activities, assigning them green stickers. Table 11 shows participants had positive responses to an average of 16.8 activities out of 20. This suggests teachers incline towards positive rather than cautious attitudes to the full range of teaching techniques and had positive feelings for a wider range of approaches than I had expected. The full data can be found in Appendix E.

Teacher	Initial Response	
	RED (Negative response)	GREEN (Positive response)
Alex	4	16
Bernie	4	16
Casey	6	14
Daryl	3	17
Eddie	5	15
Frankie	3	17
George	4	16
Hayden	2	18
Jesse	0	20
Kennedy	1	19
AVERAGE	**3.2**	**16.8**

Table 11 – Responses to card sort activity by participant

Even more surprising were the activities that elicited positive responses. These results are shown in Table 12. In contrast to Hills's (2007) suggestions, participants demonstrated more positive responses to constructivist and critical pedagogic techniques than to banking techniques. Constructivist approaches were the most popular, followed by critical pedagogic, with banking techniques the least favourite. In fact, the banking techniques of reading a textbook and making notes had the most negative responses of all approaches listed, and all four of the techniques for which 100% of participants had a positive response were constructivist. These teachers showed a distinct preference for open-ended active teaching techniques rather than passive banking approaches.

	Number of Activities	Initial Response	
		RED (Negative)	GREEN (Positive)
Banking	**4**	32.5%	62.5%
Constructivist	**10**	10.0%	90.0%
Critical Pedagogic	**6**	15.0%	85.0%

Table 12 – Responses to card sort activity by type of activity

Exploring the findings further with participants, they described banking activities as '*boring*' and '*passive*' seeing these as poor techniques for developing knowledge and understanding. Daryl did not think textbooks '*stimulates their thinking much at all',* believing they could be used *'without pupils actually learning anything*' and Hayden was even more dismissive:

'*I don't think kids sat there reading textbooks and making their own notes is what you call teaching*'. [Hayden]

In contrast, teachers referred to constructivist and particularly dialogic approaches as simply good teaching practice. Pupil-talk and open-ended activities were viewed as an exciting aspect of classroom teaching, rather than as something to be feared. Alex loved '*that I can never control what they're going to ask me or what they're going to question'.* Participants felt the open-ended nature of these approaches added interest to lessons.

Interestingly, some activities I identified as relating to critical pedagogy were less familiar to participants and yet they still responded more positively to these than to the banking activities. Participants were initially concerned they would not know how to start using these activities, but later in the discussions suggested they wouldn't mind trying the activities out:

'*I haven't considered how I might use it in my teaching. But now that you're making me think about it and how I could use it actually, and I might do now.*' [Jesse]

The inference being these activities were not dismissed out of hand because they were unfamiliar, and in some cases, participants started to consider during our conversation what these activities involved and how they would work. This did not fit with a description of teachers as conservative – rather my sample were curious.

To summarise, by using Slovic's (2018) dual thinking process and designing activities to elicit participants' immediate, intuitive responses, teachers' positive attitudes to a wide range of teaching approaches were revealed. There was little difference between reactions to banking, constructivist, and critical pedagogic

techniques. Overall, teachers expressed a preference for constructivist approaches, seeing these as representing good practice, but disliked banking techniques as they were passive and did not challenge pupils to think. Rather than viewing open-ended tasks with uncertain outcomes as risky, teachers saw them as exciting and stimulating for their pupils and for themselves. Teachers were less familiar with critical techniques, especially those which required planning lessons from different perspectives, but were interested to learn more about them and how they would support their classroom practice. These findings portray teachers as professionally curious and keen to challenge themselves and their pupils, rather than cautious and fearful of change.

6.3 Positive views of pupil outcomes

In the first round of interviews, I established participants' initial reactions to a range of teaching approaches were positive, but this only considered participants' theoretical views to a range of scenarios. Later, I examine the gap between theory and practice, but first I want to examine teachers' views on the outcomes of taking risks. Participants were overwhelmingly positive about how outcomes affected pupils. Analysing the results of coding for positive and negative outcomes for pupils, it was clear teachers spent a lot more time talking about the benefits to their pupils than any possible costs.

Participants felt trying new ideas was important for pupils' motivation and engagement. '*Having variety in their lessons…that does enthuse them*' [Bernie] and '*the kids will really enjoy it*' [Daryl] because it is '*different from what the kids have been doing before*' [Eddie]. The survey results concurred with these views with teachers identifying pupil enjoyment and motivation as the most important factor influencing their decisions to take risks in the classroom (see Table 13).

Factors influencing risk-taking	MEAN SCORE (Scale of 0-5)
Pupil enjoyment and motivation.	4.39
Being confident in my skills and abilities.	3.97
Wanting to bring variety to my lessons.	3.86
Enjoying being creative in my planning.	3.64
Previous experiences where approaches went well.	3.53
Having the right class in front of me.	3.42
Access to a wide range of resources.	2.83
Support from other colleagues.	2.64
Positive messages about taking risks from senior leaders.	2.64

Table 13 – Factors influencing risk-taking (survey results)

It is important to note, however, these teachers were that clear risk-taking was not just about making lessons enjoyable, there was a serious pedagogical issue to be considered as to whether a new technique was '*educational or is it just fun?*' [Eddie]. This goes back to the concept of risk-taking in the classroom described at the start of this chapter. Risk-taking should be planned, and if it goes well it can help '*pupils understand maybe a misconception or a misunderstanding*' [George]; result in pupils learning '*different ways to try different things'* [Alex]; or can take pupils on a '*more interesting kind of journey*' [Hayden]. While it was important to teachers that their pupils enjoyed their lessons, for them, risk-taking was about teaching those pupils more effectively. Taking risks meant '*you'll often find a good way to do things*' [Kennedy] and '*it might turn out to be the best way that you've done it*' [Daryl]. Far from being risk-averse, or unwilling to embrace change, participants saw risk-taking as an essential part of their practice. That those risks might be measured, or based on pedagogical research and evidence, was simply an expected feature of professionalism within teaching.

Interestingly, some participants spoke of the importance of obtaining pupil feedback to inform their planning and development. Jesse commented that when something new had been tried out '*I will ask then how they felt about it and that will tell me whether or not I should repeat it*'. If the use of open-ended tasks in the classroom is considered socially risky (Hills, 2007), then surely teachers exposing themselves to the criticism of their pupils afterwards is an

even greater social risk. And yet, this risk was seen as acceptable as it led to better outcomes for pupils. In Alex's words:

'*There's been times where I've said to students at the end of a lesson… I'd like to ask you a few questions about the lesson. I'm not going to be offended, but I want to know a couple of things like how I can improve it next time… they're really good at giving feedback – they're so honest.*' [Alex]

What data from the interviews and surveys suggest is teachers have positive attitudes towards risk-taking because they believe it leads to better outcomes for their pupils. Changing and developing classroom practice, even asking pupils for feedback might be risky, but not as risky as sticking to existing habits if pupils are not learning. This is the point at which I found positive outcomes for pupils overlapped with positive outcomes for teachers. Returning to Rosenholtz's (1985) view that teachers' psychic well-being is closely related to their pupils' outcomes, risk-taking as an essential part of teachers' professional practice should also lead to positive socio-psychological outcomes for teachers. In the next section, I analyse the evidence demonstrating this and look at the other positive outcomes for teachers identified in the data.

6.4 Positive views of teacher outcomes

The positive outcomes for teachers identified from the interviews fell into three categories – improving pupil outcomes, personal development, and personal gratification. Teachers saw risk-taking as necessary to ensure pupils enjoyed their lessons and made expected progress. Risk-taking to improve existing practice often came about when teachers identified that something needed to change to help their pupils, that is, they saw a conflict between what they were doing at that time and what it was achieving. '*Being a good teacher is recognising when things have to change*' [Jesse]. When an approach was not working, teachers became dissatisfied and wanted to find alternative ways to enable their pupils to succeed (Ritchie and Rigano, 2002). They felt it '*was worth the risk – it is worth trying out these different things*' [Alex] if it meant pupils could learn more effectively. Taking risks had a positive outcome for teachers as it overcame their dissatisfaction (psychic deficit) and offered opportunities for positive psychic rewards if pupils made better progress.

Kennedy compared the process to a kind of cost versus benefits analysis in business explaining:

'*I think it's just sort of getting fed up of… things not working well enough, and thinking you know…it's worth the effort and the risk to do it a different way. You know, some kind of tipping point has been reached where actually it feels like the bigger risk is not to change.*' [Kennedy]

Returning to the definition of risk-taking suggested in Chapter 3, participants seemed to suggest they were considering the balance of probabilities before taking risks. Whilst all risk-taking necessarily entails uncertain outcomes, these teachers were driven by the fact that the outcome could be favourable for their pupils and they saw the possible benefits as outweighing any possible costs (Le Fevre, 2014). Once they reached the point that doing nothing represented a possible cost in terms of pupil outcomes, teachers found what Baker-Doyle (2018) described as the courage to initiate change – self-initiated change as a result of individual teachers reflecting on the outcomes of their own practice with their own classes, not change imposed by school leaders.

This consideration of cost and benefit also manifested itself when teachers weighed up possible social risks against possible pupil gains. In the previous section, I explained many participants had described using pupil feedback and pupil voice to evaluate their teaching, valuing the benefit of improving their practice above any possible social losses. Interestingly, two of the more experienced participants took that further describing how they openly shared their thought processes with their classes. Here is one example:

'*I'll go, I didn't really like what we did last lesson, didn't really think that you understood it as well as you should. It's not your fault, it's my fault, it's the way that I did it, so ah, we're going to redo it again today. We're going to do it in a different way.*' [Frankie]

For these teachers, it was important pupils did not think a lack of progress was down to their lack of ability. Any social risk of taking on blame was considered less important than ensuring pupils' confidence remained intact and that they understood regrouping and trying different approaches was a fundamental part

of learning. In short, pupil well-being and progress represented important positive personal outcomes for teachers echoing Rosenholtz's (1985), Ponticell's (2003), and Lasky's (2005) assertions that teachers' sense of well-being and self-esteem is highly correlated with pupil progress. Teachers considered the possible gains from taking risks in the classroom were more valuable than possible social losses from opening up to pupils and sharing their thought processes.

I categorised the second type of positive outcomes for teachers as personal development. Participants described two aspects of development – avoiding getting stuck in their ways and improving and evolving their practice. These teachers were clear they did not want to continue doing the same things in their lessons throughout their careers. Words like '*stuck*', '*stale*', '*stagnant*' and '*boring*' were used by all participants to describe teaching practice that did not move on. There was a clear feeling that '*your practice becomes stale, and you don't develop professionally*' [Frankie]. Alex described feeling horror at being that teacher who was still doing the same lesson 20 years later, a sentiment echoed by Hayden. These findings did not match the descriptions of risk-averse, habit-forming teachers seen in previous literature. In fact, the risk these teachers wanted to avoid was that of not embracing change and improvement as they believed '*if you don't try new things then you're not going to learn anything*' [Eddie]. The risks they were happy to embrace were those that improved their practice, and these were seen as positive personal outcomes of taking risks. This went beyond supporting pupils to do well. Teachers got a lot of personal satisfaction from experimenting, developing, and improving – perhaps not surprising in a profession that encourages children to do the same:

'*I'm still always keen to – you know – to improve the way I teach*.' [Bernie]

'*I like the fact that I – you know – my classroom is my laboratory*.' [Kennedy]

The teachers who responded to the survey agreed risk-taking was important for their development (see Table 14). However, where interviewees were consistent in their views that risk-taking was an essential part of their development, the survey results did not suggest *strong* agreement. On the other

hand, responses to the survey question asking if teachers should be allowed to make mistakes to develop their practice showed very strong agreement (see Table 15). It was difficult to convey a clear context for classroom risk-taking in an online survey, but taking the responses to these two questions together suggests the survey results support the idea teachers see risk-taking as key to development. Although I could not determine whether the respondents to the survey enjoyed taking risks, I am confident that continued development of teaching practice is a positive outcome for teachers taking risks.

How important do you think risk-taking is to your development as a classroom teacher?

Rating from 0 (not at all) to 5 (very important)	Number of responses
0	1
1	3
2	2
3	9
4	14
5	7
TOTAL	**125**
MEAN	**3.47**

Table 14 – Importance of risk-taking to professional development (survey results)

Do you think teachers need to be allowed to make mistakes in order to develop their practice?

Rating from 0 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree)	Number of responses
0	0
1	0
2	4
3	2
4	9
5	21
TOTAL	**155**
MEAN	**4.31**

Table 15 – Do teachers need to be allowed to make mistakes (survey results)

The third aspect of positive outcomes for teachers was personal satisfaction, identified by Timperley and Robinson (2001) and Ritchie and Rigano (2002) as a motivating factor for taking risks. This does not refer to the altruistic satisfaction of improving pupil outcomes or becoming a better teacher, rather teachers enjoying taking risks for their own pleasure. Part of this pleasure came from the creativity of planning new approaches. Bernie said, '*planning lessons is something I genuinely enjoy doing*' and Casey described being creative as '*one of my favourite parts of my job*'. Another part of the pleasure came from the anticipation of trying something new:

'*I think I still feel more excited about trying something a bit different.*' [Kennedy]

'*It's also exciting because if you haven't tried it before, it is that level of nervousness and excitement about how it's going to turn out.*' [Jesse]

Participants talked about the importance of variety and novelty, and many mentioned not wanting to be bored. These findings were supported by the results of the survey in which creativity and variety were listed as strong factors influencing risk-taking (see Table 13). A final part of the pleasure came from a positive outcome which '*if it goes well it sort of like makes your day*' [Eddie] and '*it's exciting and you get a buzz if it works*' [Frankie]. Along with enjoying the creativity and anticipation of doing something new, the high of success was a positive outcome teachers recognised.

Interestingly, if a lesson did not go as well as planned, this did not necessarily put teachers off. Participants were pretty sanguine about failure suggesting '*a bit of trial and error is fun isn't it – a bit of experimentation*' [Casey] and '*if it doesn't go well the first time, I might try it a couple more times, tweak it*' [Frankie]. Teachers did not see a lesson going poorly as immediate confirmation that the idea was a bad one, rather they wanted to reflect on whether it had been properly planned and executed, and how it might be improved before using it with a different class. Where Ponticell (2003) identified loss as an important lens for understanding teachers' willingness to take risks, here, these teachers clearly focused on possible gains.

To summarise, when taking risks results in pupils making more progress, this also represents a positive outcome for teachers as they feel good about themselves – similar to Rosenholtz's (1985) description of teachers experiencing a '*psychic reward*' when pupils do well. Many of the risks teachers take are driven by the realisation that existing practices are not working well enough and from weighing up the potential risk of trying something new against the known risk of maintaining current practices. Teachers derive pleasure from improving their professional practice and take pride in being good at what they do. They also enjoy being creative and get a real buzz when a risk pays off and a lesson goes really well. This supports the notion that teachers are risk-embracing rather than risk-averse, and yet, as we will see, teachers are not taking risks regularly. I now turn to the negative outcomes of risk-taking and consider the gap between teacher attitudes and teacher actions.

6.5 Negative outcomes of risk-taking

In the previous section, I showed how teachers saw risk-taking as a positive aspect of their professional practice in terms of both pupil engagement and progress, and teacher enjoyment and psychic reward. However, negative outcomes were also identified for pupils and teachers. This did not take away from the overwhelmingly positive feelings about the importance of risk-taking for improving practice and supporting pupils, but it helps us understand how teachers balance probabilities when deciding which risks to take and when.

Negative outcomes for pupils included concerns they had not '*achieved what I wanted them to achieve*' [Bernie] or the change was '*potentially confusing the students*' [Alex], leading '*them in the wrong direction*' [Eddie]. Alex also worried students '*might leave the lesson not feeling great*'. There is an interesting continuum here from not learning, to actively misunderstanding and needing to relearn, to having negative feelings about the subject taught.

'*I think sometimes they [pupils] can feel a bit disheartened if they don't understand something.*' [Casey]

Like Yates and Stone (1992), teachers differentiated between loss and significance of loss. A lesson in which pupils did not learn represented time

wasted, where a lesson in which pupils gained fresh misconceptions required extra work to reverse the damage. In section 6.3, I discussed how teachers weigh up whether a proposed risk is likely to improve learning as opposed to simply being fun. Here participants are also considering whether learning might be hampered, or the risk might even taint how pupils feel about their subject. Teachers are not only considering the possible positive or negative outcomes, but the extent to which outcomes could be positive or negative, before deciding what action to take.

Just as positive outcomes for pupils led to teachers feeling positive, negative outcomes for pupils led to negative outcomes for teachers, reflecting Rosenholtz's (1985) description of psychic debilitation: '*it might be a waste of time and I'll feel bad*' [Kennedy]. This manifested itself in teachers' use of harsh language to describe their feelings with Bernie saying, '*you get to the end of the lesson, and you feel rubbish*' and George feeling '*like I'm kind of failing my students*'. Participants went beyond simply taking professional responsibility for pupil outcomes – they took them very personally, reflecting the descriptions of personal accountability and blame predicted by Beck (1992) arising from a society in which we increasingly self-identify as individuals. George's concern they were '*the only teacher who is going to probably be teaching them*' was one example of participants taking on individual responsibility for each minute their pupils spent with them. Interestingly, while participants exhibited distress at letting their students down, they simultaneously offered practical, realistic responses to things going wrong such as '*it's not like medicine – I'm not going to kill anyone*' [Kennedy] demonstrating these participants had achieved a certain professional resilience. They had accepted when things went well they would feel great, and when things went badly, they would feel awful – in Bernie's words: '*teaching is very much a profession of ups and downs'.*

Alongside the psychological losses identified above, participants identified possible social losses in the form of loss of trust in the teacher, their knowledge, or their competence. This was partly a fear of public failure, but mostly teachers needing their pupils to trust them and their professional abilities. In Casey's words: '*I want to come across to my pupils as somebody who knows what they*

are talking about…so anything that affects that would be a concern to me'. The relationship between pupil and teacher was seen as crucial to ensuring pupils felt safe in the classroom and confident their teacher would support them to succeed. Although a couple of participants mentioned not wanting to look bad in front of colleagues or school leaders, when comments were followed up, they were concerned about being seen to be professional rather than fearing castigation. In general, the teachers I spoke to felt supported in their schools.

My findings showed participants identified negative as well as positive outcomes that might result from taking risks in the classroom, but the negative consequences that concerned them most were those affecting pupils' learning. That said, the possibility of failure did not stop participants wanting to keep trying new ideas – the possibility of success was enough of an incentive to keep developing their practice.

6.6 The practice gap and distributed risk-taking

We have seen teachers were generally in favour of most of the activities presented to them in the interviews, showing a clear preference for constructivist approaches over banking activities. It is clear however, from looking at Table 16 that teachers are not using all these techniques in the classroom. As a practising teacher, I was not particularly surprised because to use a wide range of techniques on a frequent basis would require a lot of planning and be exhausting not just for the teacher, but also for pupils. These participants had a range of techniques they used regularly, with others added in from time to time for variety.

Initially I had thought participants would feel positively towards those activities they use regularly and negatively about those activities they use rarely or not at all. This was based on the simple premise that we tend to do the things we like and avoid the things we do not. As the results in Table 11 showed, participants felt positively towards all the activities, including those they used rarely and even the ones they had not met before. However, Table 16 shows that while participants expressed positive attitudes to constructivist and critical pedagogic techniques, they were more likely to use banking techniques in the classroom than their preferences suggested. While banking approaches were the least

popular in terms of initial responses, they represented the techniques most used in the classroom. Conversely, while teachers expressed a clear preference for constructivist techniques, these were used less frequently than banking approaches. This suggested teachers favoured techniques they considered '*boring*' and '*passive*' over the constructivist and critical pedagogic approaches they considered more effective for learning. Contrary to my initial supposition, teachers felt negatively towards those activities they used most regularly and positively towards techniques used less often.

	Number of Activities	Initial Response		How Often Techniques are Used		
		RED (Negative)	GREEN (Positive)	FREQUENT	SOMETIMES	RARELY
Banking	**4**	32.5%	62.5%	45.0%	22.5%	32.5%
Constructivist	**10**	10.0%	90.0%	33.0%	32.0%	35.0%
Critical Pedagogic	**6**	15.0%	85.0%	15.0%	45.0%	40.0%

Table 16 – Responses to card sort activity by how often techniques were used

There were clearly barriers to teachers using more active teaching techniques in their classrooms and these are examined in detail in Chapter 8. However, these techniques *are* being used, if less often. I was intrigued in the first round of interviews how often teachers talked about new things they had tried out, so I followed this up in more detail in the second round of interviews and in the survey. When asked how often they tried out new approaches I got a range of answers from '*probably once a week*' [Frankie] or '*one thing probably every couple of weeks – different classes*' [George] to '*in the summer term when we get gain time'* [Kennedy]. Or in Eddie's case: '*in terms of like new ideas, or like new strategies it would tend to be sort of one focus per term maybe'.* Each participant took their risks at different times of the academic year and at different frequencies. Turning to the survey results, Figure 4 shows most respondents tried something new in the classroom at a frequency of between once a fortnight and once a half term. It was clear, whatever the barriers, teachers were finding time to take risks. I concluded that while teachers accepted they had little time available for planning and developing new ideas, they sought small pockets of time within the year to take risks.

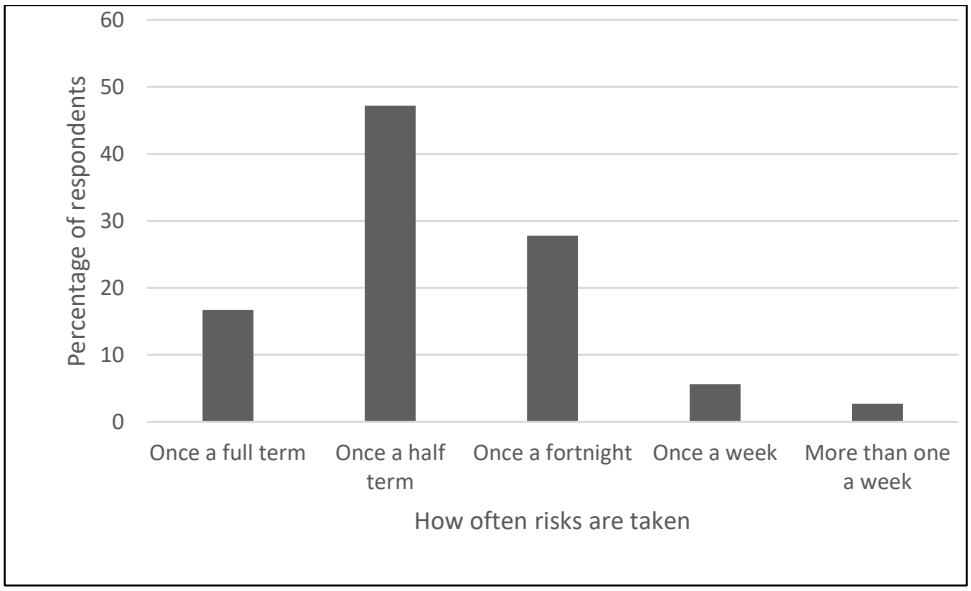

Figure 4 – How often teachers take risks

As well as seeking pockets of time to develop new approaches, teachers were fitting their risk-taking in around their other commitments. This distribution of risk-taking reflected descriptions by Douglas (2002), writing about people spreading out financial risks, perhaps choosing to take one large risk, or several smaller risks, over time. Teachers might enact small changes between lessons, take bigger risks, but perhaps only once a term, or use the less busy summer term as a time to trial new ideas ready for the next academic year. In each case – whether considering financial risks or educational risks – the aim was to ensure stability whilst also moving forward. In this model of risk-taking, teachers distribute risks to continue innovating despite the various barriers and constraints placed in their way. I contend this is another example of teachers' positive attitudes to risk-taking. Rather than being risk-averse, teachers choose to distribute their risks – find small pockets of time to try new ideas or have a toolkit of tried and tested techniques for day-to-day use, with other riskier or more time-consuming activities pulled out from time to time to supplement the diet. Teachers have had to learn to be creative with their time and resources to continue to develop. While the data from the card sort activities suggest teachers do not use open-ended, riskier activities as often as passive, banking approaches, deeper discussions in the interviews revealed teachers work hard to find time to develop new strategies despite the barriers.

6.7 Summary

Research question 1 asked which classroom techniques teachers perceived as risky and whether perceptions of active, constructivist approaches were different to passive, banking methods. By using interview activities which sought teachers' intuitive responses, participants were found to have positive initial attitudes to most teaching approaches with little difference found between attitudes to constructivist and banking approaches. If anything, teachers expressed a preference for open-ended tasks, seeing these as more effective in supporting pupils to learn.

Where previous studies described teachers as conservative, the teachers taking part in this research had positive attitudes to taking risks in the classroom. They thought risk-taking was good for pupils in terms of improved engagement and progress and identified advantages for themselves in the form of positive psychic rewards, improved professional development, and opportunities to be creative. Despite identifying possible negative outcomes, teachers thought static practice presented a greater risk than trying new approaches which might help pupils make more progress.

A gap exists between what teachers say they prefer doing and what they do in practice. Hills (2007) suggested this could be because teachers avoid open-ended tasks with uncertain outcomes, but I contend barriers exist reducing teachers' opportunities to take risks. As a result, teachers distribute their risk-taking, fitting in new approaches when they can.

Although this was a small sample of volunteer teachers, representing stand-alone, non-selective secondary schools in the Southwest of England, and whose very participation could suggest they are less conservative than the general teaching population, they were consistent in seeing risk-taking as important for their pupils and honest about the gap between preferences and practice. These findings therefore demand a different description of teachers' attitudes to risk-taking. Teachers enjoy the creativity of thinking up new ways to teach more effectively and see it as an essential part of their professional development. Rather than assuming teachers are conservative and resistant to

change, we should be removing barriers and promoting conditions necessary to encourage and capitalise on teachers' inherent drive for progress.

Chapter 7 Understanding changing attitudes to risk as careers progress

Research question 2 asked if attitudes to risk changed as teachers progressed through their careers, arising from a similar question posed by Teo and Le Fevre (2017). During my time in secondary education, I have heard suggestions teachers take more risks as they become more confident, and conversely that they take fewer risks becoming stuck in their ways. I therefore had no pre-conceptions, and the existing literature offered few suggestions, beyond Tulloch and Lupton's (2003) findings that attitudes to risk changed with age, possibly reflecting changing family responsibilities.

7.1 Career stages

I arranged my participants into three groups based on their attributes and the analysis of my findings (see Table 17).

Career Stage	Length of service	Number in sample
Beginner teachers	0-5 years	2
Mid-career teachers	6-12 years	2
Late-career teachers	12+ years	6

Table 17 – Career stages

I avoided the term '*early career teachers*' as in England this is a specific term (ECT) referring to teachers in their first and second years following the award of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). While no literature on changing attitudes to risk-taking throughout a teacher's career exists, a paper by Hargreaves (2005) looking at teachers' emotional responses to educational change throughout their careers in Canada found responses fell into similar categories for teachers at the start, middle and later stages of their careers. This research focused on the effect of top-down, involuntary change, but there are some interesting parallels with my findings that I discuss later. Finally, as described in Chapter 5, this sample, although small, is representative in terms of the high proportion of teachers who would fall into the late-career category in the workforce in England. During the interviews, I asked all participants to talk about how risk-

taking had evolved throughout their careers, so although there are small numbers of teachers in the beginner and mid-career categories, those with more experience talked about how their atittudes had changed over the course of their careers.

Following the analysis of the interview scripts and survey results, I found there were some attitudes that endured throughout the teachers' careers and did not alter, and there were others that clearly changed as participants moved from beginner through mid-career to late-career teacher. In the following sections, I first discuss those attitudes that remained the same, and then analyse those that changed.

7.2 Attitudes that endure

Some attitudes and responses were the same for all participants, regardless of their length of service. These supported the view that teachers retain the positive intuitive attitudes to risk-taking described in Chapter 6 throughout their careers. From the card sort activity in the first-round interviews, teachers at different stages in their careers all expressed positive reactions to most of the activities, suggesting the initial response, the *affect heuristic*, did not change with experience. For this cohort, teachers' interests in a range of approaches, favouring active, constructivist techniques, endured.

Turning to the discussions with interviewees, all groups of teachers described risk-taking as important for maintaining high standards of classroom practice and ensuring good outcomes for pupils. As described in Chapter 6, all groups enjoyed the creative aspects of risk-taking and the positive psychic rewards of seeing pupils enjoying and engaging in learning. These findings were supported by the survey results showing pupil enjoyment and motivation were a strong influence driving risk-taking for all groups. In addition, all groups agreed to a similar extent that risk-taking was important to their development as a classroom teacher and all groups strongly agreed that they should be allowed to make mistakes to develop their practice.

In essence, the positive attitudes towards risk-taking described in Chapter 6 largely endure throughout the careers of these teachers. They all agreed active,

open-ended tasks are important for pupil learning despite the social risks they may pose; risk-taking leads to better outcomes for pupils; risk-taking develops classroom practice; and risk-taking provides novelty and opportunities to be creative. Just as investigating the practice gap described in section 6.6 revealed the barriers to risk-taking, the same discussions led to an understanding of which attitudes change during a teacher's career and why. In the following sections I analyse these changes.

7.3 Beginner teachers

While positive attitudes to risk-taking were evident in the discussions with beginner teachers, there were some clear differences in their responses from more experienced practitioners both in the interviews and in the survey data. Some of these differences were unsurprising as beginner teachers have less knowledge and experience to draw on, but others around professional trust and the role of the classroom teacher provided interesting insights, not just into how attitudes change with experience, but into the impact of the barriers identified in Chapter 8. In this section, I consider those attitudes which are different for beginner teachers. I then identify three narratives for how teachers perceive themselves at the start of their careers, and how they help us understand early attitudes to risk-taking.

First, the survey showed beginner teachers were less influenced by previous experiences or the need for variety in their lessons than their more experienced colleagues. In the early stages of their careers, everything is new, different, and uncertain as beginner teachers '*find their feet*' (Hargreaves, 2005, p.970). In Daryl's words: '*When you start off, everything's a risk. You've never done any of it before'.* Casey, George, and Hayden all talked about the amount of time spent planning when they started out because every lesson was new. While more experienced teachers sought variety and did not want to become stale, as described in Chapter 6, this was not yet a consideration for teachers starting out in their careers.

Another unsurprising response was beginner teachers were more likely to see a lack of knowledge as a barrier to taking risks. During their first years, beginner teachers not only have to acquire knowledge about how pupils learn and how to

teach effectively, they also have to revisit their subject knowledge in depth, identifying misconceptions and the small stages of scaffolded explanations required if they are to teach children as young as 11 years old. Jesse described having to '*invest that time in teaching – teaching myself or relearning those concepts and then working out how to deliver them'*. Trying to assimilate this knowledge alongside developing the pedagogical skills required to teach is a sizable challenge, leaving little scope for trying out new, riskier approaches. George spoke of being '*quite wary of trying new things*' whilst still building confidence in basic classroom practice, and there was a general consensus the first years of teaching were for establishing those key knowledges and skills required by the Teaching Standards (Department for Education, Updated 2021).

The third predictable response was the influence of pupil behaviour and choice of class on risk-taking. The survey showed beginner teachers were much more likely to be put off taking risks by concerns about pupil behaviour, and in interviews, Eddie ranked behaviour management as high as lesson content and pedagogy as a consideration when planning lessons, preferring to take risks only with '*a group that I really trusted, and really thought they were going to take it seriously*'. Interestingly, mid-career teacher Casey started off by saying: '*I think for me behaviour is always a consideration in the classroom*' but revised this recognising '*now I'm talking about it, I realise it is more over concern than in reality a lot of the time'* when they could not think of a recent example where their ability to manage pupil behaviour had concerned them. This was an example of a rational fear becoming increasingly illogical with increased experience. Late-career teachers were not concerned about behaviour. Daryl's response was typical:

'I think I've got enough behaviour management that I can deal with kids not reacting well to it [change]… that side of it doesn't worry me.' [Daryl]

Beginner teachers were concerned either pupils might respond badly to new approaches, or trying a new approach would add to an existing behaviour management burden. However, it was clear these concerns diminished with growing confidence and experience until it was no longer a barrier to risk-taking.

So far, I have shown beginner teachers are more concerned by their lack of knowledge or ability to manage pupil behaviour, and less influenced by previous experiences or the need for variety than their experienced colleagues. While it was useful to establish these findings, they were not especially revelatory. More significant were beginner teachers' concerns around trust and their role as teaching professionals since these were unexpected and spoke to wider issues relating to the impact of risk-taking discussed in Chapter 8. I look at these findings next.

The beginner teachers in my sample, and others thinking back, agreed they were observed more often in their early years and were more likely to be criticised if they did not perform as expected. Some described being required to demonstrate they were adhering to lesson plans or assessment rubrics and felt they needed to be seen to follow procedures to avoid censure. The survey results showed beginner teachers were more likely to be influenced by the responses of senior leaders when deciding whether or not to try a new approach in the classroom. This in itself was not surprising – new staff are likely to want to impress their bosses, but interview participants referred to a lack of trust. Second year teacher Eddie acknowledged:

'At this stage in my career I haven't got enough behind me to be able to say look – trust me, I know what I'm doing.' [Eddie]

Looking back, late-career teacher Jesse commented:

'I felt I was watched more as a younger teacher um, and probably criticised more as a younger teacher as well and probably not trusted actually.' [Jesse]

Jesse went on to explain they were less likely to take a risk in their early years because they did not want to be seen to '*mess up*'. Taken with the findings from the survey, beginner teachers' attitudes to taking risks are affected, not only by wanting to please school leaders, but also by a perceived lack of trust. As a senior leader myself, I understand taking on an inexperienced teacher can feel risky as they are not yet proven to be effective practitioners. On the other hand, newly qualified teachers bring fresh ideas, and with encouragement and support are clearly assets. What my results suggest, however, is the message beginner

teachers have received over the last 20 years is they are unknown quantities to be mistrusted until they have proven otherwise. This provides an additional barrier to risk-taking in the early years of a teacher's career as conformity is seen as a priority, summed up by this comment from late-career teacher, Frankie:

'What was I like in my twenties? Probably played it a bit more safe because of the idea of promotion and being seen to do the right thing.' [Frankie]

What struck me during my discussions was none of the participants thought it unreasonable that as beginner teachers they lacked the knowledge and skills of more experienced teachers; were likely to need support in their early years; and needed to show they understood school procedures and the importance of collaborating as a team. And yet, participants had not felt trusted to put the work in to develop into effective practitioners without scrutiny. This was an example of what Breakwell (2007) referred to as a systemic constraint to taking risk. Comments such as those stated previously by Frankie, suggest increased confidence leads to more risk-taking with increased experience, so teachers are clearly not put off taking risks entirely. What this study cannot determine is the long-term effect of what is possibly systemic early mistrust on risk-taking throughout a teacher's career.

Looking across the discussions with interviewees, I found three common narratives describing the experiences and attitudes of beginner teachers – the keen new teacher, the survivor, and the approval seeker. The keen new teacher dedicated time to learning and being creative and inventive. In this narrative, teachers talked of putting everything into their teaching and its becoming a large part of their lives. Alex portrayed themselves as '*very much a 'yes' person – I would do absolutely everything and anything'* at the start of their career, and Hayden described how '*in the first, like, 1-5 years of teaching, I was so interested in reading about teaching, I wrote new resources all the time'.* The keen new teacher was excited to be starting out in a new career and wanted to do of their best. The survivor narrative recognised the tough demands of the profession and the steep learning curve faced in the early years. In Eddie's words, '*getting through the day, I suppose is – is your core focus in your first*

few years of it. How are you going to survive this term?'. The survivor had to learn how to juggle the demands of being '*heavily focussing on my lesson plan'* [George] and getting the subject knowledge right. In this narrative, teachers accepted teaching is a tough profession and their priority was to craft and deliver good quality lessons. The approval seeker recognised they needed to earn the trust of colleagues and leaders before feeling allowed to have more autonomy in the classroom. Being keen and managing the workload were not enough – they had to be seen to follow the rules and meet expectations. Taking risks at this stage would require what Tulloch and Lupton (2003, p.10) referred to as a certain '*moral courage'* to be seen to step beyond the boundaries of existing expectations. Beginner teachers move between these narratives in their early years as they seek to find balance in their working lives and establish themselves as effective practitioners. The keen new teacher is ready to take risks, but it is for school leaders to ensure the struggle to survive and gain approval does not quash this early creativity and drive for development.

One final difference between the attitudes of beginner and more experienced teachers seen amongst the survey results relates to the findings in Chapter 8. Beginner teachers agreed more strongly with the statement: '*at keystage 4 my role is to teach students how to pass the exam*', and how they taught was driven more strongly by their need to complete the curriculum than late-career teachers. At the start of their careers, teachers focused on ensuring they covered syllabuses and prepared students for external examinations. This makes sense as it takes time to become familiar with all the materials to be covered and the skills to be assessed, and beginner teachers are aware the pupils in front of them are taking important exams immediately. However, as I explore the barriers to risk-taking in Chapter 8, the significance of this finding to the future development of teachers becomes clear.

In summary, many of the differences in the attitudes of beginner teachers to risk-taking are logical. Pupil behaviour and teacher lack of knowledge are greater concerns at the start of teachers' careers, but previous experiences and a need for variety are not important as everything is new at this stage. The fact beginner teachers feel they are not trusted was surprising and concerning.

Participants referred to being *scrutinised*, with its negative connotations, not merely observed, or mentored, as they expected in their early careers. If we consider the narratives of keen new teachers, survivors, and approval seekers, we can understand that beginner teachers arrive ready and willing to take risks, but require trust and autonomy, underpinned by support to develop.

7.4 Mid-career teachers

By the time teachers had at least five years under their belts, their knowledge and confidence had grown, and they had '*settled into your way of teaching*' [Bernie] or as Casey put it: '*I've worked out who I am I think as a teacher'.* Mid-career teachers had gained a level of self-assurance around their role in school, and their identity and relationships with their pupils mattered just as much as their classroom practice. This increased confidence led to teachers being '*a bit more open to taking risks with things'* [Casey] showing teachers felt more able to face uncertainties. Not only was the risk of loss lower, but the significance of any loss concerned teachers less as they felt able to deal with issues as they arose.

At this stage in their careers, teachers started to seek variety – to ensure '*each day is not going to be like any other'* [Jesse] and they did not become that teacher who '*doesn't change – isn't continuing to develop*' [Alex]. Bernie described seeing trainee and newly qualified teachers coming into their schools with the latest ideas making them '*want to try different things'*. Not wanting to get stale or bored was a common theme amongst mid-career and late-career teachers as was not getting left behind or feeling their teaching was becoming irrelevant.

Mid-career teachers also found their use of time had changed as they no longer needed to spend as long on their planning. *'I already know what's right or wrong with this lesson because I've taught it before. I already have all these resources'* [Eddie]. Routines and techniques were becoming second nature and subject knowledge was strengthened leaving more time to '*find more ways of doing things*' [Casey]. Teachers could now spend their time enhancing their practice and experimenting with different approaches to find out which were most effective for engaging different pupils and improving their outcomes.

The picture that emerged was of teachers at a sweet point in their careers where they felt comfortable in their roles; confident in their ability to teach effectively; wanted more variety; and had the time and confidence to embrace new challenges. Similarly, Hargreaves's (2005) emotional responses study described mid-career teachers as both comfortable and still enthusiastic. The survey showed fewer concerns around behaviour and no concerns about senior leaders' responses, suggesting mid-career teachers experienced a greater level of trust. It also showed mid-career teachers felt most strongly risk-taking was an important factor in their continued professional development – they were more likely to be experimental and in Jesse's opinion, more likely to take spontaneous risks following the flow of a lesson. Mid-career teachers have a mix of knowledge, experience, confidence, capacity, and drive which provide the perfect conditions for risk-taking.

7.5 Late-career teachers

The most experienced teachers I interviewed shared the high levels of confidence described by mid-career teachers. They understood what worked in the classroom, had a deeper understanding of how children learn, and were confident about taking risks with their teaching. They were least likely to be concerned about behaviour management, and according to the survey, not concerned about being provided with resources – interviewees described already having a bank of resources they used or being confident to prepare their own. The narrative was of teachers who are secure in their practice and their ability to tackle new challenges. In this section, I explain how this confidence leads to a greater feeling of autonomy and trust, and then consider how changing roles for late-career teachers leads to changing attitudes to their working practices in education.

The confidence and security demonstrated by late-career teachers extended to feeling able to justify their actions to others, including senior leaders. Jesse commented: '*if I take a risk and somebody spots that, I'm not afraid of being told, or questioned about it because I can justify why I've done it or what I'm doing'*. At this stage in their careers, teachers knew what was best for their pupils and had the knowledge and experience to defend decisions taken about

what happened in their classrooms. This confidence arose partly from past performance and partly from being in post long enough to gain leaders' trust. Frankie felt having a previous 100% pass rate meant *'I'm left alone because I've got results and if I don't get results one year, it's because I've had an off year, not because there's anything wrong with my teaching'.* This suggested not only did experienced teachers feel able to point to past successes as evidence they knew what they were doing, but they knew senior leaders would forgive or ignore occasional perceived dips in performance, assigning them to other causes or outside factors. By this stage in their careers, teachers felt they had built up a level of trust resulting from those past successes, but also from being in post long enough to demonstrate competency:

'I think it probably gets easier the longer you've been teaching at a particular school… I think there is a kind of ah trust.' [Kennedy]

Where mid-career teachers felt secure in their classroom practice, late-career teachers felt secure justifying their decisions to others, including senior leaders, and taking their own path where they considered it better for their pupils. Late-career teachers had a greater sense of autonomy and felt less need to conform.

The self-assurance late-career teachers possessed extended to taking risks around completing the curriculum. I consider the barrier of curriculum time in detail in Chapter 8, but it is interesting to note here that late-career teachers were more confident to slow down their teaching, or even not quite complete the curriculum, if it ensured pupils understood the concepts taught before moving on. Both Alex and Eddie recognised they went through the curriculum more quickly than more experienced teachers in their departments, where Frankie and Jesse were more concerned with ensuring pupils had embedded key knowledge and skills before moving on. Again, experienced teachers focused on doing the best for their pupils rather than pleasing school leaders.

The increased autonomy and self-assurance described in this section might be considered a natural progression as teachers gain experience and establish themselves within the teaching profession. However, there was one key factor affecting risk-taking specifically for late-career teachers which related to

participants' changing priorities both within teaching and within their private lives. While these differed for individuals, these changes can be summarised as relating to changing responsibilities (personal or professional) and changing attitudes to work-life balance, including physical and mental wellbeing.

Some participants had moved into more senior roles, leaving less time for planning, including planning to take risks with their teaching. There was a sense that activities around teaching and learning got pushed to the boundaries as senior teachers relied on existing expertise rather than continuing to develop. Jesse felt the immediate demands of a leadership role led to classroom teaching '*tak[ing] a knock. There would be compromise on those – which actually shouldn't – those are the things that should be perfect… but they would be compromised'.* Bernie and Frankie went further, admitting they sometimes did not plan lessons in the same depth or even performed administrative tasks during lessons:

'There have been times when I will, for the sake of my sanity, I will use a lesson – and perhaps it won't be as planned to the nth degree as my normal lessons are.' [Frankie]

Not all late-career teachers necessarily took on extra duties or moved into senior roles, but additional responsibilities and pressures arose outside the working environment. Family needs led to priorities being evaluated and changed, meaning for some, it was no longer acceptable to dedicate every hour of the day to the job. Less time was therefore available for researching and planning new ways of teaching. Daryl and Kennedy reflected on the impact of having children:

'I know when my kids were little, my lessons were not as – as varied and – you know I wasn't trying lots of new things because I did not have the time to think about different ways of doing it.' [Daryl]

'You know – maybe I've changed as well – obviously, I've got, like everybody I've got older – also I've got two kids…so…I haven't had the time, I used to spend time in the evenings perhaps, kind of thinking oh you know I'll make this fun – less, much less time to do that sort of thing.' [Kennedy]

Where they may previously have spent time in the evenings planning lessons in more depth or researching new approaches to delivering content, Daryl and Kennedy now wanted to give their time to their own children and recognised there were not enough hours in the day to do both. There was also recognition from late-career teachers that responsibilities extended to caring for parents and supporting members of the wider family, all of which competed for their time.

For all late-career teachers interviewed, this reassessment of priorities was linked to a wider need to consider their work-life balance and its effect on their mental and physical health. These experienced teachers had reached a point in their careers and their lives where they questioned whether they could continue working such long hours, and at such a pace, and indeed, whether they should be expected to. Participants described a range of issues arising from the long hours culture including social isolation, lacking time to keep up interests outside teaching, stress and anxiety, and physical illness. Kennedy described a working day that used to *'continue from school to coming home and continue straightaway – the first thing I would do was turn my computer on rather than sorting myself out and get changed - I'd be eating whilst I was working and I would carry on working many a time until 11 maybe sometimes midnight, so there's very little time that I would make for myself, to do things that I would enjoy'*. This description of a profession that was all-consuming was typical, and late-career teachers recognised a concerted effort was required to prevent exclusion from family, social and cultural interactions. Frankie was very open in explaining that remaining in a senior role had '*ultimately impacted on my mental health'*, and the constant drive to perform well was *'at the sake of my health'*. Frankie was not alone in feeling the pressure to continually perform at a high standard for the sake of their pupils. Daryl decided to go '*part-time because it stresses me out to have to – to not be able to do as good a job as I want… I'm happier that way, that's better for me'*. All participants recognised teaching is a tough profession requiring long working hours, but where teachers at earlier stages of their careers immersed themselves in their work and accepted this culture, late-career teachers made deliberate decisions about how they wanted to use their time. Some accepted a conflict of priorities led to less time for

development, while others stood down from senior roles or went part time to achieve a better balance in their lives.

The key differences late-career teachers demonstrated in their attitudes to taking risks were that they not only had the confidence to try new approaches, but the self-assurance to justify their decisions to others. They felt trusted, considered they had more autonomy, and valued the discretion senior leaders gave them to teach as they saw fit, reflecting the findings of Rosenholtz and Simpson's (1990) study looking at professional *commitment* of experienced teachers. However, late-career teachers also found themselves at a point where they evaluated the conflicting demands of their personal and professional lives and spent less time on planning and developing their practice in favour of other priorities. This meant late-career teachers tended to focus the little time they had on doing their best for their pupils rather than pleasing someone else. Hargreaves (2005) found similar responses to imposed change where experienced teachers chose to transfer energy to their personal lives and concentrated their efforts on supporting their own classes.

Looking at these findings through the lens of critical pedagogy, the long hours culture of the teaching profession can be seen as a hegemonic practice. The education system is imposed on teachers by the government, and they are led to believe there is no way of dramatically increasing funding. Thus, teachers see no alternative but to work long hours to meet the demands made of the profession by those in power, even though it is doing them harm. Late-career teachers may recognise the damage their working conditions are causing but are still likely to adapt to these conditions rather than expecting them to change.

7.6 Summary

The evidence from the interviews and survey shows teachers maintain their positive attitudes towards risk-taking throughout their careers. What changes are the barriers to taking risks and how teachers choose to prioritise the use of their finite time. At the start of their careers, beginner teachers are keen to take risks and have the time and energy to try out new ideas. However, they may lack skills and knowledge and feel the need to earn the trust of senior teachers before risking possible failure. Late-career teachers on the other hand possess

the confidence and tools to take risks and to justify their decisions. They have achieved a level of trust and autonomy, but often find themselves time-poor, juggling teaching commitments with other responsibilities at work or in their personal lives. Late-career teachers are more likely to question the long hours culture of the teaching profession and evaluate the long-term consequences for their physical and mental well-being.

Mid-career teachers appear to exist at a sweet spot where they have the confidence and knowledge to take more risks, require less time to plan lessons, but do not yet have the responsibilities of more experienced teachers. The term *sweet spot* does not feel entirely appropriate, as all teachers at all stages of their careers described punishing work schedules that took over evenings, weekends, and holidays. Perhaps it is better to describe this as the point in a teacher's career where they have developed their confidence and skills whilst still being willing to accept excessive working hours.

In general, the narrative from all participants followed a similar pattern. During training and the first year of teaching, everything is new and therefore every day involves risk-taking. As a beginner teacher the focus is to hone your craft and establish yourself in your new profession, so fewer risks are taken. Mid-career teachers have increased confidence, expertise, and trust, which combined with an interest in new ideas and a need for variety drives an increase in risk-taking. Risk-taking reduces again for experienced teachers as other professional or personal pressures reduce available time and risk-taking becomes more distributed. This overview is summarised in Figure 5.

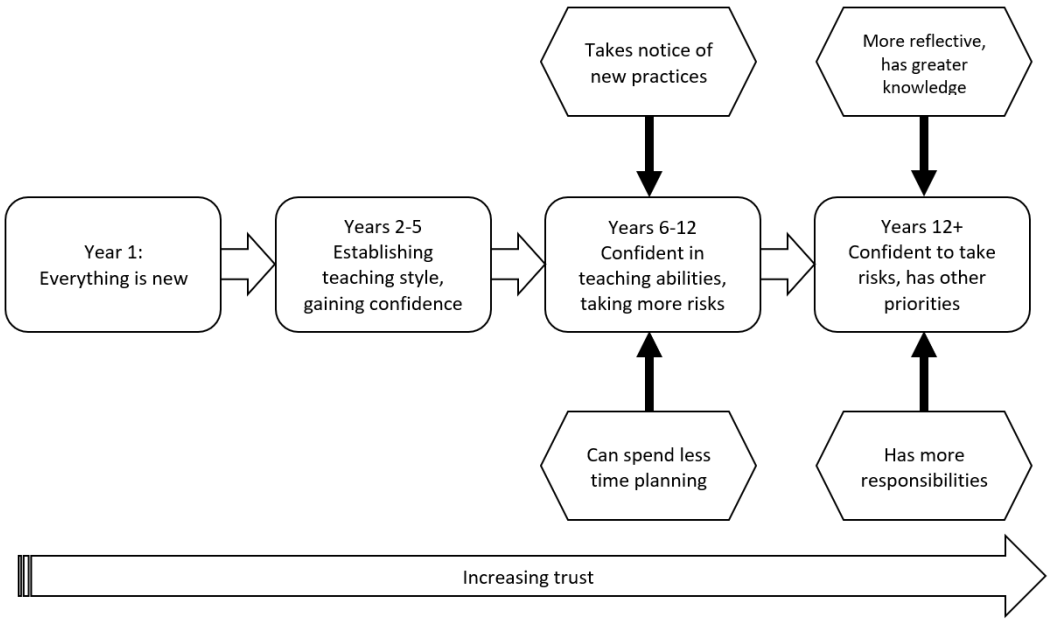

Figure 5 – How risk-taking changes over a teacher's career

Education and school leaders need to be aware of the different barriers and opportunities that present themselves at different stages of teachers' careers so they can provide the appropriate support and opportunities to tap into teachers' latent enthusiasm for developing their practice. Beginner teachers require support to build their skills and knowledge, but also need to feel trusted and secure enough to take risks, and sometimes make mistakes, as they develop their practice. Mid-career teachers, with their combination of skill and enthusiasm could make great ambassadors for researching, developing, and disseminating teaching practices within a school. School leaders need to recognise the time pressures that exist for late-career teachers and consider how these experienced teachers can best be used to support the development of teaching practices across a school. In summary, the findings in this chapter provide a framework that can be used at institution level to identify the different support and encouragement to take risks needed by different teachers. Building on some of the barriers already identified in this chapter, I now look at wider barriers to risk-taking in detail and the challenges facing individuals, schools, and the education system.

Chapter 8 Barriers to risk-taking

Research question 3 asked what the main barriers to taking risks in the classroom were and how they impacted on teacher development. In Chapter 6, I showed all participants had positive initial attitudes to risk-taking, but there was a gap between what they said they preferred doing and what happened in their classrooms – in effect between their experiential and analytic responses. The barriers to risk-taking were identified through interview discussions with participants about this practice gap. Having completed the first-round interviews, I coded the transcripts and identified a number of barriers to risk-taking which were tested in the second-round interviews. The transcripts were recoded, and a list of barriers identified which are shown in Table 18. I used NVIVO to identify how often each barrier was referred to across the 16 interviews and the results are represented as a percentage. I have also indicated how many participants out of the cohort of 10 referred to each barrier.

Barriers	**Percentage of references**	**No. of participants referring to barrier /10**
1. Practical issues (rooms, resources, etc.)	4.5%	9
2. Lack of support/opportunities to collaborate	5%	7
3. Teacher knowledge	6%	8
4. Pupil behaviour	7%	5
5. Subject considerations	7.5%	5
6. Pupil abilities and skills	16%	9
7. Teacher time	24%	10
8. Curriculum time	30%	10

Table 18 – Barriers to risk-taking

In the following sections, I analyse these barriers in three groups. The first I have labelled as low frequency, covering barriers 1-6. Pupil abilities and skills has a relatively high frequency at 16%, so I also explain how follow-up discussions and survey results led to this being included in the low-frequency category. The next section looks at teacher time as a barrier and explains how

participants' attitudes and reactions to this barrier were very similar to the low frequency barriers in that they were typically seen as practical issues. The final section looks at curriculum time as a barrier and why this is different to teacher time. It includes a discussion of how this barrier relates to Beck's (1992) blame culture and aspects of critical pedagogy, in particular power relations and reproduction.

8.1 Low-frequency barriers

The barriers to risk-taking listed in Table 18 include 5 categories which I have defined as low-frequency barriers as they gained less than 8% of references each. However, they warrant discussion since they represent 30% of references to barriers in total. In this section, I briefly describe how these barriers manifested themselves and why I chose not to investigate them further.

Practical issues largely involved lack of resources. For example, team teaching requires two staff to be available at the same time to plan and teach, and this may not be possible. The lack of support and collaboration concerned an inability to find time and resources to work with others, rather than suggesting school colleagues were unwilling to collaborate. In fact, participants generally felt supported by colleagues and school leadership, but believed their practice developed more effectively when working with others, reflecting the findings of Spitzer (1975) and Baker-Doyle et al. (2018). Teacher knowledge referred to participants' lack of understanding about an approach or how it would be implemented, such that they would want training or time to research it. As mentioned in Chapter 6, my interviewees were intrigued by those approaches they had not heard of, or tried, and wanted to know more. Pupil behaviour figured far less often that I expected and was only a concern for those at the beginning of their teaching careers, as explained in Chapter 7, hence only 5 participants referred to it. Subject considerations were also only identified by half the participants, arising where participants felt the nature of their subject meant certain approaches might get in the way of pupil learning or feel contrived. These discussions were pedagogic, considering whether trying something new would genuinely improve pupil learning. For example, group tasks sat more easily with humanities teachers than with art, where self-

expression was important, and problem solving was considered a better fit in mathematics and science than in English. Participants did not rule anything out but wanted to be certain of the pedagogic benefits of a new approach before allocating time to it. What these low-frequency barriers had in common were the philosophical responses they elicited from participants. Some were considered insurmountable and therefore not worth worrying about, others were not considered of sufficient pedagogical worth to be a high priority, and some were there to be overcome as and when teachers could find time to do so. When questioned more deeply, participants remained phlegmatic about these barriers. As a result of this, and the low frequency of responses, I decided not to pursue these themes further and concentrated on those teachers identified as more important.

Pupil abilities and skills was interesting as it represented 16% of the responses regarding barriers to risk-taking and was raised by 9 of the 10 participants. These responses largely fell into two categories – pupils lacking the skills to access new approaches, and pupils lacking the ability to manage change. An example of the first came from Alex who thought valuable lesson time was needed to teach pupils how to work effectively in a group before using group tasks in a lesson. Although pupils might learn more effectively this way, curriculum time would need to be sacrificed first, which was seen as a major barrier (explained later in this chapter). The second category was discussed in much the same way as subject considerations – from a pedagogic point of view. Eddie described how a class with a high number of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) liked routine and struggled with the additional cognitive load of a change of approach, for example. Teachers used different techniques with different classes to meet the different needs of pupils. The high number of responses for this theme in the initial interviews led me to ask specifically about pupil skills and abilities in the second round of interviews. However, participants consistently rejected the idea pupil abilities were a barrier to taking risks, a finding which was supported by the survey results. As with the other low-frequency barriers identified earlier, teachers saw pupil abilities as a consideration rather than a barrier. This was an interesting finding, perhaps worth further investigation related to research into 21st century skills, but to keep

my focus on research question 3, I chose not to pursue the issue further and focused on the much larger barriers of teacher time and curriculum time.

8.2 Teacher time

Teacher time was a major barrier to risk-taking identified by all participants in the interviews. Here I am referring to any mention participants made to being short of enough time to plan, carry out or evaluate new approaches in the classroom. In effect, a lack of hours in the day. In this section, I consider the importance teachers place on planning for risk-taking, and then provide context raising important issues around teacher well-being, job satisfaction, and how these are related to the ability to take risks and develop practice. Finally, I demonstrate that participants show similar responses to the issue of teacher time as they do to the low-frequency barriers identified in the previous section, leading to distributed risk-taking as described in Chapter 6.

In the interviews, participants differentiated between spur of the moment risks taken in lessons, for example where a change in direction might support pupil learning, and planned risks that involved trying new approaches – which participants saw as developing their practice. Planning is an integral part of teaching – whether around subject knowledge, delivery of content, assessment, or adapting lessons for individual pupils – and however experienced they were, participants still expected to plan thoroughly for any new approach. Kennedy explained: *'If I was trying something new, I would always try to have enough time to prepare. Yeah, I do like to do my job properly. It's important'.* Participants were clear that careful preparation was not just about maximising the chance of a successful outcome, they needed to know possible failures were not down to poor planning. Finally, we need to acknowledge the teachers in this study enjoyed planning. In Chapter 6 Casey described planning as one of the '*favourite parts of my job*' explaining '*I take great pride in the resources that I produce'.* Therefore, when teachers talk about a lack of time for planning, there is no evidence that planning is a chore to be avoided, or teachers use any time available for something more enjoyable. Given the opportunity, my participants wanted more time to plan and be creative.

Teachers across both schools, across all subjects and in all stages of their careers agreed a lack of planning time was a major barrier to trying out new ideas in the classroom. This was supported by the survey results which put a lack of planning time as the top barrier to taking risks. Teachers wanted time to plan and develop, both individually and collaboratively, but spoke of difficulties finding time to fit their existing workload in, let alone develop new approaches. Hayden described planning for new approaches as *'time-consuming, you know, things that I would need to research about and learn about'.* Digging deeper to understand this lack of time, I found participants struggled to find even small pockets of extra time in their day. Bernie, Casey, and Eddie suggested finding even an extra half hour would be a challenge. There was a clear tension between teachers wanting to try new ideas, but not wanting to let down pupils with poorly planned lessons. Where time was lacking, and teachers found themselves under pressure, they stuck with what they knew worked (Collinson and Fedoruk Cook, 2001) feeling as Hayden did '*I've just not had enough time to replan things, so I just go back to what I've used before*' and relying on existing materials as '*that just saves me the time of starting from scratch'* [Daryl]. In fact, participants went further, using some of the teaching methods they had described disparagingly in Chapter 6 as '*boring*' and '*passive*' as coping mechanisms during busy periods. Eddie, for example, did not consider the use of textbooks to be good teaching practice, but admitted '*they do offer you a nice break sometimes',* and Frankie described telling pupils '*right, read it, and these are the questions I want you to answer'* on occasion so they could complete another task during the lesson. These descriptions of scrabbling around for small pockets of time explain why teachers see planning time as such a huge barrier to taking risks and help explain the disconnect between teachers disliking banking methods of teaching and yet still choosing to use them. This lack of time stifled teacher development and was a source of frustration for participants, summarised by this comment from Bernie:

'*I do regret that. I think it's something about the job - as I say, planning lessons is something that I genuinely enjoy doing. Um, thinking about different ways of doing things that appeal to different students is what I like doing…I think that sometimes that's why you feel a bit – well I might feel a bit frustrated by the job*

because I – I'm not always able to do things to the – to the standard that I really want.' [Bernie]

At this point, it is important to put teacher time and time management into perspective. We might imagine teachers could take more risks if they prioritised their time better, or perhaps see these responses simply as busy professionals having a moan to the captive audience of a researcher. To understand teacher time better, I asked participants about a typical day or week in the first round of interviews. They described hectic days starting at 7-7:30am, often spending 10-11 hours in school before going home and continuing to work. George's experience of being '*home for about 6, make food, work for another two hours, maybe three – get ready for school the next day and go to sleep'* was not unusual. Participants spoke of scheduling toilet and refreshment breaks when in school, and the annoyance felt when circumstances often meant they had to choose between these, and described how work life bled into homelife:

'Weekends sort of Saturday would be a day off, but Sunday would be spent planning the lessons for the week.' [Eddie]

Classroom teachers found teaching and planning time constantly eroded by time required for pastoral and administrative roles, and for those with other responsibilities in school, time for planning lessons slipped down the list of priorities. Bernie described having ''*stand to' lessons to go to that are just prepared and ready'* to cope with the demands of a leadership role, and Frankie admitted to using lesson time on occasion '*to deal with whole school responsibilities'.* It is clear from my findings that teachers are working very long hours, balancing a wide range of responsibilities, and admitting they do not feel they have enough time to do their jobs as well as they want to.

Mid- and late-career teachers who had worked at this pace over a number of years described how workload had impacted their lives and affected their approach to their teaching careers. In Chapter 7 I explained how teachers began to reassess their work-life priorities as they progressed through their careers, but what stood out in the interview discussions were teachers'

descriptions of striving to function normally and retain their physical and mental health.

'I think for the last 5 years I've been so invested in being a teacher that every hour's been about me being a teacher even if I'm not working…at the moment I'm really trying hard to function in a more normal way.' [Alex]

'I've probably come to a point in my life now where, where I've decided that um, work-life balance has to play a big part. In my early to middle years of teaching um, work was the majority of my time – in work and outside of work. And the balance – there just was no proper balance at all.' [Jesse]

This is a narrative of teachers working very long hours – long enough to impact on their physical and mental health – and recognising this leads to burnout and emotional exhaustion in the long term (Lasky, 2005). And yet, teachers want to develop their practice and enjoy the process of planning new creative ways to help pupils learn. Finding time to plan, trial, and evaluate new approaches represents a considerable challenge and cannot simply be added to the list of tasks expected of teachers. Jesse summarised participants' frustrations asking: *'I don't have time to do the things I want to do, why would I look to do things that I want to be <u>able</u> to do?'* If we want teachers to develop their practice, something must be removed from their list of tasks to make appropriate space for risk-taking. Despite all the difficulties and frustrations, we know teachers are finding small pockets of time to do just that, distributing their risk-taking as described in Chapter 6.

Just as participants exhibited a philosophical response to the low-frequency practical barriers identified in the previous section, they spoke of workload in much the same way. Teacher time was another issue to be managed. Participants found small pockets of time to take risks where they could, but either accepted (albeit with a certain level of frustration) their planning would not be of the quality they desired or changed roles or contracted hours to cope. This lack of agency and power is an illustration of oppression within education. The acceptance that teaching is a profession requiring long hours at the expense of home and social life, and of physical and mental well-being, is an example of

the hegemonic practices visited on teachers. These issues, along with the political nature of the English education system and the impact on pupils and teachers becomes even more evident when looking at the barrier of curriculum time in the next section.

8.3 Curriculum time

When I began coding the first round of interviews, I initially identified one theme of time. However, it quickly became clear all teachers were describing two distinct issues around time – a lack of time in the day to meet all the demands of the job (teacher time), and a lack of timetabled teaching hours to complete the curriculum (curriculum time), with curriculum time emerging as the dominant theme. In this section, I explain why curriculum time is a barrier to risk-taking and how it has become a risk factor itself. I then examine the wider consequences of a lack of curriculum time through the lens of critical pedagogy before returning to consider how this affects teachers' ability to take risks to develop their practice.

While not all state schools in England are legally required to follow the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2014), the majority do, especially since the syllabuses for external examinations at age 16 years (GCSEs) are based upon it. However, participants felt there was a lot of content to cover and not enough time to cover it. For example, Casey explained if they felt they had *'spent too long on one particular unit'* then they had to *'speed up a little bit and move on to the next one'* to ensure curriculum completion. Participants were concerned that introducing a new approach might lead to a loss of lesson time, especially if pupils did not learn effectively, leading to their class falling behind. George described this as '*a massive worry – that if it goes wrong it's going to subtract away from my curriculum time'.* This represented a loss, and a loss significant enough (Yates and Stone, 1992) to present a barrier to trying something with an uncertain outcome.

The significance of losing curriculum time weighed heavily with participants who used strong emotional language speaking of '*worry'*, '*pressure'*, '*fear'*, feeling '*daunted*' and having a heightened sense of responsibility or '*guilt'* not just about failing to complete the curriculum, but about how this might affect a child's

ability to do well in an examination. Participants took personal responsibility for the life chances of their pupils, putting a huge burden on themselves.

'I can't bear the thought of not finishing the topic…the way the exam's set up…there are multiple choice questions that are 1,2,4 easy marks and they are just pure knowledge and if I've not taught it at all, I'm depriving them of – of very very easy marks.' [Eddie]

'I know if I don't finish the curriculum, um, questions may come up in their GCSE exams, that means they may not get their grade 4, grade 5, go into their college or job whatever, and the impact on my pupils' futures if I don't finish off the topic – and that's not their choice – that's my choice that I made for them.' [George]

These teachers understood children's learning is not linear and sometimes lessons have to be reworked and retaught – indeed George spoke of the importance of allowing pupils to make mistakes. However, where repeating a lesson in response to pupil need was considered good practice, to do so as a result of taking a risk was seen as almost irresponsible.

The sense of anxiety was also evident in how much lesson time participants thought it acceptable to lose. Bernie, Eddie, Hayden, and Kennedy all voiced concern about losing even one hour of teaching out of a school year, while Alex and George worried about getting even a few minutes behind. Following up these findings in the survey, 72% of respondents were willing to lose up to an hour, 28% up to 2-3 hours, but no-one was willing to lose more than that (see Figure 6). That participants were so worried about losing such small amounts of time revealed the pressure teachers felt to complete the curriculum. Asking teachers to try a new approach that might cost a lesson, even to achieve deeper learning in the long run, is not a trivial matter.

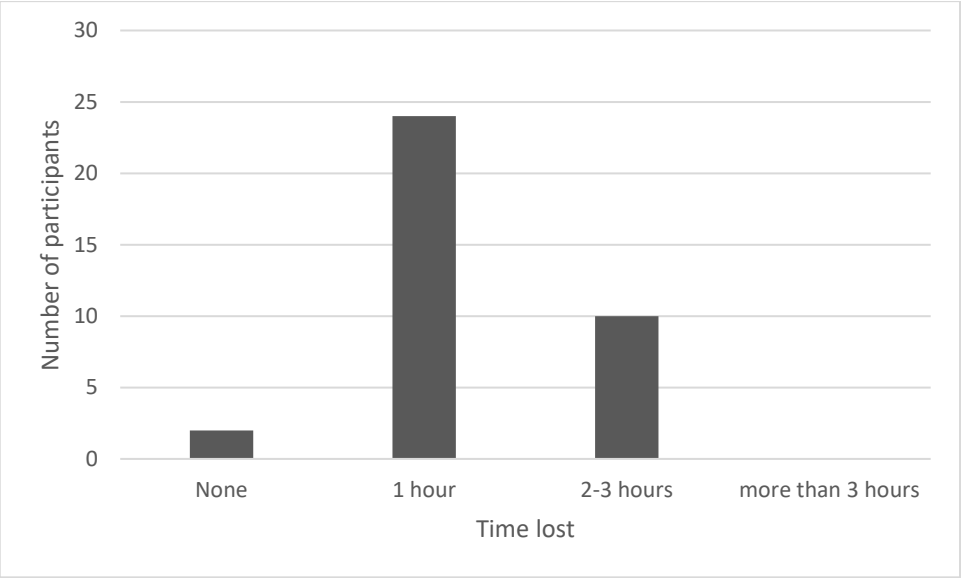

Figure 6 – Lesson time participants were willing to lose

To summarise, not only was lack of curriculum time a clear barrier to risk-taking, but losing curriculum time represented a significant possible loss. Applying Slovic and Peter's (2006) theory of negative correlation, the high perception of this risk led teachers to minimise their view of possible benefits. In effect, the psychological risk of losing curriculum time overshadowed other risks, including the social risk of appearing incompetent or the psychological deficit of pupils not learning effectively. The consequences of this lack of curriculum time include a narrowing of teaching techniques; a narrowing of the knowledge and skills taught; and an embedded examination culture which reduces rather than increases social equity. In the following sections, I look at these issues through the lens of critical pedagogy and consider the implications for teachers' risk-taking.

In Chapter 6, I described a practice gap existing between those approaches teachers valued and those they actually used. Here I contend a lack of curriculum time represents an even greater barrier to risk-taking than teacher time, narrowing the range of techniques teachers use, leading to banking techniques being favoured over constructivist, democratic approaches, and compromising the quality of teaching in favour of curriculum completion. Participants recognised they relied on banking techniques when time was tight, and described moving on even if pupils had not understood the topic; not having time to teach key skills; not going deeper into a subject or pursuing pupil

interests; and not allowing pupils time to learn and develop independently. Eddie admitted '*we're almost saying we'd rather not do it quite as well… to make sure we get it all done'*. In effect, active, constructivist, democratic techniques appeared almost as luxuries brought out when precious time allowed.

The move towards banking techniques also shifted the power dynamic in the classroom. Participants did not see themselves as authoritarian figures laying down the law, in fact Jesse felt one improvement since their own school days was that pupils are allowed to '*be more confident*' and '*less afraid of authority*'. For these teachers, building positive relationships with pupils was an essential part of good classroom practice. However, the increased use of banking techniques meant less dialogue and discussion, and fewer opportunities for pupils to drive their own learning. Teachers were expected to complete the curriculum and pupils were expected to comply with the content and methods chosen for them. Frankie recognised pupils arriving from primary school get the message '*this is the way you're going to learn, and you're going to sit at your desk and you'll do this',* with George reinforcing this disciplinarian description suggesting we '*mould*' children to understand '*this is what you do – there's no argument – there's no question*'. The result is pupils who are increasingly '*directed by us as teachers because of the amount we get through and because of the time constraints'* [Jesse]. In effect, the pressure exerted on teachers has narrowed teaching methods, leading in turn to a less democratic pedagogic model in which teachers impose curriculum knowledge on their pupils.

Participants felt this restriction of teaching methods caused an increasing lack of pupil independence as teachers did not have time to teach them the skills needed to become self-sufficient, resilient learners. This led to a vicious cycle where pupils lacked independence and teachers restricted teaching further, providing increasing support in response – the very issue identified in my own school. Jesse recognised their part in perpetuating the problem: *'They like to be spoon fed and I'm giving them that. I want them to think independently and they're not doing that',* and participants like Alex were concerned about the long-term consequences for pupils who *'expect you to hand them everything on*

a – on a plate and you know life's not like that'. However, since the current curriculum and examination system did not '*lend itself to those sorts of skills – to presentation, to research, to any of that really*' [Eddie], they were not taught. From a critical pedagogical perspective, this is an example of reproduction resulting in banking techniques returning to the classroom as shown in Figure 7.

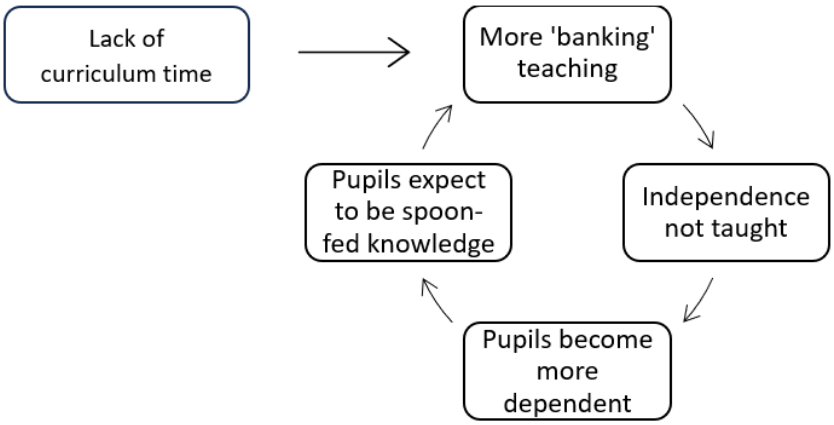

Figure 7 – Reproduction of dependence

Where critical pedagogy sees education as a vehicle that enables pupils to lead meaningful lives and develop skills to develop a more socially equitable society, this reproduction of dependence produces unquestioning pupils who accept the conditions they find themselves in. Furthermore, as teachers cope with increased pupil dependency, they find their own professional practice shrinking in response.

The narrowing of teaching techniques described above suggests teachers are being less creative and taking fewer risks (Apple, 2012). As constructivist or democratic approaches are used less often, the concern is teachers entering the profession are less likely to experience them, or see them used in schools, reproducing the narrowing effect so fewer teachers develop the higher-level skills required to deliver these approaches. As teachers focus on classroom management, curriculum completion, and preparing pupils for examinations, rather than on interpreting and delivering the curriculum in context, they also risk losing the vital skill of linking the curriculum to the pupils they are teaching and the lives they lead (Giroux, 2011), and losing the professional judgement that allows them to balance teaching the curriculum with educating the

individual (Biesta, 2016). Eddie thought this was a shame, wanting their pupils to be '*really well-rounded*' but not having the '*time to teach, to explain to them why [the subject is] so important'*. This de-skilling or de-professionalisation of teachers (Hargreaves, 2000) reduces them to technicians (Giroux, 1994) delivering prescribed examination content. The resulting lack of agency (Lasky, 2005) and autonomy can already be recognised in Jesse's finding the curriculum '*restrictive and frustrating'* not allowing time for '*going off on a tangent';* Hayden's '*guilty*' feelings about lessons not being '*exciting or revolutionary*'; and Kennedy's concern '*there's very limited time to sort of explore something interesting in depth'*. There is a clear sense from the interviews that participants are squeezed between a desire to take risks and produce creative lessons, and a requirement to complete the curriculum and prepare pupils for examinations.

The need to complete examination syllabuses also led to the narrowing of the overt, taught curriculum in schools. The English National Curriculum should represent the minimum entitlement for pupils, implying there is room for teachers and schools to cover other knowledge and skills in lessons, as described in Chapter 4 (Young, 2013). However, participants were clear they lacked time even to cover this minimum entitlement and felt forced to focus on preparing for examinations and maximising grades. Hayden's '*main focus is… about covering the content and building in those skills for the exams',* and George wanted to *'get through everything so they [pupils] can get a good grade'*. Not only did teachers lack time to develop pupil resilience or independence, they lacked time to stray away from the curriculum, share their passions, or follow pupils' interests. Late-career teachers described an increased constraint on lesson time with Jesse wishing they still had time for '*exploration and sort of a free rein on things',* and Kennedy commenting they could not '*remember going off-piste for ages, pre- I don't know, 2010?*'. In fact, rather than seeking to teach a wider range of knowledge and skills in lessons, teachers were more likely to squeeze in more examination preparation.

'I spend a lot of my time teaching the exam, sort of how to read an exam question, how to understand what the question's asking you for, where to pick up your marks, and where to spend your time.' [Eddie]

Interestingly, participants did not question the content of the National Curriculum, only its volume. This could be because teachers tend to see knowledge as neutral (Apple, 2012), because most teachers would have been taught a similar curriculum themselves, or because teachers are so busy trying to maximise examination results for their pupils, they simply feel powerless to exact change. Since the curriculum is created by the DfE (Department for Education), its content reflects the views of the dominant minority in power (Apple, 2012) and while many government reforms have little impact on education systems (Levin, 2001), in England the government have succeeded in controlling what is taught in classrooms through the twin levers of examination league tables and school inspections. Poor rankings or inspection results may change public perception of the effectiveness of a school; affect access to finance; or lead to threats of forced academisation and reduced autonomy (Ball, 2009). In a bid to keep up, schools have pursued strategies to maximise league table outcomes, prompting accusations of gaming the system from the government, who have responded with an increasingly complex system of measuring school outcomes to ensure implementation regardless of opposition (Levin, 2001). The result is a firmly embedded examination culture. Governments see increased examination performance as a measure of their success and put pressure on schools to improve outcomes. Schools put pressure on pupils to achieve higher examination results, linking this to access to further and higher education, jobs, and income. Schools are then in danger of becoming seen as examination factories, where pupils think the only purpose of education is to obtain the required set of certificates when they leave, and teachers are the production line workers who make this happen (Giroux, 1994). There was evidence in the interviews of this reproduction of the examination culture coming full circle as pupils began to question teachers who drifted from the path of examination teaching, wanting to know why they were wasting time on material not on a syllabus, or on active learning techniques when they just wanted to be given knowledge to learn. Hence, the pressure to restrict the

overt, taught curriculum to examination preparation comes from government demands to increase examination results; teachers' wish to get the best for their pupils; and increasingly from pupils themselves seeing school as a vehicle for examination success. This is a far cry from Dewey's view that education should improve and enrich the individual as a '*process of living and not a preparation for future success*' (Dewey, 2009, p.39).

Having established a lack of curriculum time leads to a narrowing of teaching techniques and a narrowing of the taught curriculum, reinforcing an examination culture of teacher technicians and dependent pupils, what does this mean for teacher attitudes to risk-taking? There is more to understand than the simple practical barrier a lack of available teaching time presents to trying out new approaches.

First, as in other areas of society, teachers respond to the increasing and ever-changing demands of the education system by seeking to maintain control and certainty in their own domains (Wildavsky and Douglas, 1982) – in this case in their own classrooms. The problem is, taking risks necessarily entails some ceding of control and a willingness to accept uncertainty. As government and schools introduce more initiatives to raise examination results, teachers seek to reduce the rate of change, stifling development (Adams, 1995). Second, as teachers fear taking risks will let their pupils down, especially if lesson time is lost, the blame culture flourishes (Beck, 1992) where teachers take personal responsibility every time a pupil does not meet the exacting targets set, ultimately, by government. Thus, a systemic, institutional examination culture decreases teacher agency and increases teacher vulnerability, leading to increased reluctance to take risks (Breakwell, 2007), not to mention risking teachers' mental health. Third, if teachers cannot see an alternative to examination teaching within the present system their analytic responses to risk (Slovic and Peters, 2006) will override any initial, positive responses as they will not fit the examination-driven requirements of the English education system. Jesse summed up participants' views with this comment:

'We have to behave, we have to conform. So, until that changes at the top, we – we won't be allowed – won't be able to take those risks to change things.' [Jesse]

Despite this gloomy description of an education system that suppresses risk-taking, there are still reasons to be optimistic. Participants demonstrated positive attitudes to risk-taking and although they might feel powerless to change the current system, their responses were broadly pragmatic – they tried not to get too frustrated about the things they could not change and grasp opportunities to take risks as they arose. And while recent developments in the English education system might appear to be trying to reduce risk through controlling what is taught, and directing teachers towards specific, evidence-based approaches, these participants were clear that risk-taking is still important and was all about becoming better teachers and improving their pupils' experiences and outcomes.

Furthermore, these teachers might comply with the existing examination culture, but they all recognised the flaws in the system and were not fooled into believing its objectives were in the best interests of their students and their future lives.

'I don't think exams and the way that's set up benefits pupils at the moment really I think it's too prescribed, it's too the same, and it doesn't explore a wider enough variety of skills to really work in the real world.' [Eddie]

Following up these references to pupils' lives after school, I asked participants whether they felt the English education system increased social equality. While they agreed that *'education is the one point in someone's life where their inequality can be addressed and rectified'* [Eddie], and their schools were places that tried to promote greater equality, the consensus was the education system was run by people who did not understand the lives of their pupils and the '*disadvantages rooted in society'* [Kennedy]. Participants did not think schools succeeded in reducing the inequalities existing in wider society so most pupils *'feel they fit where they come from so therefore they'll just stay fitting in'* [Frankie]. However, as with examination culture, teachers were not necessarily

disheartened by the challenges facing them, again taking a pragmatic approach that sought to make the small differences they could within their own institutions and classrooms. This recalled Giroux's (1983) theory of resistance as purposeful rebellion in education, recognising teachers retain agency and do not necessarily submit fully to dominant systems. Teachers' determination to do the best for their pupils drives them to create distributed pockets of resistance where they can take control of *what* they teach and *how* they teach it, finding the autonomy needed to take risks with confidence. This is schools' entry point for encouraging risk-taking and professional development.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

This study sought to understand the attitudes of secondary school teachers to taking voluntary risks to develop their own classroom practice. Qualitative methods consisting of two sets of semi-structured interviews and a survey were used and the research was designed and analysed through the lens of risk theories and critical pedagogy. In Chapters 6, 7, and 8 I presented and analysed my findings and in this concluding chapter I present a summary of the results of my study, considering each research question in turn and providing an overview of the limitations of the research. I describe how the results of this study contribute to existing research, explain the implications of my findings for teacher development and finally recommend how this research might be taken forward in the future.

9.1 Addressing the research questions

Research question 1 asked if teachers perceived open-ended constructivist teaching techniques to be more risky than banking, transmission methods of teaching. The card sort activity allowed me to access participants' initial intuitive attitudes to voluntary risk-taking revealing teachers' clear preference for constructivist approaches and active dislike of banking techniques which they equated with poor quality teaching. Participants were driven by a need to provide the best experiences and outcomes for their pupils and were of the opinion taking risks was essential to ensure a variety of engaging, high quality lessons. The social risks Hills (2007) had suggested might be associated with constructivist teaching – how teachers might be viewed by students or other teachers if a lesson went wrong – were not a concern to these teachers. Participants identified three key incentives for taking risks: a need for change if pupils were not making progress using existing methods; the wish to keep developing personal practice to be the best possible teacher; and the enjoyment and satisfaction gained from being creative and trying new ideas. Contrary to existing literature that labelled teachers as conservative, participants were very open to taking risks to develop their practice. These positive attitudes were uncovered by focusing on voluntary risk-taking where previous research focused largely on teachers' responses to risks resulting from imposed change,

revealing their more negative, analytic attitudes to involuntary risk. The message is that teachers prefer constructivist techniques, see creativity as one of the most enjoyable aspects of their work, and are happy to take risks to improve lessons and develop practice. However, teachers prefer to have the autonomy to drive their own development and take risks to meet the needs of their pupils.

Research question 2 investigated whether teachers' attitudes to risk changed during their careers. The positive attitudes identified in research question 1 endured throughout teachers' careers both in terms of the drive to produce the best lessons for pupils, and the excitement felt trying something new. What changed were teachers' levels of knowledge, confidence, trust, autonomy, and responsibility. Beginner teachers recognised they lacked knowledge and had a lot to learn, which they saw as exciting and challenging, but meant they lacked some confidence, particularly around behaviour management. Of more concern was their feeling they needed to be seen to be following the right policies and procedures and exhibiting the right behaviours to earn school leaders' trust, while also proving themselves to be competent classroom teachers. They were therefore the least likely to step out of line, even if they thought it in the best interests of pupils. Mid-career teachers had achieved a level of confidence, were more time efficient and wanted to move their practice on to avoid becoming stale. Conditions for risk-taking were optimal at this point – participants had the time, confidence, and drive to improve. Late-career teachers had the knowledge and confidence to take more risks and having proved themselves, achieved higher levels of trust leading to greater autonomy in the classroom. However, despite being the obvious drivers of risk-taking, they had accrued personal and professional responsibilities that took up more time, and after years of working long hours, were more likely to question their work-life balance. While teachers retained positive attitudes to risk-taking throughout their careers, these results showed the factors affecting their ability or willingness to take risks changed over time.

Research question 3 sought to identify and understand the barriers to teachers taking risks. While participants consistently displayed positive attitudes to taking

risks, the interviews revealed a practice gap between those approaches teachers preferred in discussion, and those actually used in the classroom. A number of practical barriers were identified, including lack of access to facilities, resources, or opportunities to collaborate, and in the case of beginner teachers, lack of knowledge and skills yet to be amassed. These were not assigned a great deal of importance by participants who accepted they had entered a profession knowing it would not be resourced to the levels they would like. A lack of teacher time was considered a much greater barrier and one of more significance. Teachers wanted risks in the classroom to be carefully planned so their pupils had high quality experiences and so they would know any lack of success was not due to poor preparation. If there was not sufficient time to plan properly, teachers felt taking a risk could be irresponsible. Late-career teachers with extra responsibilities particularly felt the lack of time and were most likely to consider work-life balance before taking on extra tasks. However, despite their frustrations, teachers viewed a lack of time in much the same pragmatic way they viewed other practical barriers. They did not imagine any improvements were likely in the near future and found ways to work around the barriers as best they could – in the case of teacher time, by finding small pockets of time and distributing their risk-taking.

Curriculum time represented the most significant barrier. Teachers did not always have enough time to cover the material in the National Curriculum and examination syllabuses and were concerned taking risks might lead to a loss of lesson time putting them behind. The significance of this loss was considered too great to be worth taking risks as it was linked to pupil exam outcomes. The risk of not completing the curriculum outweighed all other risks, so only the most experienced teachers would consider giving up curriculum time, and then only when utterly convinced it was best for their pupils. A possible loss of curriculum time elicited a completely different reaction from teachers, being met with fear, worry and concern rather than the calm, pragmatic, solution-focused response shown when discussing other barriers. Teachers assumed a huge personal responsibility for the life chances of their individual pupils, blaming themselves if pupils did not achieve the examination outcomes they needed. Lack of curriculum time did not just limit risk-taking in the classroom, it narrowed the

taught curriculum and teaching techniques, especially for older pupils, accounting for a large part of the practice gap. In effect, where teachers' drive to do the best for their pupils empowered them to look for opportunities to take risks to improve their practice despite the various practical barriers in their way, pressure from the government in the form of league tables and inspections has driven teachers to limit risk-taking in favour of curriculum completion and examination preparation.

9.2 Limitations of the research

The main limitation of this study was centred on the small scale of the research. Data were gathered from interviews and a survey only, with the interview cohort comprising 10 participants from 2 schools and the survey eliciting 36 responses. All schools were based in the Southwest of England, and the interviewees came from two non-selective state secondary schools, neither of which were part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) at the time. Ideally, a third school with another 4 participants would have provided a greater range of results in terms of numbers of teachers and offering an additional school context. In my original plan, I had intended to use focus groups to increase the number of participants and allow for an exchange of ideas, but running effective focus groups or expanding the number of participants was extremely challenging during the Covid-19 pandemic, both in terms of the practicalities of working safely and in terms of the ethical issues surrounding teachers' workloads and personal circumstances at that time. I was able to draw clear conclusions from the small sample I had, but I would have liked the opportunity to triangulate more sources.

A further limitation arose from participant selection which was largely voluntary, again driven to a large extent by researching during the pandemic. The cohort was representative of the national teaching population in England in terms of length of service, gender, and race, but I would have liked to interview more mid-career teachers as my findings showed they are at an interesting point in their professional journey.

The final limitation concerns my role as an insider researcher. While this brought many advantages, these findings have been interpreted through the lens of someone who has taught in schools in the Southwest for over 20 years.

9.3 Contribution to knowledge and significance of the findings

This study makes a number of contributions to existing knowledge. First, a different approach and set of methods were used to elicit and investigate teachers' attitudes to risk-taking. Where previous research largely considered teachers' responses to involuntary change imposed upon them by school leaders, this study took a teacher-centred approach focusing on understanding risk-taking from the perspective of individual teachers taking voluntary risks to drive their own professional development. This allowed teachers to identify the barriers to taking risks in their own, everyday professional lives, rather than how they felt about implementing projects devised by leaders. Using Slovic's (2018) dual thinking process model of risk-taking to inform the design and analysis of the interviews exposed the differences between teachers' *feelings* about risk and what they *practice* in the classroom. Investigating the gap between feelings and practice revealed the barriers to taking risks and ensured the thoughts, views, and feelings of teachers were situated at the centre of the research.

The second contribution was revealing how teachers have positive attitudes to taking risks and developing their practice, seeing these as vital to good quality teaching and one of the most enjoyable aspects of their role. The conservative descriptions of teachers in existing literature were not evident in this cohort, especially when describing how they felt about taking voluntary risks that may benefit their pupils. Taking a teacher-centred approach in the study has shown a different set of attitudes towards risk and change than seen in previous research.

The third contribution is demonstrating most of the barriers to risk-taking are practical issues, viewed philosophically by teachers who choose not to worry about those things they cannot change, but focus on what they can change or influence. This pragmatic approach to voluntary development shares some of the properties of Doyle and Ponder's (1977) practicality ethic where pressure and lack of resources caused teachers to consider how new approaches fit within existing practices before taking risks. The barrier of teacher time has the greatest impact, largely because teachers have a professional wish to plan changes to practice carefully, and yet teachers still find small pockets of time to

take risks. This study also shows the hegemonic long hours culture has a negative impact on teachers' physical and mental wellbeing leaving teachers with the unenviable choice of spending time developing their practice or looking after their own health.

The fourth contribution is that a lack of curriculum time, linked to examination preparation, represents the greatest barrier to risk-taking, being met with fear and worry rather than pragmatism. In previous studies on teacher risk-taking, only Le Fevre (2014) mentioned the risk of losing teaching time, although this was not specifically linked to examination culture. Furthermore, choosing to view my findings through the lens of critical pedagogy showed that government as the dominant minority have reinforced and reproduced this examination culture which values curriculum completion over quality teaching. This in turn has led teachers to reduce risk-taking and turn to banking techniques despite considering these as inferior teaching approaches. Where practical barriers make it difficult for teachers to move forward in their development, the barrier of curriculum time moves practice backwards.

The fifth contribution is a response to Teo and Le Fevre's (2017) question, showing teachers retain their positive attitudes to risk-taking throughout their careers, but the extent to which they take risks changes as their skills, confidence, responsibilities, and priorities change, as shown previously in Figure 5. School leaders can use these findings to inform the design of continuing professional development (CPD) programmes in their schools to ensure they are effectively differentiated to meet the needs of individual teachers. The model in Figure 8 shows how teachers' risk-taking attributes change with career phase, the general and suggested specific CPD foci that support each phase, and the traits and characteristics school leaders can promote through training, line management and performance review. This model focuses on individual teacher development as that is the purpose of this study.

Career stage	**Beginner 0-5 years**		**Mid-career 6-12 years**		**Late-career 12+ years**	
Risk-taking attributes	*Everything is new so everything a risk* *Acquiring lots of new skills and knowledge* *Building confidence and competence*		*Teaching practice is established* *More time, confidence, and appetite to learn and take more risks*		*Other responsibilities take priority so time for risk-taking reduces* *Teaching decisions prioritise pupil need over compliance*	
CPD focus	Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019d)	Building teacher toolkit	Exploring pedagogies	Contributing to subject development	Embedding pedagogies	Contributing to school development
Specific areas for CPD	➢ Behaviour management ➢ Subject / curriculum knowledge ➢ Teaching techniques		➢ Critical approaches ➢ Linking curriculum to pupils' lives ➢ Developing pupil skills ➢ Mentoring beginner teachers		➢ Critical approaches ➢ Mentoring and coaching across the school ➢ Carrying out own or school-wide research	
School leadership role	Provide trust and support, develop autonomy		Promote flexibility and use of professional judgement		Encourage use of expertise to support and develop others	

Figure 8 - Model linking teacher risk-taking attributes to CPD needs at different career stages

Beginner teachers are supported through their first two years in the classroom by a mentor using the Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019d). During this period, teachers are constantly learning behaviour management strategies, deepening subject knowledge, and building a toolbox of teaching techniques. They need to know they have permission to take risks, sometimes making mistakes, and that school leaders trust they will work hard and use the support available to develop. Mid-career teachers are typically confident with behaviour management and now need to be encouraged to critically review their established practices and curriculum interpretation using their professional judgement to enhance their practice. At the same time, mid-career teachers are keen to explore new ideas, and engaging with educational research or training to mentor beginner teachers are two possible routes to achieving this. Late-career teachers may be time-poor but have the professional expertise and judgement to understand what will really help their pupils learn. They may appreciate having time to review and refine approaches they have explored previously, or research an aspect of their practice and share their findings. Late-career teachers also have a key part to play in disseminating effective practice

through coaching and mentoring, but also providing the support Timperley (2015) recommends teachers need to identify areas of their practice to develop.

Finally, this study is situated within the English education system where previous research has largely taken place in the United States, Canada, and New Zealand. In addition to revealing new ideas about teachers' risk-taking, the study has shown that factors such as risk perception; the role of teacher autonomy; the need to understand possible loss and significance of loss; and the link between pupil progress and teacher wellbeing are as important in England as elsewhere.

The findings of this study are significant because they enable schools and individual teachers to recognise and celebrate the personal and professional enjoyment teachers derive from taking risks and being creative in their drive to do the best for their pupils. The results should prompt school leaders to question whether teachers' resistance to new approaches really results from a resistance to change or a resistance to how they are implemented. By examining the barriers to risk-taking in detail, school leaders and teachers can work together to identify opportunities for increased teacher agency and autonomy and remove or reduce some practical barriers to increase the spaces available for risk-taking to grow.

Discovering the barrier of curriculum time to be the greatest concern is significant as this is firmly embedded in a government-imposed examination culture which feeds on teachers' sense of personal responsibility, increasing their reluctance to take risks, even when they believe it would be better for their pupils. As a school leader, it is hard to challenge a dominant culture and the controls that accompany it. Recognising the examination culture's role in narrowing teaching methods and reversing teacher development is crucial if school leaders and policymakers are to retain a skilled professional workforce and improve academic and social outcomes for pupils. Breaking down a barrier which constitutes a systematic, institutional constraint requires a longer-term change to reinstate teacher agency and allow for innovation and improvement.

9.4 Recommendations for future studies

There is plenty of scope for future research into teachers' attitudes to risk-taking, but the key areas that stood out as next steps for research from this study were:

- Comparing how teachers responded to voluntary and involuntary risks. This study concentrated on voluntary risks and showed a marked difference in attitudes from those which had focused on imposed change. It would be useful to find out if teachers responded differently to voluntary and involuntary risks if they were discussed at the same time, and whether there is a clear boundary between voluntary and involuntary or a continuum of agency and autonomy.
- As the implications of this study affect the practice of school leaders, a useful next step would be to investigate their attitudes to risk-taking, whether that be to teachers taking risks in the classroom or themselves taking risks as school leaders. It would be interesting to see which barriers to risk-taking they identified and compare the findings with those for classroom teachers.
- The two schools involved in this study were non-selective comprehensive schools. Expanding this research to include a wider variety of contexts such as selective schools, independent schools, or schools in a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) would provide an understanding of whether and how school context affects attitudes to risk-taking. The latter category would be particularly interesting as many MATs have prescribed teaching methods which suggests less opportunity for taking risks.
- This study did not consider factors such as gender or race, although research into risk perception and risk-taking shows there are differences for different groups in society. As the teaching workforce in England is predominantly female, investigating gender seems an obvious next step, especially finding out whether attitudes to teacher time and the need to complete an examination curriculum vary between genders. From there, research into risk-taking amongst other protected groups would support schools to be inclusive employers.

9.5 Implications of the research for school practices

In this section, I consider how schools might use the findings of this study to support greater teacher risk-taking. First, and most importantly, school leaders should recognise teachers' positive attitudes to taking risks to develop their practice and acknowledge how much teachers enjoy being creative. Schools need to see teachers as agents for change, not technicians to be managed, and encourage them to seek opportunities to take risks where they can. Where schools can find opportunities to provide practical support and pockets of time to research, plan and rehearse new approaches, teachers are likely to take more risks. Promoting collaborative working and building a communal drive to improve practice that reduces Beck's (1992) blame culture alongside valuing and celebrating small, incremental successes will support risk-taking.

Secondly, schools need to recognise teachers respond differently to voluntary and involuntary risks. Teachers are more likely to take risks where they have a sense of autonomy and agency. When allowed to drive their own development teachers feel less vulnerable and more invested in a process they consider will benefit their pupils in their classes. Ensuring professional development is a mixture of whole school and individual, personalised development capitalises on these principles. Where schools support teachers to identify their own professional development needs and interests, backed up with high quality training and the space to develop and explore their practice, teachers are more likely to embrace change. Providing the right balance of trust, autonomy and support delivers the right conditions for teachers to take risks. This is especially true for beginner teachers who often get the message they are not trusted to do their jobs without scrutiny, which suggests school leaders and mentors need to reconsider how they support and monitor those at the start of their careers and allow space for beginner teachers in particular to make mistakes as part of the development process.

Thirdly, the changing expertise and priorities of teachers as they progress through their careers can inform how schools support and encourage staff development. The combination of enthusiasm and confidence make mid-career teachers a valuable source of innovation in schools. School leaders could

encourage teachers at this stage in their careers to take on new opportunities, possibly supported by the experience and expertise of late-career teachers. Leaders should also understand late-career teachers often have additional responsibilities in their personal and professional lives, and not mistake a shift in their priorities for a lack of enthusiasm to develop. These teachers often react calmly to change, having experienced a lot of it during their careers, and prefer to concentrate their efforts on where they believe innovation will genuinely bring benefits for their pupils. They also have a wealth of experience to share with younger teachers and can help build beginner teachers' confidence whilst benefitting from being exposed to their recent training and research.

Fourth, the implications of this study are that schools should question the extent to which their curriculum and teaching has become examination-focused and increased pupil dependence. Do pupils in their schools see the curriculum as interesting and providing them with the skills to develop independently as adults, or simply a vehicle to pass examinations? Does the overt and covert curriculum do whatever is needed to maximise examination results, or prepare pupils not only to cope in the outside world, but understand how to make it a better place? Schools cannot refuse to cover the National Curriculum or enter pupils for public examinations, but they can be aware of the consequences of favouring examination-preparation over quality teaching and develop strategies that begin to redress the balance and reduce the reproduction of the examination culture.

9.6 Implications for education policy

A lot of work has taken place over recent years to improve teacher development in schools (Teacher Development Trust, 2015; Education Endowment Foundation, 2019; Education Endowment Foundation, 2021b) leading to a system of teacher development by career phase (Department for Education, 2022b). The research and resulting training courses and materials recognise some of the barriers to change identified in this study – the need to explain the purpose of change to increase teacher agency; the need for high quality training to ensure secure knowledge; and the need to provide time to train, rehearse and evaluate practice spread out to allow new approaches to be properly

embedded. What is less clear is how schools should manage the delicate balance (Tharby, n.d.) between top-down strategies and encouraging teachers to drive their own voluntary, autonomous, bottom-up development. If school leaders only develop strategies for imposing whole-school change, they will miss the significance of understanding attitudes to risk-taking and could lose out on a wealth of teacher creativity. In my opinion, the introduction of professional development pathways from initial teacher training (ITT) to senior leadership is long overdue, but it is vital these programmes and their facilitators do not fall into the trap of depicting teachers as conservative diehards who need to be cajoled into improving their practice. I recommend leadership training programmes include materials covering teachers' attitudes to risk-taking, particularly their positive feelings towards improving outcomes for pupils and the relationship between risk perception and voluntary risk-taking. However, the improvements brought about in teacher development will have no impact if curriculum completion continues to be prioritised over quality of teaching, which leads to the second implication of my research for education policy.

The combination of a packed National Curriculum, performance measures focused on examination results, published league tables, and current inspection regime have led to an education system that values examination results to the extent it is deskilling teachers and producing pupils who lack independence and are poorly prepared for adult life. The reproduction of the examination culture produces pupils who expect teachers to stick to syllabuses and a generation of young teachers who seem better prepared to teach examination skills than collaborative learning. If education in England is to prepare '*pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life*' (Department for Education, 2014, p.4) then the levers of control – performance measures, league tables and inspections – need to change and the purpose and mechanisms of assessment need to be revisited. While the current government examination culture dominates, teacher risk-taking and development will remain relegated to those small pockets of time teachers squeeze out from their overloaded schedules. Government needs to trust teachers as committed professionals and provide the resources and support they want and need to develop, rather than seeking to control them as units in a production line. This

greater autonomy will support the risk-taking required to develop constructivist, dialogic techniques that encourage deeper learning, improving outcomes for pupils and schools.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Schedule for initial semi-structured interviews

Consent

First ensure the consent form is completed.

Ethics

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview and for completing the consent forms.

Before we start, I should remind you that this process is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time during this discussion and up to two weeks afterwards.

My studies with Lancaster University are independent of this school and the research is entirely independent of any professional relationship we may have. Your participation or otherwise will not affect your position in the school. The discussions from this session will not be shared with other teaching staff or senior leaders.

All data taken from this discussion will be anonymised and stored securely.

Housekeeping

I will be recording the session, so I have a clear and accurate record of the discussions we have. I'll also be taking some notes as we go to help me with analysing the discussions later.

On your pack, please fill in the sheet asking for your name, the subject you teach and the numbers of years you have been teaching. Please indicate whether you would be willing for me to contact you again in the future to ask any follow-up questions. The letter will be assigned to ensure anonymity.

As this is being conducted as an online interview I have had to make a few adjustments to how I will collect information. I'll ask you to give me the letter on the form and the information required so I can make a note of them. All notes will be kept securely.

Introduction to the research

As you are aware, I am a PhD student with Lancaster University researching secondary school teachers' perceptions of risk-taking in developing their practice.

To put the research in context, there are plenty of books and articles that say teachers need to take risks to develop their practice, whatever stage of their careers they are in, but there is little research looking at which that actually means in terms of teachers' everyday working lives, so my research aims to understand it better.

The aims of this initial interview are in large part exploratory and will inform how the next stages of my research will develop. All views, opinions, and experiences are valid and interesting and I am not looking for a particular outcome, so please be as honest as you can.

I hope you enjoy taking part and find the discussions interesting.

Start Recording

Please say the letter assigned in your pack ONLY out loud, the subject you teach and how long you have been teaching.

Initial Exercise

1. In a moment I will invite you to look through the set of cards in the brown envelope in your pack. I want you to imagine you are going to teach your classes using the method on each card and sort them in to two piles – those you feel positively about and those you feel negatively about. I want your initial and immediate response, so take one card at a time – look at it, don't think about it, but put a sticker on each one indicating whether you have a positive or negative response *and don't change your mind*. To be clear, positive can be from 'I'm really enthusiastic' to 'I'm OK with that' and negative can be from 'I'd rather not' to 'please don't make me'.
2. Now use the second set of stickers to indicate for each method whether this is something you use regularly and frequently in your lessons (so something you might describe as usual practice); something you use regularly but infrequently; or rarely/not at all.

I'll collect the packs in when I see you next. In meantime can you hold up each card to the camera so I can see which stickers you have put on each. I'll be able to play the recording back later and capture the information.

Discussion

3. Thinking about what went into your positive pile, what do you think made you feel positively about these methods?
4. Thinking about what went into your negative pile, what do you think made you feel negatively about these methods?
5. Thinking about those methods you rarely or have never used,
    - what might put you off using or engaging with those methods?
    - What might the negative consequences be?
    - What might the positive consequences be?

    Prompts: student or teacher consequences? Loss and significance of loss.

6. Now we have had some time to discuss and reflect, would you change your mind about any of the methods in either pile?
7. How do you feel about taking risks and trying new methods in your teaching? Has this changed since you started teaching?
8. What methods or techniques have I missed out today?

Supplementary

9. How would you describe the context of the school you teach in? Does this affect your attitude to taking risks?
10. Do you think you have a particular approach to, or philosophy of education?

Plenary

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B – Schedule for the second-round semi-structured interviews

Consent

First ensure that everyone attending has already completed a consent form.

Ethics

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview and for completing the consent forms.

As before, I should remind you that this process is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time during this discussion and up to two weeks afterwards and my studies with Lancaster University are independent of this school and the research is entirely independent of any professional relationship we may have. Your participation or otherwise will not affect your position in the school. The discussions from this session will not be shared with other teaching staff or senior leaders.

All data taken from this discussion will be anonymised and stored securely.

Housekeeping

As before, I will be recording the session, so I have a clear and accurate record of the discussions we have. I'll also be taking some notes as we go to help me with analysing the discussions later.

Discussion

1. Last time we talked about the consequences of taking risks or trying new things to develop teaching practice. This time I'd like to ask what you think the consequences of NOT taking risks are.
2. In the first interview we discussed a range of barriers that exist to you taking risks and trying new teaching techniques, and yet you still described times when you had tried new things. How do you decide when you should try something new in the classroom?
3. A common barrier identified in the first round of interviews was a lack of skill or ability on the part of the students – for example, lack of research skills, presentation skills, ability to work in groups, ability to learn ahead of lessons. What are your thoughts on that?

- What causes this?
- Does it matter?
- How might we overcome it?

4. What do you think of this statement?

   “it’s not so much that teachers are averse to taking risks with their classroom teaching, more the risk of not completing the curriculum”.

5. Where do you think this (perceived) pressure to complete the curriculum at all costs comes from?
   - Can you put these in order or who applies the most pressure down to who applied the least?

     School, students, parents, government, department, you, society, governors OTHER

6. Have a look at these activities. Could you put them in order from the one you would feel most comfortable doing to the one you would feel least comfortable doing?
7. Do you think the way you teach today:
   - Prepares students for the future.
   - Empowers students to live the lives they want for themselves.
   - Increases equality?

Supplementary

8. How do you think students respond to the way you/the teaching profession teaches today?

Plenary

9. Going back to question 1, do you have anything else to add about the negative consequences of not taking risks in developing our teaching?

Do you have any questions for me? Anything else you would like to add?

Appendix C – Evolution of themes and codes during interview analysis

Provisional codes after 3 interviews
Teacher Knowledge
Lack of experience
Restrictive practices
Behaviour
Importance of Active Learning
Student perspectives
Time pressure
Workload and coping strategies
Feelings of distress/failure
Pressure and compromise
Student autonomy and independence
Positive views of risk taking
Exams as priority
Informed by previous practice
Safety and security
Concern about current practice
Need to maintain control
Negative feelings
Fear of how failure is perceived
Prescriptive methods
Avoiding Change
Lack of support
Changing priorities
Assessment
Rationalising not using techniques
Compromise
Student progress vs engagement
Lack of student skills or ability
Different student groups
Structure and routine
Teachers' physics and mental health

Refined themes after 6 interviews
Barriers
Practical issues
Student abilities and skills
Student behaviour
Teacher knowledge
Time
Considerations
Confidence and structure
Feelings about risk
Planning
Previous experiences
Student groups
Subject considerations
Support or lack of support
Education and pedagogy
Exam teaching and coaching
Outcomes of risk taking
Student negative
Student positive
Teacher negative
Teacher positive
Progression over time
Reflection
Reproduction
Student empowerment
Power relationships
Personal comments
QUOTES

Refined themes after 10 interviews
Barriers
Practical issues
Student abilities and skills
Student behaviour
Teacher knowledge
Lack of support
Considerations
Confidence
Feelings about risk
Control, structure, planning
Previous experiences
Student groups
Subject considerations
Pedagogy
Exam teaching and coaching
Outcomes of risk taking
Student negative
Student positive
Teacher negative
Teacher positive
Progression over time
Reflection
Reproduction
Student empowerment
TIME Curriculum
TIME Personal
QUOTES

Final themes after round 2 interviews
Barriers
Practical issues
Student abilities and skills
Student behaviour
Teacher knowledge
Lack of support
Considerations
Confidence
Feelings about risk
Control, structure, planning
Previous experiences
Student groups
Subject considerations
Pedagogy
Distributed risk
Relationships with students
Different perspectives
Exam teaching and coaching
Outcomes of risk taking
Student negative
Student positive
Teacher negative
Teacher positive
Progression over time
Reflection
Reproduction
Student empowerment
TIME Curriculum
TIME Personal
The system
QUOTES

Appendix D – Survey questions

1. **What is the main subject you teach?**
2. **To the nearest full year, how long have you been teaching?**

   0-3

   4-6

   7-12

   12+
3. **Where you have taken risks or tried out new things in the classroom, to what extent were you influenced by the following: (sliding scale of 0-5 for each)**

   Wanting to bring variety to my lessons.

   Enjoying being creative in my planning.

   Having the right class in front of me.

   Being confident in my skills and abilities.

   Previous experiences where approaches went well.

   Support from other colleagues.

   Positive messages about taking risks from senior leaders.

   Access to a wide range of resources.

   Student enjoyment and motivation.
4. **To what extent do you think the following would put you off taking risks or trying new approaches in the classroom? (sliding scale of 0-5 for each)**

   Students might misbehave.

   Students might lack the skills or abilities to access the approach.

   A lack of support from other staff in school.

   My own lack of knowledge or experience.

   Previous experiences where approaches haven't gone well.

   A lack of planning time.

   Prescriptive lesson plans and schemes of work.

   A lack of curriculum time.

   Concern around how senior leaders might respond.
5. **On average, how often do you try something new in the classroom? Select the answer that best matches your answer.**

   Once a full term

Once a half term

Once a fortnight

Once a week

More than one a week

6. **Trying a new approach in the classroom might mean losing some teaching time to trial the new approach or help students access the new approach. How much teaching time would you be willing to lose to try something new in the classroom?**

   None

   1 hour

   2-3 hours

   more than 3 hours

7. **To what extent do you think how you teach is driven by the need to complete a curriculum or syllabus?**

   0

   1

   2

   3

   4

   5

8. **To what extent would you agree with the statement: "At keystage 4 my role is to teach students how to pass the exam"?**

   0

   1

   2

   3

   4

   5

9. **Thinking about the following skills, often called 21st Century Skills, select the THREE you think are most important for student progress in school:**

   Researching and extracting information

   Working collaboratively with others

   Presenting or delivering material to others

Working independently

Problem solving

Being creative

Critical questioning

Using IT for work or study

10. **To what extent do you think you are put off trying certain activities in the classroom because students don't have the skills needed?**

    0

    1

    2

    3

    4

    5

11. **How important do you think risk-taking is to your development as a classroom teacher?**

    0

    1

    2

    3

    4

    5

12. **Do you think teachers need to be allowed to make mistakes in order to develop their practice?**

    0

    1

    2

    3

    4

    5

13. **Thinking about the way you teach today, within the English education system, to what extent do you think this empowers students to live the lives they want for themselves?**

    0

    1

2

3

4

5

14. **Thinking about the way you teach today, within the English education system, to what extent do you think this increases equality in society?**

0

1

2

3

4

5

Appendix E – Results from the first interview card sort

ACTIVITY	TYPE OF ACTIVITY	RED	GREEN	FREQUENT	SOMETIMES	RARELY
Students will read through textbook pages and make their own notes.	Banking	7	3	0	3	7
Students answer questions from a worksheet or textbook.	Banking	3	7	5	2	3
Students use the internet to research and understand a new idea.	Banking	2	8	3	4	3
The teacher plans a lesson where they will learn or complete work alongside the students.	Constructivist	0	10	1	3	6
Students work in groups to complete a task or solve a problem.	Constructivist	0	10	7	3	0
A clear link is made in a lesson between what is being taught and how it will benefit students in the real world.	Crit Pedagogy	1	9	5	4	1
Students are set a task with an uncertain outcome – neither the students nor teacher knows what will result.	Constructivist	5	5	0	4	6
A flipped learning model is used where students arrive at the lesson having already studied knowledge content so they learn to apply it in the lesson.	Constructivist	2	8	0	4	6
Students are directed to question and critique what they are learning and why they are learning it.	Crit Pedagogy	1	9	0	6	4
Students complete a task that requires them to make a number of independent decisions.	Constructivist	0	10	6	4	0
The teacher uses a PPT or images to talk through an explanation.	Banking	1	9	10	0	0
The teacher demonstrates or models answers for students.	Constructivist	0	10	10	0	0
The teacher starts a lesson or topic by asking students what they want to learn about it.	Crit Pedagogy	1	9	0	3	7
Student voice is used in a lesson to determine the effectiveness of the lesson and inform future planning.	Constructivist	0	10	4	5	1
The teacher delivers a lesson using a different perspective to their own – gender/race/age/class	Crit Pedagogy	4	6	1	4	5

Students teach or lead all or part of a lesson.	Constructivist	1	9	0	4	6
Metacognitive questions are used throughout the lesson.	Constructivist	1	9	5	3	2
Students are directed to identify and question their assumptions about a topic.	Crit Pedagogy	1	9	2	6	2
A lesson is planned from a student's perspective (age, background, culture, etc.)	Crit Pedagogy	1	9	1	4	5
Team teaching	Constructivist	1	9	0	2	8