

THE IMPACT OF STANDARDISED
ASSESSMENT IN THE PRIMARY
SCHOOL CONTEXT IN IRELAND:
KEY ACTOR PERSPECTIVES

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations:

ARD - Assessment Research and Development

CARPE- Centre for Assessment Research, Policy and Practice in Education

DES- Department of Education and Skills

ESAI- Educational Studies Association of Ireland

GERM- Global Educational Reform Movement

INTO- Irish National Teachers' Organisation

M.Ed- Master of Education

NCCA- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NUI- National University of Ireland

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Introduction

This report has been constructed in order to provide an overview of my doctoral study which has been awarded funding under the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 'Assessment Research and Development' (ARD) Programme. It also aims to provide an outline of the progress made in this research project throughout the period for which this financial support was gratefully received.

In order to address each aspect of my study comprehensively, this report has been split into four clearly defined sections. The first section shall outline the background to this project, commenting on the landscape relating to standardised assessment from both a national and global perspective, as well as discussing my rationale for undertaking in-depth research in this area. The second section shall document the aim of this study. Here, the research questions at the heart of this study will be outlined and discussed. Thirdly, the methodology employed throughout this research will be clarified, providing justification for each aspect included in this regard. Lastly, the final section in this report shall provide an account of the progress made in this study during the period of financial support provided by the NCCA.

Overview/ Background to the Research

Standardised assessment has become a widely debated topic amongst key actors in education in recent years, both within Ireland and internationally. When compared to our international counterparts, such as The United States and Great Britain, the construction and subsequent usage of this form of assessment in Ireland is relatively new, dating back only to the late 1970's (ERC, 1976). Although supportive literature regarding this form of assessment was dutifully produced since its introduction into our education system (NCCA, 2005), it is not until 2007, however, that we see any formal procedures governing its usage being implemented (Ireland. Department of Education and Science, 2006). In the years following this formalisation, the role allotted to standardised assessment has significantly intensified, as evidenced by the procedures outlined in educational government strategies, such as the 'Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020' policy document (DES, 2011). Here, for example, a significant widening of the net of entitlement to the results can be seen, as well as an increase in the number of times which children must officially undertake standardised assessments throughout their primary schooling career.

Given such recent developments regarding the manner in which the results from this form of assessment are used, much debate within Ireland now justly focuses on the experience of more established testing nations. In this regard, it is vital to acknowledge the effect that standardised assessment has had on other education systems around the world, and in particular how, and by whom, the test results are used, in order to ensure that we learn from the widely-documented mistakes of other countries. Assessing our own progression in this regard also allows us to examine to what extent global trends are evident in our own education system. On this topic, current discourse in educational literature highlights the spread of the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) and its effect on education systems worldwide (Conway and Murphy, 2013; Sahlberg, 2015). This effect is typified by increasing standardisation, leading to a marked decrease in personalisation within education systems. When one considers the recent procedures implemented regarding standardised assessment, as outlined above, we cannot but acknowledge the existence of the GERM in Irish primary schools. This research project aims to assess the extent to which the GERM has spread within our primary level education system, and how its impact is being felt in the classroom context.

Importantly, my own professional critical reflections as an educational practitioner have also led to the formation of this doctoral research. Here, my own experiences with using this form of assessment in my classroom, my social interactions with my workplace colleagues and my reflective discussions I have engaged in with other primary school teachers on this topic have all brought to the fore very strong opinions and concerns relating to the use of standardised testing. When one considers that it is teachers who are most experienced in the usage of this form of assessment, I felt it would be remiss to note their concerns in this area without conducting further research to see if such views are validated.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the formation of this study has also been informed by the results of previous research which I have undertaken in this area, as documented in my Masters of Education (M.Ed) dissertation. The findings in this study also highlighted many interesting issues and concerns which I felt warranted further research. When considering the data obtained throughout my M.Ed study, many of the participants' experiences and concerns regarding standardised assessment closely aligned with those outlined by their international counterparts. If we are to critically evaluate the effectiveness of our education system rather than passively accept external changes to it, I felt it was vital to conduct a more in-depth analysis on this topic.

Lastly, it is apparent that there exists a vast body of research from an international perspective regarding standardised assessment which warns that "standardised testing has swelled

and mutated, like a creature in one of those old horror movies, to the point that it now threatens to swallow our schools whole” (Kohn, 2000, p.1). The expansive literature available in this regard stands in stark contrast to the dearth of research in this area within the Irish context. Given the clear warnings regarding the impacts that standardised assessment can have in our schools, as outlined by Kohn (2000) above, it is surprising to note that, to date, there exist only a limited number of studies conducted broadly within the area of standardised assessment in Ireland (Madaus, Airasian and Kelleghan, 1971; Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO), 1997; NCCA, 2005; Mac Ruairc, 2009; Conway and Murphy, 2013). This study aims to bridge that gap and provide educational stakeholders with a more comprehensive overview of the impacts, both positive and negative, that exist within our primary education system. In further supporting my stance in this matter, in recent weeks the Centre for Assessment Research, Policy and Practice in Education (CARPE) has outlined their own plans to conduct research in this area, the results of which will certainly complement the findings outlined in this study.

Research Aim

The aim of this doctoral study is to explore the impact of standardised assessment in Irish primary schools through the lens of international experience, as well as noting current trends in this regard. In order to ensure a comprehensive examination of this topic, four levels of impact are being strategically addressed, as outlined in table 1 on the following page.

Table 1: Research Questions

Student Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do teachers believe standardised assessment impacts students?
Teacher Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do teachers believe standardised assessment impacts their own practice?
School Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do schools utilise the results gained from standardised assessments?
Policy Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are teachers responding to the role allotted to standardised assessment in the recently implemented literacy and numeracy strategy?

Firstly, focus is drawn to the student level. I felt it was vital that this aspect formed a central feature of the research given that best practice would dictate that assessment should always serve

the needs of the learner. However, given recent procedural changes to the manner in which standardised assessment is now utilised, one must probe the validity of this ascertain in relation to the current context. Here, the impact of standardised assessment on student learning, as well as their social, emotional and behavioural needs, is explored through the lens of the teachers' professional perspective. Comparisons are then dutifully drawn to the experience of their cohorts in other countries, as outlined in the literature in this area.

Secondly, this study aims to assess the extent to which standardised assessment impacts teachers' classroom practice. As teachers, and indeed teaching principals, employ this form of assessment in their own practice, it is they who are most familiar with its administration, interpretation and communication. Logically then, it is they who are most likely to experience the associated questionable effects, as highlighted in international literature. Here, features such as accountability, informative and diagnostic value and systemic compliance are explored, as well as others.

Thirdly, the school level impact is expressly addressed. Here, this study aims to ascertain how schools use the results of the standardised assessments. Aspects explored relating to this level include communication of results to parents and other audiences, policy content and school ethos in relation to assessment.

Lastly, The policy level, and in particular the implementation of the *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* government strategy (DES, 2011), constitutes the main thrust of enquiry. Teachers provide their professional opinions regarding this policy document and the revised procedures contained within relating to standardised assessment. Teachers' awareness of other noteworthy studies in assessment, from both a national and international perspective, is also explored.

Research Methodology

Predominantly located within the Interpretivist/ Constructivist paradigm, this doctoral research essentially aims to understand socially constructed views deriving from "the world of human experience" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.36). In order to achieve this aim, a social survey strategy is being employed when collecting data as this approach allows an extension of the sample size beyond that afforded by other research strategies, such as ethnography or case studies. This approach to data collection also strengthens the validity and generalizability of the research as it

allows for several data collection methods to be adopted within the study, each serving to corroborate the findings.

The use of self-administered online qualitative questionnaires constitutes the main method of data collection. As there is quite an expansive participant base, comprising of 229 schools in Galway, this method of data collection was deemed most appropriate for use, allowing the researcher to obtain a broad overview of the attitudes that exist amongst teachers and principals. Bryman further supports this belief, stating that “the cheapness of the self-completion questionnaire is especially advantageous if you have a sample that is geographically widely dispersed” (2001, p.129). Here Bryman advocates the use of questionnaires when obtaining information for a wide participant base, as is the case in this study, and also notes the cost effectiveness encompassed in this approach. Such fiscal matters come to the fore when undertaking a study of this nature as when the participant base is large, the expense involved in obtaining information from each individual can prove extremely costly for the researcher, as would have been the case here were interviews to constitute the main data collection method. Also, as the topic of the research can constitute a sensitive issue at times, it was vital to choose a primary method of data collection that would put the participants at ease, thus promoting them to respond more openly than in more invasive situations where the researcher is present. Furthermore, as the questionnaire was online it was more convenient for the participant as they could answer it at a time that suited them, in the privacy of their own home and at their own pace. When discussing this particular feature Czaja and Blair note that “the ability to obtain reasonably complete and detailed answers to open-ended questions may prove to be an advantage of internet surveys over mail surveys” (2005, p.41), thus providing additional validation for the inclusion of this feature as the primary method of data collection in the study. Importantly, in considering those who may not have proficient computer skills, or who may not have access to the internet, a hardcopy version of the questionnaire was also be offered in such cases to ensure the inclusivity of all participants in the study.

In order to provide further context to the data obtained using the online questionnaire, face-to-face/ telephone interviewing embodies the secondary approach to data collection in this study. Here, a selection of those who had expressed an interest in this activity upon completion of the questionnaire were invited to partake in a face-to-face/telephone interview. It was decided to adopt a semi-structured approach when undertaking these interviews. Defined by Cannel and Khan (1968) as a “two-person conversation initiated by the researcher for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information, and focused by him on content specified by the research objectives” as quoted in Cohen and Manion, 1994, p.271), this particular interview method is deemed most appropriate for use here as it allows me the freedom to deviate from the interview schedule if

necessary in order to probe responses further and expand upon material of interest, yet it also provides a rough structure to the interview so that the information that is being collected is focused on addressing the research questions.

The use of 'expert interviews' (Flick, 1998) is additionally being employed in this study as it is hoped to interview a Department of Education and Skills (DES) Inspector, an NCCA executive and a third level lecturer from a teacher training college. Here, Flick highlights that "the interviewee is of less interest as a person than in his or her own capacity of being an expert for a certain field or activity. He or she is integrated into the study not as a single case but as representing a group (of specific experts)" (1998, p.92). Thus, the specialised data gained from each of the participants above is seen as being representative of that group of experts. In addition, each of those interviewed using this method are, in effect, enhancing the research by providing data relating to the research questions from a unique perspective.

In relation to the analysis of the data obtained using the methodology outlined above, numerous methods associated with qualitative data analysis will be employed in this study. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data obtained, for example, will be undertaken in order to expose emergent themes and relationships in the data. Additionally, in complementing the aforementioned thematic analysis, it is expected that features associated with the Grounded theory approach to data analysis will also be employed (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), such as open coding, axial coding and constant comparison. A data management system will be utilised to efficiently organise and interrogate the data, namely NVivo 10.

Study Progression to Date

The formation of this doctoral research began in September 2011, stemming from the results obtained in my previous M.Ed study on the topic of standardised assessment, as outlined above. The early years of this study bore witness to a period of great change in the landscape of assessment in Ireland owing to the introduction of the literacy and numeracy strategy (DES, 2011), and the implementation of revised procedures relating to standardised assessment contained within. Thus, the focus of this study shifted significantly throughout this period, aligning itself with key developments in this regard.

Once the literacy and numeracy strategy (DES, 2011) had become firmly engrained in educational practice, it was then possible to construct informed and relevant research questions, as outlined in table 1, to explore this topic appropriately, adopting a multi-perspective approach. In

order to ensure that these research questions were effectively addressed, a multi-stage piloting process was subsequently undertaken to ensure that the most effective means possible were being employed to obtain rich qualitative data from participants in this study. Initially, face-to-face semi-structured interviewing was to constitute the main data method by which data was to be collected. After a lengthy ethical approval application was submitted and approved for this purpose, interviewing promptly began. These interviews were deemed successful in terms of collecting data to address the research questions, yet it was felt that it would be more beneficial for the study, particularly when considering the generalisability of the findings, to include a wider participant base than solely interviewing could allow. For this reason it was decided to employ a self-completion qualitative questionnaire, as outlined in the methodology section above. Again, ethical approval was sought to use this method of data collection. Upon receipt of this approval, work ensued to construct an online questionnaire instrument that could be employed. Thus, stage two in the piloting process was underway. Upon completion of this stage, it was decided that the online qualitative questionnaires would constitute the main method by which data would be collected, and would be supplemented by follow-up semi-structured interviews. With the data collection instruments now piloted and refined, where necessary, the formal collection of data began.

Phase one of the formal collection of data constituted the dissemination of the online questionnaire instrument to all 229 eligible primary schools in Galway city and county. This sample essentially included all school types in this region, excluding junior schools and special schools where standardised testes were not administered. It was during this phase in the study that support for this research project was gratefully recieved from the NCCA under their ARD Programme. Progress from this time is outlined in table 2 below.

Table 2: Research Progress Made during Term of NCCA Funding

Activities	2015			2015			2016			2016			2016		
	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov
1 Chapter Construction															
1.1 Re-Drafting/ Editing Literature Review															
1.2 Re-Drafting/ Editing Methodology															
1.3 Drafting up Findings Chapter															
1.4 Drafting up Analysis Chapter															
1.5 Drafting up Discussion Chapter															
1.6 Introduction Chapter															
2 Data Collection And Analysis															
2.1 Questionnaire Dissemination															
2.2 Questionnaire Data Analysis															
2.3 Interview Schedule Development															
2.4 Recruiting Interviewees															
2.5 Interviewing participants															
2.6 Interview transcription															
2.7 Interview Data analysis															
3 Other Activities															
3.1 Research Dissemination (When possible)															
3.2 Ongoing training (When necessary)															

Following receipt of this funding, much progress has been made in this study, particularly in terms of data collection and analysis, as is evident in the table above. Upon completion of the questionnaire dissemination phase, 103 questionnaires were completed and analysed. A specialised data management system, 'Nvivo 10', was employed to aid in this task. Importantly, the findings derived from this careful data analysis subsequently informed the construction of topic guides for use in the follow-up interviews, whereby issues of interest stemming from this analysis are further probed when interviewing participants. Separate topic guides were also constructed for the 'Expert' interviews based on these, and other, issues. Work is currently on-going in this area, meeting with participants and transcribing the interview data.

This year has also again seen marked progress made in relation to the construction of these chapters. As documented in the above table, the methodology chapter has been updated regularly in line with developments as they are happening so as to avoid missing any detail in this regard. Also, I am keeping up to date with emerging literature in the area of assessment and as such, the literature review chapter is also under constant review.

As a result of the funding received from the ARD Programme I have also engaged in increased research dissemination this year. To this end, I attended and presented a paper at this year's Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) Conference, as well as discussing some of the emerging findings from this study at the NUI, Galway Postgraduate Research Seminar Series earlier this year. It is also planned to attend and discuss this research at other upcoming educational events, such as the NCCA showcase and Teaching Council's *Feilte* Conference.

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