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A Qualitative Longitudinal Study of Students' Experiences of Assessment throughout Junior Cycle

by

M. Lorraine Chadwick, BA, PGDE, PDEL, M.Ed.

**This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD in Education)**



UCC

Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh, Éire
University College Cork, Ireland

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March 2025

Declaration

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism and intellectual property.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "M. Lorraine Chadwick", is displayed within a light gray rectangular box.

Signed: _____

M. Lorraine Chadwick

Date: 26th March 2025

Abstract

This thesis explores the evolving experiences and implications of assessment practices for Junior Cycle (JC) students in one school site in Ireland, through a qualitative longitudinal study. It examines how students conceptualise and navigate assessment, encompassing summative and formative approaches, and framed by the complex connections between sociocultural, institutional and political influences. By centring student voices through a continuous cycle of study, the research aims to provide a novel understanding of the emotional, cognitive and social dimensions of assessment, illuminating its impact on the students' academic progression, personal growth and engagement.

Guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study followed a cohort (n=19) of JC students over a three-and-a-half year period, using interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and sketches to capture their lived experiences.

Findings reveal the dynamics of students' understanding of assessment through JC - from a performance-driven, high-stakes paradigm to a more holistic perspective that values feedback, the development of skills and self-reflection. However, tensions persist, as summative assessments often dominate perceptions of success, while classroom-based assessments (CBAs), despite their skill-building potential and summative function, are perceived as undervalued in JC terminal grading frameworks. This disconnect leads students to view the Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) descriptor as an isolated measure, bearing little weight on their final grade, which in turn diminishes its perceived significance and impact on their overall academic achievement.

The research situates these findings within sociocultural theories of learning, offering theoretical and practical insights while also highlighting the critical role of feedback, the dual purpose of assessment as a tool for both evaluation and learning, and the sociocultural scripts that shape students' experiences.

This thesis contributes to the evolving discourse on assessment in education by advocating for practices that empower students, enhance equity, and foster meaningful engagement. Its findings hold implications not only for JC assessments but also for the upcoming Senior Cycle reforms, whilst emphasising the transformative potential of integrating student perspectives into educational policy and practice.

Key Words: students, student voice, junior cycle, assessment, sociocultural theory, affordance theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis.

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Finally, this thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father Diarmuid O’Leary, whose sudden death in 2003 sparked the beginning of my late return to education the following year. Your spirit, love and wisdom are ever-present and your memory continues to be my greatest source of inspiration and guidance.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AAC	Additional Assessment Component
AEN	Additional Educational Needs
AfL	Assessment for Learning
AoL	Assessment of Learning
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AT	Affordance Theory
ATsk	Assessment Task
CAT	Cognitive Ability Test
CBA	Classroom-based Assessment
CBAs	Classroom-based Assessments
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DoE	Department of Education
DPIA	Data Protection Impact Assessment
DPO	Data Protection Officer
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
JC	Junior Cycle
JCPA	Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement
JCT	Junior Cycle for Teachers
LC	Leaving Certificate
LCE	Leaving Certificate Established
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education

OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
QLR	Qualitative Longitudinal Research
SC	Senior Cycle
SCT	Sociocultural Theory
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SOL	Statements of Learning
SREC	Social Research Ethics Committee
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UCC	University College Cork
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

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Chapter One – Introduction

1.0 Introduction

The genesis of this research is deeply rooted in both personal and professional motivations, framed by a commitment to better understand and give voice to the assessment experiences of students throughout their Junior Cycle (JC) learning continuum at post-primary level in Ireland. This chapter delineates the framework for the research by outlining the evolving assessment practices at JC that directly impact students navigating their path through this assessment journey. In the opening section, Section 1.1 of this chapter, I explain the background that has influenced this study and outline my rationale for undertaking it. Section 1.2 contextualises the study, while Section 1.3 outlines the evolution of assessment policy at JC as a dynamic narrative, shaped by sociocultural, political, and ideological forces. Particular attention is afforded to assessment reform in Ireland from 1999 to 2015, as this period underscores the broader shifts and contextual influences that have shaped current educational practices and policies which critically inform this research and ignited the spark for this study.

Section 1.4 sets out the research questions that will guide this inquiry, positioning them within a theoretical and heuristic framework that draws upon relevant literature, theoretical perspectives and methodology explained in Section 1.5. Section 1.6 provides an overview of the structure of the thesis, while Section 1.7 offers a road map for the subsequent chapters that will examine the various facets of the research inquiry.

1.1 Background to the Study – Personal and Professional Motivation

Within the educational research space, I believe that the complex dynamics of assessment serve as a focal point for understanding students' learning experiences and outcomes. My journey into this area of doctoral inquiry stems from a culmination of past academic endeavours, but principally my research undertaken towards the attainment of my Master's Degree in Education, completed in 2019. That study was concerned with the perspectives and reflections of students, teachers and parents, on classroom-based assessments, in the Business Studies classroom, at JC level, in one school site in Ireland. Building on the knowledge gleaned from that investigation, this doctoral study seeks to explore the multifaceted landscape of assessment, specifically honing in on the experiences of secondary school students, documenting their assessment journeys throughout their JC phase of learning - from the day they sat their entrance assessment to the day they received their JC results and subsequent Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) document.

The milieu against which this research unfolds is richly layered with evolving paradigms in education, characterised by a growing emphasis on student-centred approaches, holistic development and the ongoing reconfiguration of assessment practices to align with pedagogical goals. Within this context, JC marks a pivotal stage for students in their secondary school education in Ireland, as they navigate the complexities of their academic journey, grappling with the demands of assessment whilst growing and developing their identities as learners.

Thus, this research seeks to illuminate the nuanced intersections between assessment practices and student experiences within this landscape, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors that shape these experiences throughout their JC learning journey. The words of Fullan (1991, p. 170) resonate as he reflects on educational reform; 'what would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?' So too should we extend this sentiment to the realm of assessment practice and policy. As I embark on this quest towards understanding the educational assessment experiences, perspectives and outcomes of a

particular cohort of JC students in one school site, who are the ‘consumers’ of JC assessment reform, it is imperative to acknowledge that students are not mere recipients of assessment but active experts (Flynn, 2018) whose perspectives and opinions matter and are integral to the process.

Ó Murchú (2014, p. 22) posits that ‘education is about change, yet we are so involved in change we rarely seem to have the opportunity to study change itself.’ This study proposes to take a snapshot of this change in terms of JC assessment reform as there is a need to reflect on the transformations that have occurred at this level and to evaluate how that change is being perceived, received, experienced and navigated by those most directly subsumed in the assessment process - our students. As a facilitator of this change in the classroom, I was motivated to conduct a study into how the assessment component of JC reform is being experienced by our students; to highlight the affordances experienced by students as a result of these new learning opportunities and to draw attention to the constraints of the JC framework as evidenced by these students also.

By embracing the premise that students’ opinions on assessment matter, it is my hope that the insights gleaned will serve as a catalyst for further reflection and review of the JC assessment framework, ultimately enriching the educational landscape at JC level and nurturing the holistic development of our learners. To rigorously investigate such a premise, it is essential to consider the context of the study, as this provides critical insight into the sociocultural and political milieu driving the educational reform which is central to this research.

1.2 Context of the Study

The wider contextualisation of this study necessitates an examination of the broader educational landscape within which it is anchored. At national level, Ireland's education system has undergone significant transformation in recent years, particularly with the introduction of JC reform, which seeks to promote a more holistic and student-centred approach to assessment and learning in the first three years of a secondary school student's enrolment. The research aims to provide unique insights into the interaction at the boundary between contextual factors which influence assessment, assessment practices and students' experiences of assessment, thereby contributing to a more rounded understanding of JC assessment within Irish secondary schools.

The study took place within one school site and maps the assessment journeys of nineteen students over a three-and-a-half year period, in mixed ability settings, from their entrance assessment in February 2020 to the day they received their JC results in October 2023. The school is a voluntary secondary school for girls with a Catholic ethos and an excellent academic reputation. This unique context encompasses various elements, including the school's characteristic spirit, the educational setting and the religious and cultural environment within which the school operates. The school's religious and cultural ethos is also an important contextual factor which may influence students' attitudes towards education, their motivations and their perceptions of assessment. In middle-class voluntary secondary schools such as the school site anchoring this research, entrance assessments - though officially decoupled from admissions decisions via the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 - often serve performative functions, reinforcing a culture of academic selectivity and institutional reputation. These assessments, while framed as diagnostic or organisational tools, can subtly signal academic expectations and contribute to the commodification of education by aligning school identity with measurable performance outcomes (Curtin *et al.*, 2020).

Thus, the findings of this study are intrinsically linked to this specific cohort of 19 students and were drawn exclusively from a single-gender school characterised by a predominantly homogeneous, affluent socio-economic and cultural context. While this sampling context facilitated a nuanced and in-depth exploration of student experiences, it inherently constrains the extent to which the study can account for potential variations in assessment experiences among students in co-educational environments, socio-economically disadvantaged settings, or ethnically diverse school communities.

With increased prominence attached to student-centred learning and assessment approaches from the JC reform (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2015), this study seeks to mirror that approach by prioritising students' voices and perspectives in shaping assessment practices. By positioning the research on students' experiences of assessment, the aim is to contribute in a meaningful way to the promotion of a more inclusive and responsive educational assessment system that caters to the diverse needs and aspirations of our learners.

Understanding students' experiences and perceptions of assessment may provide valuable insights for policymakers and other educational stakeholders thus informing the refinement and implementation of assessment policies and practices and supporting research in future studies which review JC reform. There are only a handful of Irish studies which have explored the complex and mutable assessment landscape which has arisen since the introduction of the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* (NCCA, 2015) some of which include McGarr *et al.*, (2022, 2023), Printer, (2020), MacPhail, Halbert and O'Neill, (2018), and Lenihan, Hinchion and Laurenson, (2016). Hence, it is my hope that this research will add further original perspectives from students on their experiences of JC reform within their own unique context.

Additionally, it may be reasoned that by gaining a deeper understanding of how students perceive and engage with assessment at JC level, educators can more deeply reflect on their

practice and explore additional innovative teaching and assessment strategies which enhance student learning outcomes and may foster further positive educational experiences. The research may also highlight potential inequities and disparities within assessment approaches at JC level. Ultimately, undertaking longitudinal doctoral research on mapping students' experiences of assessment *across* their JC assessment continuum, contributes to the emerging body of knowledge in the field of assessment research in this area given the recent timing of the reform. Moreover, by continuing to incorporate the expert voices and experiences of students (Flynn, 2018) into policy development, Ireland's post-primary assessment policies have the potential to become even more responsive, equitable and effective in promoting lifelong learning and academic success for our students.

1.3 Mapping the Evolution of Assessment Policy at post-primary level in Ireland: The Historical, Socio-economic and Socio-political Context of Junior Cycle Reform

For contextualisation purposes, this section briefly maps, in the form of a table, the evolution of assessment policy at post-primary level in Ireland between 1999 and 2015 as it represents a critical juncture in the educational, sociocultural and socio-political narrative of the period. The contextual history that speaks to the emergence of 'dual assessment' (enveloping both summative and formative assessment) is also presented. It has been a difficult journey. Looney (2006) claims that assessment reform in post-primary schools in Ireland was heralded by a silence. She suggested that the silence was 'filled with the deafening noise of two formal public examinations, which, despite the efforts of the NCCA in its Assessment for Learning (AfL) Initiative, drowns out the whispers of other assessment discourse' (Looney, 2006, p.352). Almost two decades on, the opinions of the students participating in this research still chimes with that observation and will be explored in more detail in Chapter 7 of this thesis. MacPhail,

Halbert and O'Neill (2018) contend that the discourse surrounding assessment in Ireland has grown louder and is increasingly complex, yet the development of curriculum and assessment reform has been characterised more by a series of inquiries than by definitive solutions. This, they aver, is particularly evident in the context of assessment policy and practice within JC.

The Junior Certificate, introduced in the late 1980s, had long been the cornerstone of Irish lower secondary education (MacPhail, Halbert and O'Neill, 2018). However, over time it drew growing criticism for promoting rote learning, narrow exam-driven instruction, and failing to develop critical thinking or problem-solving skills among students (MacPhail, Halbert and O'Neill, 2018). Educators and stakeholders raised concerns about a 'teaching to the test' culture that sidelined meaningful learning and creativity. These concerns were amplified by the 2009 PISA (OECD, 2010) results, which saw Ireland fall from 5th to 17th in reading literacy and demonstrated negligible progress in mathematics and science - a signal that perhaps the existing model was insufficient and needed urgent reform.

The poor PISA outcome served as a catalyst for change. With the election of the 28th Government in 2011, a Fine Gael-Labour coalition under Taoiseach Enda Kenny and Education Minister Ruairí Quinn, political will was mobilised to address the perceived shortcomings in lower secondary assessment. Among the earliest policy responses was the *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020* (DES, 2011) strategy, designed to raise educational standards across the system. Following on from this, the government launched a process to reimagine the Junior Cycle, via the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) aiming for broader, deeper learning experiences aligned with international educational benchmarks.

The Junior Cycle reform process unfolded within a broader socio-political context shaped by global policy trends, particularly those advanced by the OECD. Increasingly, education in

Ireland was framed through the lens of economic utility, influenced by performative pressures that prioritised accountability, measurement, and standardisation (Mooney Simmie, 2012). Concepts such as human capital development, lifelong learning, and international benchmarking reinforced a policy narrative where educational success was closely tied to employability and global competitiveness (Holborow, 2012). This environment contributed to the commodification of education, whereby learning became valued primarily for its market outcomes rather than its intrinsic or civic purposes. In October 2012, the first *Framework for Junior Cycle* was introduced, proposing an approach to assessment which aimed to place less emphasis on the traditional terminal state exam which would be worth 60%, and introduced a school-based component of assessment which would be attributed the remaining 40% and marked by the students' subject teachers. This brought immediate and strong opposition, particularly from the ASTI and TUI teacher unions. The ASTI, for instance, convened regional seminars that identified concerns over resources, inconsistent implementation across schools, and threats to fairness and workload stemming from school-based grading (ASTI, 2013). This opposition escalated into industrial action, as teachers refused to carry out school-based grading or engage with the reform.

In light of these socio-political and socio-economic tensions, and after sustained negotiation with teacher unions, the framework was significantly revised in 2015. The result was a dual-assessment model, melding externally marked final exams - albeit of reduced emphasis – with the use of Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) to promote a more holistic and skill-based approach. The revised framework also introduced moderation mechanisms and provided additional professional time for teachers, addressing workload and fairness concerns. This recalibration aimed to develop key skills within the legitimacy of state-certified examinations, setting the stage for a more student-centred, OECD-aligned lower secondary curriculum.

Despite these efforts, students' perceptions of the effectiveness and fairness of these assessments remain mixed, a key focus of this study. This research thus aligns with the ongoing debates concerning assessment policy and practice in Ireland, contributing to a broader understanding of how recent reforms have impacted students' experiences and learning outcomes. The following table [Table 1.1] has been constructed to map the key chronological moments of contemporary JC education review and reform and outlines the critical moments, key features and evolution over time. Each milestone is contextualised within the framework of this research, demonstrating its relevance to the core themes and theoretical underpinnings of the study.

Table 1.1 - Key Milestones in Education Review and Reform 1999 - 2015: Chronological developments and their relevance to this research

JC Review and Reform Milestones	Key Features	Relevance to Current Study
Junior Certificate Review 1999	Focus - Evaluation of Junior Certificate focusing on subject status, availability and school flexibility. Consider if the curriculum's principles were being realised, exploring literacy and numeracy outcomes, and if assessment methods aligned with its aims thus highlighting early concerns about the programme's effectiveness Finding/s - Schools needed more flexibility in shaping curricula, a revised approach was needed to assess student achievement and a need for formative assessment development, diverse assessment methods and a shift towards school-based certification was required to address identified deficiencies. Literacy and numeracy strategies to be considered.	The review raised concerns about the Junior Certificate being perceived as a high stakes exam. The review sparked a project initiative which emphasised a shift from assessment of learning (AoL) to assessment for learning (AfL) with the NCCA working from 2003 to 2005 on formative assessment practices in schools with the creation of a repository of resources to support teachers in refining their assessment practices. These AfL strategies (such as peer assessment and classroom-based assessment) are central to students' experiences, a focus of this study.
NCCA established as a statutory body in 2001	Focus – formally established by statute under Section 39 of the Education Act 1998	The NCCA therefore had a legal mandate to develop curriculum and assessment across all sectors of Irish education, including early childhood, primary, and post-primary levels.
Student Voice – NCCA commission ESRI Longitudinal Study of Junior Cycle in 2002 which would publish three reports - Moving Up. The Experiences of First-Year Students in Post-Primary Education Smyth, McCoy and Darmody (2004)	Focus - Tracking 900 students from their first to third year of junior cycle across 12 schools.	Provides baseline data for understanding long-term student experiences and outcomes in junior cycle education.
Pathways through the Junior Cycle: The Experiences of Second Year Students (Phase 2, ESRI, 2006) Smyth, Dunne, McCoy and Darmody (2006)	Focus - Documented student experiences with teaching, learning, and curriculum, highlighting exam-driven stress, disengagement, and the impact on pedagogy.	Illustrates issues such as stress and disengagement, which are relevant to the current examination of student well-being and pedagogical practices.
Gearing up for the Exams (Phase 3, ESRI, 2007) Smyth, Dunne, McCoy and Darmody (2007)	Focus - Examined student expectations and performance outcomes for the Junior Certificate exam.	Explores key themes of assessment and performance, directly aligned with this study's focus on Junior Certificate outcomes.

NCCA Commitment to Broadening Summative Assessment (NCCA, 2007)	Focus - NCCA's commitment to reform summative assessment options as part of Junior Cycle reform.	Relevant to discussions on assessment reforms and the role of summative assessments in shaping student experiences.
PISA 2009 Results	Focus – Results saw Ireland fall from 5 th to 17 th in reading literacy and demonstrated negligible progress in Maths and Science	A signal that perhaps the existing model of assessment was insufficient and needed reform.
Election of 28 th Government of Ireland	Focus – Political will was mobilised to address the perceived shortcomings of lower secondary assessment	Signalled that policy responses would be swift.
Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (2011-2020) DES 2011	Focus – Raise educational standards across the system.	Following this publication, the government launched a process to reimagine the Junior Cycle via the NCCA.
Framework for Junior Cycle (NCCA, 2012)	Focus - Proposed major reforms in assessment practices, shifting from traditional exams to school-based assessments. Guided by eight core principles to frame the educational experiences of students. Outlined comprehensive educational outcomes to be achieved by students in JC. Introduced six additional key skills aimed at enhancing learning beyond the classroom.	Provides the foundational framework shaping current junior cycle assessment practices examined in this study. The core principles directly influence the evaluation of educational experiences explored in the research. Relevant to understanding the broader educational objectives and learning outcomes guiding this study. Directly informs the research question regarding skill development as perceived by students. Explores themes central to this study's focus on the integration of formative and summative assessments. Examines continuous assessment strategies that are a key component of the study's investigation into assessment reform. Important for exploring alternative assessment methods, particularly for students with special learning needs. Relevant to discussions on student achievement and recognition, particularly for those with diverse learning needs. Influenced by several OECD publications (OECD, 2007; 2010; 2011)
Period of Industrial Relations challenges (2012-2015)	Focus – teacher unions refuse to engage with aspects of the reform.	Further negotiation between the government and the unions resulted in compromise.

Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation (2015)

Focus – the teacher unions and the government agree a joint conciliatory position on assessment reform.

This document ultimately laid the foundation for the dual assessment and reporting structure now embedded within the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA), wherein subject grade descriptors derived from state-certified examinations are reported distinctly from Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs).

Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 (NCCA, 2015)

Focus - Revisions were prompted by tensions between the Department of Education and teacher unions, focusing on workload and industrial relations (as outlined above).

Informs the context of revisions in the assessment framework, relevant to the study's focus on evolving JC assessment.

Key updates in assessment and certification.

Critical to shaping the research questions around student perceptions and experiences of junior cycle assessment.

Key difference: 2012 focused on school-based assessment; 2015 introduced a dual approach with both classroom-based assessments and final national exams. Students complete CBAs in second and third year, with grading moderated through a SLAR meeting to ensure consistency.

Directly informs the investigation of the balance between traditional examinations and creative, engaged learning.

Students complete an Assessment Task (ATsk) based on one of their CBAs, contributing 10% to the final grade and externally graded by the State Examinations Commission.

Relevant to this study's focus on the assessment process, teacher grading practices, and consistency in evaluating student performance.

Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) - replaced the Junior Certificate, certifying both academic and non-academic achievements, recognising broader student accomplishments.

Explores the role of the Assessment Task (ATsk) in shaping final grades, which is a key aspect of the research.

Relevant to discussions on the certification of student learning, both in academic and broader achievement contexts.

1.4 Research Questions

The key milestones in educational review and reform outlined in Table 1.1, frames and informs the research questions in this study by providing a critical lens through which to explore the evolution of JC assessment and its impact on the cohort of students involved in this research. The 1999 Junior Certificate Review highlighted the limitations of a perceived high-stakes exam-driven system, emphasising the need for more formative and flexible assessment practices, a theme that resonates with this study's investigation into students' perceptions of assessment and their experiences with new assessment methods such as CBAs. This review also catalysed initiatives such as the NCCA's focus on AfL, which aligns with the study's exploration of how peer and classroom-based assessments influence students' engagement and learning outcomes.

The 2015 *Junior Cycle Framework*, with its introduction of key skills, CBAs, and the reporting element known as the JCPA, offer a modern context for understanding how ongoing reforms have reshaped assessment. These developments are central to my research questions, which seek to explore how students experience the evolving role of assessment in their learning, skill development, personal and academic growth and overall educational experience. The reform of JC assessment, as outlined in Table 1.1 above, has been an ongoing process in Irish education, with the most significant changes initiated in 2012. These changes were designed to shift away from a high-stakes examination system and towards a more balanced model that includes both formative and summative assessments, driving and capturing a more holistic and rounded account of a student's development, including Key Skills. Efforts to redirect attention towards the substantive learning experiences that characterise the JC - rather than an excessive emphasis on preparing for and engaging in the ostensibly high-stakes assessments at its conclusion - have not always achieved their intended outcomes (MacPhail, Halbert and

O'Neill, 2018). As assessment policies evolved, so too did the focus on student-centred approaches, with a growing emphasis on holistic learning and competency development. The table outlines the key developments in Irish educational policy that have framed the experiences of the students participating in this study. Each of these reforms has shaped and reshaped how students engage with assessments, which is the central theme of this research.

The research questions central to this study delineated the scope and direction of the study. They derived from both the national educational context of policy and reform and my own professional experiences, while informed by and formulated from relevant literature. They guide this study's investigation into how students experience JC assessment. Moreover, they also influenced the choice of methods and techniques I used to collect and analyse the data generated and they shaped the conceptual framework for interpreting results by specifying what needed to be examined and understood.

1. What does a first year/second year/third year student understand the term 'assessment' to mean and does that understanding shift as they move through their first three years of post-primary schooling?
2. (a)What factors shape students' preferences for summative and formative assessment? (b)What are the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as perceived and enacted by students at JC and how do these assessments influence their educational experience?
3. What skills, values, knowledge and understanding do students perceive they acquire or develop specifically as a result of classroom-based assessments undertaken in second and third year?
4. How do students' perceive the correlation between the assessments they complete and their overall learning experiences?
5. How do students' assessment experiences evolve throughout their JC, and in what ways do these experiences contribute to their growth, development and learning?

By exploring these questions, I aim to provide unique insights into the experiences of students concerning JC assessment reform and to offer evidence of how this cohort of students engaged with and perceived these new assessment practices.

To fully understand the impact of JC assessment reform, it is essential to gather student feedback on their experiences of the dual assessment approach finalised in 2015 and outlined in the 2015 *Junior Cycle Framework* document. Their feedback is crucial to evaluating whether the balance between examination preparation and creative learning is being effectively achieved. The questions are explored in more detail in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

1.5 Theoretical and Heuristic Framework of the Study

The theoretical frameworks of this study are grounded in sociocultural theory and affordance theory. Sociocultural theory informs the role of social interaction and cultural mediation in assessment practices, while affordance theory provides insight into how learning environments shape student identity by offering or limiting opportunities for engagement and self-concept development. Sociocultural theory, rooted in Vygotsky's (1978a, 1978b, 1986) work, emphasises the role of social interaction, cultural tools, and mediated learning in cognitive development. In assessment, this theory suggests that learning is not merely an individual process, rather, it is shaped by social and cultural contexts, advocating for dynamic assessment methods that incorporate scaffolding and collaborative engagement (Elwood, 2006; McDermott, 2001; Rogoff, 1995). Affordance Theory (AT), derived from Gibson's (1979, 1986) ecological psychology, posits that environments offer various opportunities (affordances) for action based on an individual's perception and abilities. In the context of student identity, affordance theory highlights how learning spaces, tools and interactions shape

identity formation by either enabling or constraining a student's sense of agency, participation, and self-concept within the educational environment.

The methodological approach of this study is that of Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR), which emphasises participants' experiences over extended periods, thus, its trustworthiness necessitates a phenomenological perspective from the beginning. This philosophical foundation is inherently linked to the research design; therefore, the study is grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a heuristic framework. The essence of IPA lies in understanding how individuals interpret their lived experiences (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021), with researchers aiming to comprehend how these individuals make sense of their realities. In this study, the focus is on understanding how students perceive their assessment experiences, employing a double hermeneutic process where I endeavour to interpret the students' interpretations of their world. The theoretical framework is discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

The penultimate section of this introductory chapter outlines the thesis structure, briefly referring to the component parts of each section to ensure a coherent and comprehensive presentation of the research findings and their implications.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is curated into eight chapters. Chapter 1, the introductory chapter, presents the background, rationale and contextualisation for the study whilst also illuminating assessment policy at post-primary level in Ireland, describing the historical policy developments of JC reform and how assessment has been reconstituted within an educational landscape of change.

It also introduces the research questions pertinent to the study, provides a brief description of the theoretical and heuristic frameworks which underpin the study, and outlines the structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2 is the first of two literature review chapters. It explores the sociocultural landscape of education and assessment and considers the purpose of assessment through a sociocultural and historical lens. The definition and purpose of assessment for this research study is also examined in this chapter together with an exploration of the figured world of assessment and how assessment environments such as JC are socially constructed.

Chapter 3 is the second literature review chapter. This chapter is concerned with the application of AT in educational settings, the sociocultural dynamics of identity formation and learner agency, the tenet that students should be considered as policy actors, an exploration of student voice, and finally, student perceptions and experiences of assessment at JC.

Chapter 4 sets out the methodology employed for the study including the objectives and aims of the research and a discussion concerning the rationale for employing a QLR approach. The conceptual framework of IPA is explored - including relevant topics such as the theoretical basis of IPA, that of Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and Idiography. The research design is also outlined with each of its component parts examined, together with an explanation of the thematic coding data analysis methodology employed. Finally, a section on ethical considerations is presented in the penultimate section of this chapter with the concluding section providing a transition to the first of the findings chapters.

Chapter 5 is concerned with rendering the longitudinal dynamics of students' understanding of 'assessment' as a particular emphasis of Research Question 1:

- What does a first year/second year/third year student understand the term ‘assessment’ to mean and does that understanding shift as they move through their first three years of post-primary schooling?

Students’ illustrations and explanations of what the term assessment means to them will be presented in this chapter together with their thoughts on whether their understanding of assessment shifts as they navigate their assessment journey at JC. How this connects and conflicts with the current literature on the topic will also be explored in this chapter.

Chapter 6 considers students’ experiences as preferences, affordances and perceptions of assessment belonging to Research Questions 2 (a & b) and 3:

- (a)What factors shape students’ preferences for summative and formative assessment?
(b)What are the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as perceived and enacted by students at Junior Cycle and how do these assessments influence their educational experience?
- What skills, values, knowledge and understanding do students perceive they acquire or develop specifically as a result of classroom-based assessments undertaken in second and third year?

Discussion in this chapter is concerned with classroom-based assessment, formative assessment practices, and the value that students place on classroom-based assessment and their JC terminal exams.

The penultimate chapter, Chapter 7, considers the students’ perceived relationships between assessment and learning, framed by Research Questions 4 and 5:

- How do students' perceive the correlation between the assessments they complete and their overall learning experiences?
- How do students' assessment experiences evolve throughout their Junior Cycle, and in what ways do these experiences contribute to their growth, development and learning?

This chapter discusses the findings on the overall learning experiences of the students involved in this research and explores areas such as learner experience and student growth and development as they complete their JC assessment journey.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, is the conclusion of the thesis. It draws together the revealing narratives of the students, their perspectives and opinions on JC assessment, presenting original findings which contribute to the growing knowledge in this research area.

Illuminating student voice in assessment discourse is crucial as it ensures that educational reforms are responsive to the actual experiences and needs of those most affected by them. By incorporating students' perspectives, educators and policymakers can design assessments that and develop assessment policy that has the potential to enhance learning and foster engagement, potentially leading to more meaningful and effective educational outcomes for the students in our care.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the background and rationale influencing this study together with a brief contextual analysis for understanding the importance of investigating students' experiences of assessment within the reformed JC framework. By grounding the research in

IPA, I hope to emphasise the significance of capturing the nuanced and subjective realities of students as they navigate these assessment practices and routines. The forthcoming chapters of this thesis will explore the current literature on assessment in Ireland, the methodological approach undertaken for this study, present original, detailed findings, and comprehensive analyses, in an effort to provide a unique understanding of how JC assessments impact student learning. Thus, this research seeks to contribute with valuable original insights to the discourse on JC assessment reform, ensuring that students' voices are central to the ongoing discourse, development and refinement of assessment practices.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

Considering Assessment in Sociocultural Contexts: Unveiling the Figured World of Assessment for Junior Cycle Students

2.0 Introduction

Assessment in education is far more than just an apparatus concerned with measuring knowledge; it is a complex concept deeply entrenched in social, historical, political, economic and philosophical contexts. The introductory chapter of this thesis framed the context of the research study situated in one school site in Ireland, and proffered a brief description of the evolution of assessment policy at post-primary level with particular emphasis on JC reform. Chapter 2 explores the intricate nature of assessment, examining its sociocultural, historic, role and purpose dimensions, and how these shape and construct our contemporary understandings of assessment. In the context of JC, these dimensions become particularly significant as they intersect with students' experiences, perceptions and interpretations of assessment practices. By analysing how historical and sociocultural factors influence students' understanding of assessment, this chapter lays the groundwork for exploring the impact these factors have on student engagement, motivation, and overall learning experiences. This exploration is essential in building the argument that students' perceptions do not merely reflect assessment policies but actively emerge from the broader educational context and the evolving purposes of assessment within it.

The first section, Section 2.1, is concerned with an exploration of the theoretical framework which underpins this literature review chapter, that of Sociocultural Theory (SCT). This section of the chapter explores the foundational aspects of SCT within the realm of education and assessment. It begins by tracing the origins and delineating the key concepts of SCT,

explicating how these concepts have evolved over time to shape our understanding of learning and development. This evolution is particularly pertinent to this study, as it provides a framework for exploring how students perceive assessment within the JC. By examining how SCT's emphasis on the social and cultural contexts of learning informs students' attitudes toward and interpretations of assessment practices, this research seeks to uncover the ways in which these perceptions are influenced by broader sociocultural factors. Understanding these connections proffers a basis for analysing how students' develop perspectives on assessment and how these perspectives influence their educational experiences. The section also explores the practical application of SCT in educational settings, shedding light on how its principles can inform instructional strategies, curriculum design, and classroom interactions, areas that inform this study. An overview of the sociocultural theorisation of assessment is also explored, examining how assessment practices are influenced by sociocultural factors and perspectives, concepts that again resonate with this study. This section also analyses assessment as a sociocultural practice through a Rogoffian lens, emphasising the relationship between culture, context, and assessment methodologies. In exploring these methodologies, this study articulates the distinction between formative and summative assessment within a sociocultural context and examines their respective roles in facilitating learning and measuring student progress. Such an analysis is essential for understanding how students experience these assessments throughout their JC assessment journeys. This nuanced understanding of students' experiences may shed light on the alignment between assessment practices and the educational experiences of learners, offering critical insights into how these assessments influence their overall learning and development.

This section also addresses the pivotal role of feedback in sociocultural assessment, underscoring its significance in fostering a supportive learning environment and promoting student growth and development. Embedded in the extensive literature on assessment in

education, this section of the chapter aims to unravel the complexities enveloping assessment within the broader sociocultural context. As an indispensable facet of the educational landscape, assessment transcends mere evaluation; it acts as a dynamic process that shapes and is shaped by the sociocultural environment in which it unfolds. These concepts provide a basis for the first two research questions as outlined in Figure 2.1 below and these underpin the foci for this chapter:-

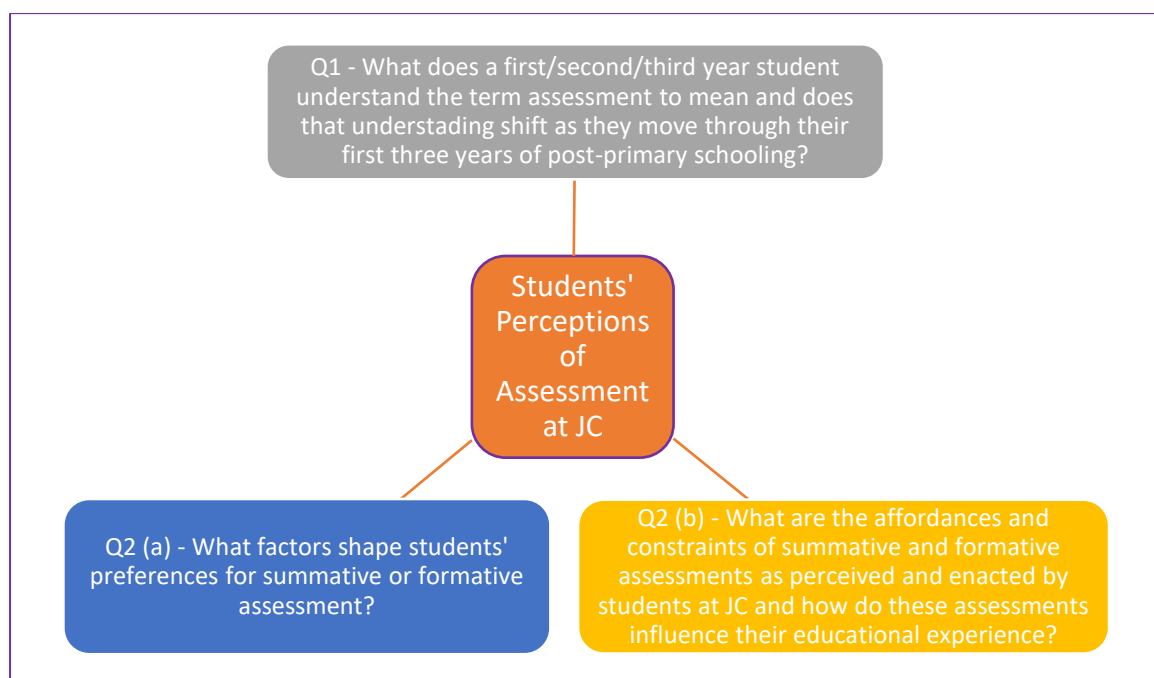


Figure 2.1 – Research Questions 1 & 2

In framing these questions, through the lens of SCT, this section of the literature review chapter explores the inherent sociocultural nature of assessment, considering it not as an isolated event but as an embedded practice within a broader social and cultural framework.

Section 2.2 builds on the developing theorisation of SCT and applies it to learning, teaching and student development, unpacking assessment as a mechanism for selection, certification,

measurement, curriculum control, institutional, national and international evaluation. These are themes that are significant to this study as they are inextricably linked to entrance examinations, students with additional educational needs negotiating their assessment journey, classroom-based assessment, state certified examinations, and reporting such as the JCPA.

Building on Sections 2.1 and 2.2, Section 2.3 outlines the definition of assessment as it directly relates to this study. The penultimate section, Section 2.4, explores the figured world of assessment, illuminating the social construction of assessment environments, with a particular focus on JC settings and the cultural influences shaping these environments. Section 2.5 concludes the chapter.

Thus, this chapter endeavours to illuminate the theory informing the complex and nuanced relationship that exists between assessment, sociocultural contexts and the social construction of assessment environments, which may pave the way for more informed, efficacious and student-centred assessment policies and practices in post primary educational settings.

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Exploring the Sociocultural Landscape of Education and Assessment

The primary objective of this section of the Literature Review chapter is to explore assessment as a sociocultural practice. It seeks to reveal the various dimensions that shape assessment, including personal, public, cultural, political and economic aspects (Curtin *et al.*, 2020) as these are central to understanding how disparate influences impact students' perceptions of JC assessment practices and their educational experiences. To guide understanding, the review considers the origins and key concepts of sociocultural theory and the application of SCT to education. An overview of the sociocultural theorisation of assessment will be undertaken,

together with a consideration of assessment as sociocultural practice through a Rogoffian lens, as these concepts directly influence the analysis of students' experiences of JC assessments and the broader educational context within this study. Finally, formative and summative assessment in a sociocultural context will be explored briefly, together with the role of feedback in sociocultural assessment, as this speaks to critical assessment elements (such as classroom-based assessment) of JC reform.

2.1.1 Origins and Key Concepts of Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory (SCT) explores how individual metacognitive achievements are intricately intertwined with cultural, institutional and historical contexts. This theoretical framework places considerable emphasis on the significance and meaning that social interactions and culturally shaped actions and behaviours hold in shaping psychological development. Pioneered by Vygotsky in (1978b), this perspective posits that as students engage in collaborative activities and subsequently reflect on their shared experiences, they acquire and develop distinct strategies, knowledge and understanding of the world, society and culture in which they are immersed. This is a critical tenet as educational reform moves towards assessment spaces which are classroom-based or peer appraised, areas that are central to JC reform. Churcher, Downs and Tewksbury (2014) contend that the process of knowledge construction is fundamentally driven by dialogue and interactive engagement with others. Thus, in the classroom setting, both peers and teachers function as essential agents in a student's learning process, facilitating knowledge construction through dynamic communication, collaborative interactions, and the shared use of educational tools that shape students' cognitive and social development.

What Vygotsky prompts us to consider, according to Kozulin *et al.* (2012, p.2) is ‘the nature of knowledge used in the classroom, for example, knowledge as information versus knowledge as concept foundation.’ Vygotsky’s SCT also presses us to reconstruct our concept of ‘students’, from one which is comprised of children of a particular age, with defined Cognitive Ability Test (CAT) scores and Intelligence Quotient (IQ) scores, to that of those who are culturally and socially situated learners. van Compernelle (2014, p.10) contends that the principal tenet of Vygotskian SCT ‘is that the human mind is mediated by culturally constructed artefacts’. In contrast to dualistic, reductionist perspectives on human cognition, which assert that mental processes either emerge from environmental influences or are biologically predetermined within the individual’s mind or brain, Vygotsky proposed a dialectical relationship between innate biological capacities and cultural constructs (van Compernelle, 2014).

Vygotsky (1978a) posited that human consciousness arises from the confluence of biologically inherent mental abilities and the internalisation of culturally constructed mediational tools. The incorporation of these mediational tools into cognitive activities fundamentally reorganises and transforms innate cognitive processes into advanced, distinctly human psychological functions (van Compernelle, 2014). Wertsch (1998) avers that the human mind extends beyond the confines of the brain, integrating culturally derived mediational tools. Applying these Vygotskian concepts to students undertaking assessments at JC, it may be argued that their cognitive development is influenced not only by their inherent mental abilities but also by the cultural and educational tools and agents they engage with. Effective assessment strategies should therefore recognise the importance of providing culturally rich and diverse mediational means to foster the development of higher-order cognitive functions in students.

Vygotsky’s (1978b) interpretation of the mind as a mediated entity prompted him to suggest that humans interact with their environment through secondary or supportive (mediational)

tools. van Compernelle (2014, p. 10) notes that while other significant psychological theories promulgated at the time argued a ‘direct stimulus-response relationship between subject and object, Vygotsky insisted that cultural artefacts allowed humans to create their own indirect, auxiliary relationship with the world.’ Vygotsky (1978b) illustrated this mediated relationship between subject and object as a triangle depicted below in Figure 2.2.

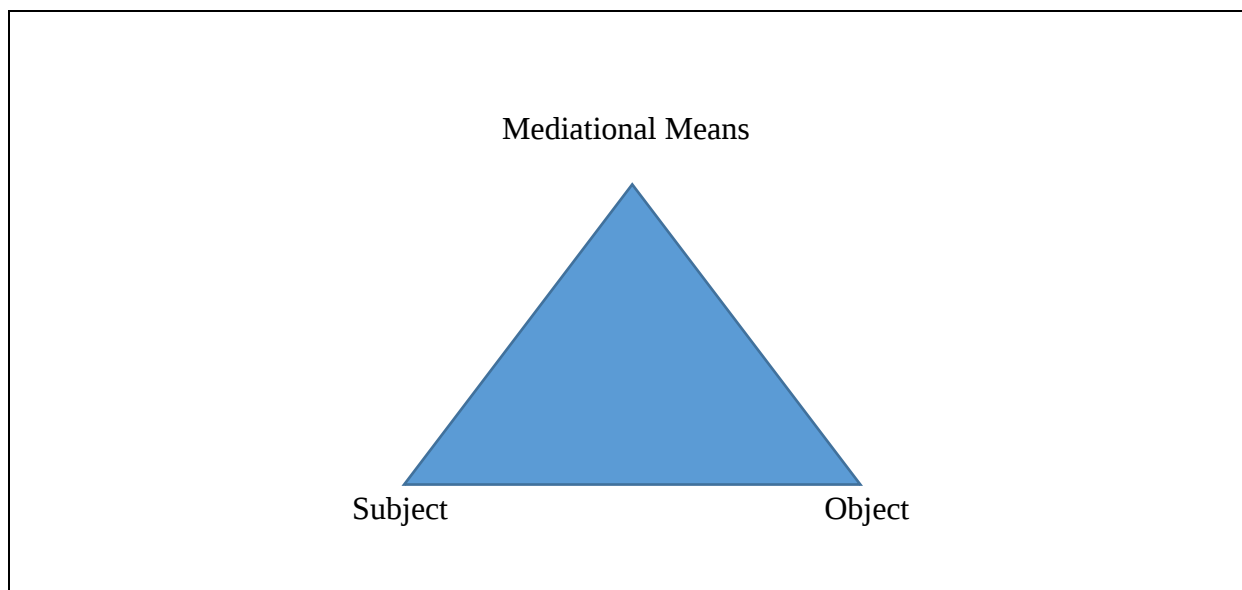


Figure 2.2 – Vygotsky's (1978b) Mediation Triangle

Vygotsky (1978b) did not deny the existence of direct stimulus-response mechanisms in humans. Instead, he contended that these mechanisms represent a class of lower psychological functions, which are not culturally based and are shared with other animals, particularly primates (van Compernelle, 2014). In contrast, higher-order psychological functions, which are culturally derived, integrate cultural tools or mediational means engaged with other relevant cultural and educational agents. Such integration and interactions enable humans to regulate their lower, natural, or biologically specified psychological processes (van Compernelle, 2014).

On examining Vygotsky's (1978b) mediation triangle, Cole (1996) noted that the unmediated or natural functions are situated across the bottom of the triangle where the direct stimulus-response process occurs and the mediated or cultural forms of cognitive activity takes place at the vertex of the triangle where the subject, object, response, stimulus, environment, artefact are wholly arbitrated. van Compernelle (2014, p. 11) contends that

higher or culturally based forms of mental activity include such things as voluntary attention, intentional memory, and logical thought and problem solving, which of course rely on biologically specified functions in the brain but which are formed through the integrating of mediating artefacts.

He also posits that intentional memory relies on both the capacities of working and long-term memory, which are biologically based, and on cultural artefacts that facilitate the deliberate regulation of these functions (van Compernelle, 2014). This enables individuals to remember specific information at desired times and in relevant ways - underscoring the importance of culturally embedded tools and practices in enhancing cognitive processes critical for success in state certified examinations such as the JC exam.

Thus, in the context of education, but particularly assessment, intentional memory is crucial as it underpins a student's ability to recall *and apply* learned information effectively. This process depends not only on the biological capacity of working and long-term memory (Sweller, 2010) but also on the use of cultural artefacts and strategies that help students deliberately control their memory functions (Kirschner *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, assessments should be designed to evaluate both what students can retrieve from memory (lower-order skills) and how they construct meaning through the use of cultural tools (higher-order skills), ensuring that their performance and development are supported and guided toward higher levels. These tenets of sociocultural theory are central to this research as they demonstrate a sophisticated framework that elucidates the complex relationship between students and their sociocultural contexts, as

they navigate their individual assessment journeys. Building on this understanding, the following section of this chapter will explore the application of SCT in educational settings with a particular emphasis on this study.

2.1.2 Sociocultural Theory: Application in Education

SCT posits that learning is an inherently social and cultural phenomenon and that it occurs within the social interactions and cultural practices of individuals with Falk and Dierking (2000, p.10) contending that

all learning is situated within a series of contexts ... an organic, integrated experience ... a product of millions of years of evolution, an adaptation that permits an ongoing dialogue between the whole individual and the physical and sociocultural world he or she inhabits.

Within the framework of SCT, teaching and learning are considered as dialectical processes that reciprocally influence the other (Eun and Knotek, 2022). *Obuchenie*, the Russian word most commonly translated as ‘teaching-learning process’ (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991) captures the essence of the dialectical phenomena of teaching and learning and supports the opinion espoused by Vygotsky (1978a), that children not only develop but are developed by others. In his view, *obuchenie* and a child’s development from a cognitive perspective were two disparate processes grounded on complex symbiotic relationships with their own developmental arcs, dynamics and subtleties. According to Eun and Knotek (2022, p.6), Vygotsky’s research led him to conclude that

cognitive development need not precede the formal teaching and learning processes nor should be equated with them ... the dynamic relationship between education and development should be more

clearly defined than to just assume that the former is one type of the latter.

Vygotsky (1978a) also highlights that both personal and societal achievements are mediated and negotiated through signs and tools. Palincsar and Scott (2009) insightfully observe that these semiotic means not only facilitate the co-construction of knowledge but also become internalised supports for future independent problem solving. However, McDermott (2001) raises an intriguing point in this context. He argues that learning cannot be fully achieved if a particular method of learning is not socially accessible to us. He further contends that educators should move away from solely focusing on traditional views of learning, which revolve around learners absorbing isolated pieces of knowledge during assessment moments. Instead, he advocates for a more socially constructivist approach to instruction; one that acknowledges and embraces the unique contexts of our students and what is available to them to learn within those contexts. By doing so, we can gain a more comprehensive and profound understanding of learning as an inherently social process, rooted in interpersonal exchanges between individuals, rather than merely the transfer of knowledge from learners' minds to the blank pages before them. McDermott (2001, p. 68) astutely asserts that learning 'does not belong to individual persons but to the various conversations of which they are a part'.

In the context of mapping students' assessment journeys at JC in Ireland, McDermott's (2001) perspective aligns with the imperative of adopting a socially constructivist approach to instruction. This perspective emphasises the importance of recognising and embracing the unique contexts in which students engage with learning opportunities, particularly at JC. McDermott's (2001) assertion that learning is not the preserve of the individual but rather is attached to the variety of interactions of which they are a part, underscores the significance of considering interpersonal exchanges, such as peer-assessment and CBAs within the JC assessment process. This research can thus endeavour to unravel the intricate connections

between assessment practices, social interaction, and the development of students' understanding within the specific educational context of JC in Ireland [Figure 2.3].

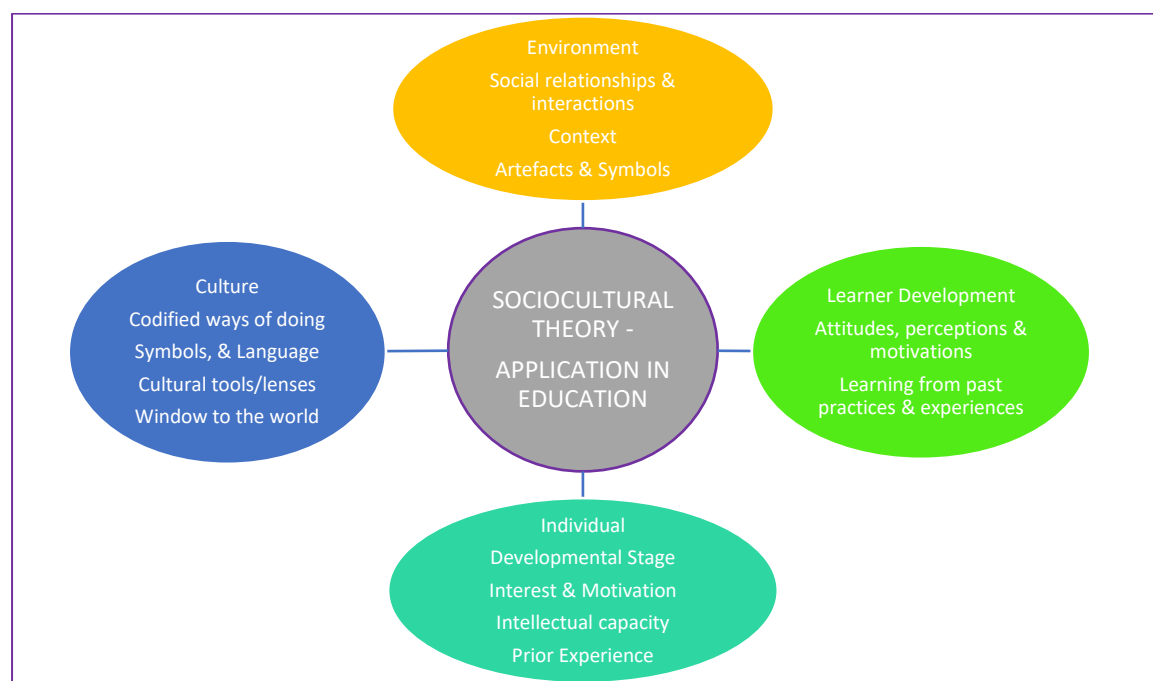


Figure 2.3 – Sociocultural Theory – Application in Education; adapted from Kelly (2007)

The nuanced, symbiotic relationship between culture, society and education has emerged as a pivotal focus in modern educational scholarship. Addressing the question of educational goals for the 21st century, Wells and Claxton (2002) assert that in rapidly evolving societies, it is imperative for students to be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate and adapt to these dynamic conditions. They conceptualise education as a dual process of enculturation and transformation, where individuals must not only acquire existing cultural tools but also possess the capacity to adapt and modify these tools to suit diverse contexts. These ideas are rooted in Vygotskian theories, which consistently emphasise that the objective of education is to foster cultural development through mediation, leading to the acquisition of

transferable knowledge and skills (Eun and Knotek, 2022). These principles are also echoed in the Department of Education's¹ discourse on JC reform, raising critical questions as to whether these reforms have successfully enabled students to develop the requisite knowledge, values, skills and understanding required for our dynamic world.

In the forthcoming section of this chapter, an exploration of the literature on SCT and assessment within educational contexts will be undertaken. While this is directly relevant to JC assessment, it is important to note that despite few recent studies exploring students' perspectives on JC assessment, there remains a significant dearth of research, largely due to the very recent educational reforms in Ireland and the continued marginalisation of student voice within scholarly discourse.

2.1.3 Overview of Sociocultural Theorisation of Assessment

Building upon the discussion of SCT and its application in educational settings, introduced in the previous section, this element of the chapter applies SCT to the theorisation of assessment, focusing on the social dimensions that are essential to understand students' perspectives on JC assessment. Vygotsky (1978b) argues that we exist not as isolated entities impacted by our surroundings, but rather as interconnected components of the social whole, inseparable from it. Our ability to think and act emerges from our active involvement and participation in various activities and practices, and in these interactions, we simultaneously influence change

¹ The Department of Education in Ireland has undergone several name changes since its establishment. It was known as the Department of Education from 1924 to 1997, the Department of Education and Science from 1997 to 2010, the Department of Education and Skills from 2010 to 2020, and reverted to the Department of Education in 2020. When referencing policies or reports, the name used corresponds to the official title of the Department at the time of publication.

and undergo transformation ourselves (Billett, 1996). In the sociocultural context, activity encompasses learning, making education an intrinsic aspect of all endeavours rather than just one type of activity among many (Lave, 1993). In Ireland, via the *Junior Cycle Framework 2015*, the NCCA (2015) advocate for classrooms at post-primary level to be more student-centred and for inquiry to be more activity-led, with teachers acting as facilitators and scaffolders of learning, leading to environments which emphasise the social nature of learning and the collaborative and dialogic aspects of learning and assessment.

Sociocultural theorisation of assessment is an approach to understanding and interpreting the assessment process from a sociocultural perspective (Elwood and Murphy, 2015). It is based on the principles of sociocultural theory, which emphasises the importance of the social and cultural context in shaping individual development and learning. The sociocultural perspective acknowledges that assessment is not a neutral nor objective activity but is deeply influenced by the cultural, social and historical context in which it occurs. Elwood and Murphy (2015, p. 183) aver that ‘understanding assessment as an activity involving both process and structure that address a societal need locates assessment practices in broader systems of relations and social structures in which they have meaning’. In the exploration of the sociocultural practice of assessment at JC, it is imperative to recognise that assessment is far from a neutral or objective activity; instead, it is intricately shaped by the cultural, social, political and historical context in which it takes place. Thus, any examination of JC assessment must consider these sociocultural dimensions, exploring the relationship between cultural influences, social dynamics, and historical factors to gain a deeper understanding of how assessment practices unfold and shape educational experiences in this context.

Curtin *et al.* (2020) assert that by recognising the significance of exploring the social structure of assessment, one may establish links between context, meaning, participation, and reification within assessment policy and praxis. They further acknowledge assessment as an integral

sociocultural endeavour. Therefore, assessment policy and practice is ‘a mediated, meaning laden, constitutive and negotiated social practice in a variety of contexts’ (Curtin *et al.*, 2020, p.2). Recognising assessment as a social activity that shapes human interactions with the world and with those around us (Curtin *et al.*, 2020; Elwood and Murphy, 2015; Lucas 2021), it is therefore essential to consider the social, historical and cultural context, when one is attempting to deconstruct assessment practices, as they are interconnected in a fluid and dynamic way.

Thus, viewing assessment as a process and a structure that caters to societal requirements, places these practices within broader systems of relations and social frameworks that give them significance (Elwood and Murphy, 2015). Furthermore, they aver that assessment practice not only contributes to the fabric of society by being integrated into symbolic networks but also plays a role in social situations within institutional activities where people collaborate (Elwood and Murphy, 2015). As an integral part of the social order, assessment is a product of its historical development and is constructed through discourse, serving as a means to establish and maintain practices (Curtin *et al.* 2020). They further aver that ‘it is through participation in practice, as people engage in ongoing activity using the tools of their community that understanding happens’ (Curtin *et al.*, 2020).

Consequently, within the context of JC assessment, the brief exploration of its historical development and the discourse surrounding it undertaken in the introductory chapter becomes pivotal, as it unveils the intricate connections between assessment practices, social structures, and the tools employed in the educational community. The review highlights the connection between assessment practices and educational culture, demonstrating how shifts from high-stakes examinations to more formative, school-based assessments influence both teaching methodologies and student engagement. It accentuates the social dimension of assessment, where teacher collaboration, student voice and evolving pedagogical strategies reflect broader societal expectations regarding educational achievement and equity. Additionally, the reforms

illustrate how institutional structures and policy shape classroom practices, balancing traditional summative evaluations with progressive assessment models that aim to foster deeper learning and skill development. Understanding these elements is essential for comprehending how assessment functions as a dynamic component within the broader socio-educational framework of JC.

Thus, cultural beliefs, scripts or tools which relate to assessment; what it is and what it's for, and what the ontological and epistemological principles which frame them are 'conserved, elaborated and passed on to succeeding generations who maintain the culture's identity and way of life' (Bruner, 1996, p. 3). Cultural scripts (embedded beliefs, norms and expectations) and tools (language, artefacts and resources) serve as the channels through which our students act and ascribe meaning to assessment practices and experiences (Elwood and Murphy, 2015). These scripts, which are anchored in commonly accepted beliefs about learning and assessment, can shape how people perceive the world and how things should be within the realm of education (Curtin *et al.* 2020). Within the context of school assessment practices, students engage with and interpret diverse meanings, thereby forming their unique and personal lived experience of assessment, a concept which will be explored more deeply in the next section of this chapter as it contributes to the understanding of how students participating in this research study navigate their assessment journeys.

2.1.4 Assessment as Sociocultural Practice through a Rogoffian lens

If students form their own unique and personal lived experience of assessment, we can conclude that the practice of undertaking assessments can construct 'particular kinds of people

or identities’ (Curtin *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). The work of Barbara Rogoff (1995) examines how social order crystallises through practice, a valuable theoretical model which comprehensively captures the intricacies of human learning in a manner which connects deeply with this study on mapping students’ assessment experiences. Despite being decades old, Rogoff’s (1995) research holds relevance and significance for this research. Her framework captures the ever-changing dynamics of individuals’ contributions and interactions within their immediate social context, as well as their interactions with their peers and the broader cultural and institutional environment in which they are involved. She outlines three distinct planes of analysis: (i) the personal, (ii) inter-personal and (iii) institutional. The strength of her framework lies in its ability to illuminate each plane whilst also integrating the planes and acknowledging their interconnected nature [Figure 2.4].

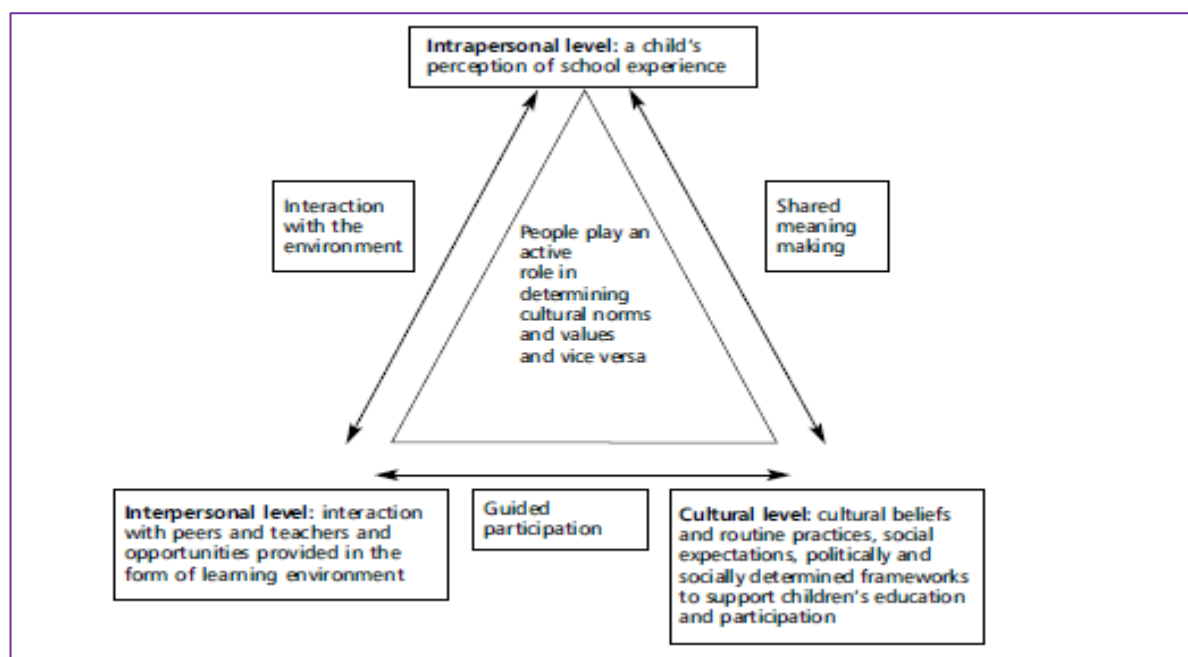


Figure 2.4 – Insights into children’s participation using Rogoff’s three planes of analysis (Maguire and Kanyal, 2012)

As a sociocultural framework, the Rogoffian planes support the lens through which this research is anchored. The personal plane for example, places the learners' experiences at the forefront centring on the concepts of appropriation and identity transformation, highlighting how learners internalise and make the curriculum their own, leading to personal growth and self-identity development. The inter-personal plane emphasises guided participation, allowing for the emergence of multiple meanings through negotiation, contestation and sharing of perspectives. It delves into the examination of the sources behind these diverse meanings as individuals interact and engage in curriculum-related activities. Finally, on the social/institutional plane, the framework addresses the expression, circulation and institutionalisation of idealised competencies, understandings, procedures and attitudes. This level represents the broader societal context where norms and practices are established and reinforced. Rogoff's (1995) framework is integral to understanding the concept of the intricate connections between the students who participated in this study, their interactions and the broader contexts within which they learn and participate.

Rogoff's extensive research on the sociocultural dimensions of learning (1990, 1995, 1998, 2003, and 2007) has profoundly influenced educational practices, yet its application within the realm of assessment remains underutilised. While her work has been instrumental in reshaping educational paradigms, there is a notable paucity of research applying Rogoff's frameworks specifically to student assessment practices with the exception of Flear (2002) and Fottland and Matre (2005). This gap presents a valuable opportunity to explore and harness the theoretical potential of her sociocultural perspectives in developing more holistic and culturally responsive assessment methodologies.

Thus, grounded in the Rogoffian framework and interpreted through a sociocultural lens, it can be argued that if everything is subjective and meaning cannot exist independently of people, then documenting students' assessment journeys becomes crucial, as it provides a dynamic

record of their evolving understanding, experiences, interactions and contextual influences. For the purposes of this research, their journeys were documented from their first experience of assessment in secondary school (the entrance assessment) to the day they received their JC results. Curtin *et al.* (2020, p. 6) remind us that ‘experiences of assessment have an impact far beyond the experience and the moment of assessment itself; these experiences are important, cultural, historical, social and personal moments that shape the identity of the learner from within and without’. Transitioning from this understanding, the subsequent section of the chapter explores the social world of the classroom, examining how the interactions and relationships within this environment further influence and shape learners' educational experiences and perceptions of assessment.

2.1.5 Contextualising Assessment within the Social World of the Classroom

Vygotsky (1978a) challenges the validity of assessments that evaluate students based solely on their individual performance on a specific day. He argues that a more accurate measure of a student's capability is their performance when supported by another, a concept he describes as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978a). He describes it as ‘the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by the independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers’ (Vygotsky, 1978b, p. 86). From a Vygotskian perspective, assessment should not be viewed as an isolated event limited to the outcome of a single examination. Instead, it should be understood as a continuous, interactive process between the student and the teacher. The core principle is that the collaborative effort between the student and the teacher yields the highest attainable performance from the student.

Consequently, assessment should not be regarded as an external or formalised activity, but rather as an integral part of the teaching process, with a significant emphasis on the nature and quality of feedback exchanged between students and their teacher. In the context of JC assessment, Vygotsky's (1978a) perspective underscores the importance of continuous, interactive evaluation processes that prioritise collaborative learning and meaningful feedback over isolated, one-time performance metrics. Vygotsky's perspective is seen in JC through a range of formative assessment practices along the learning continuum from first to third year. Thus, in the social world of the classroom, the learner plays an active role in their own education, emphasising the importance of learning both from and with others, with instruction acting as an intervention in the process of knowledge construction (Gipps, 1999). Nevertheless, Elwood (2006, p. 230) contends that this approach does not represent a significant departure from a cognitive-rationalist perspective, as the underlying conception of the mind remains unchanged-

Thus formative assessments are still really measuring something that is the property of the student even though that property (i.e., their learning) has been co-constructed. Their learning may well take place in the social but it is still very much seen as being located within the student.

In classroom settings, sociocultural approaches fundamentally alter the teacher-student dynamic, viewing both cognitive development and learning as non-local phenomena situated within interpersonal interactions (Elwood, 2006). Within this framework, assessment must be understood as embedded within its social, historical, and cultural context. Elwood and Murphy (2015, p.187) argue that, from a sociocultural perspective, 'concepts are socially determined and acquired, and understanding is achieved through individuals appropriating shared meanings through discussion and negotiation'. This perspective suggests that meanings emerge from interactions, and thus, assessments should account for 'the dialectical

relationships between social order structures and influences, institutional practices, and the social actors' histories of participation in assessment practices' (Elwood and Murphy, 2015, p.188). Consequently, assessment does not measure ability in isolation but rather describes the relationship between the learner, the teacher, and the assessment task (Elwood, 2006). Central to a sociocultural approach is the recognition that assessment practices are inherently non-neutral.

Therefore, assessment practices in sociocultural classrooms should emphasise the importance of collaborative and dialogic interactions between teachers, students and peers. Assessment tasks should also be designed to foster meaningful social interactions, promoting individual cognitive growth and the construction of knowledge through the collective engagement of the learners. In this sense, assessment is not solely concerned with measuring predetermined outcomes but also acts as a catalyst for learning and development within a socio-culturally rich classroom environment which is integral to the concept of the student-centred approach promulgated at JC. The tenet of dialogic interactions directly relates to the aforementioned Vygotskian (1986) concept, ZPD.

The ZPD denotes the variance between a learner's actual developmental level and their potential level when given appropriate guidance and support. Assessment within this theoretical framework embraces the ZPD by identifying and leveraging opportunities for scaffolding learning, whereby teachers provide tailored assistance and feedback to support learners' progress and narrow the gap between their current abilities and their potential [Figure 2.5].

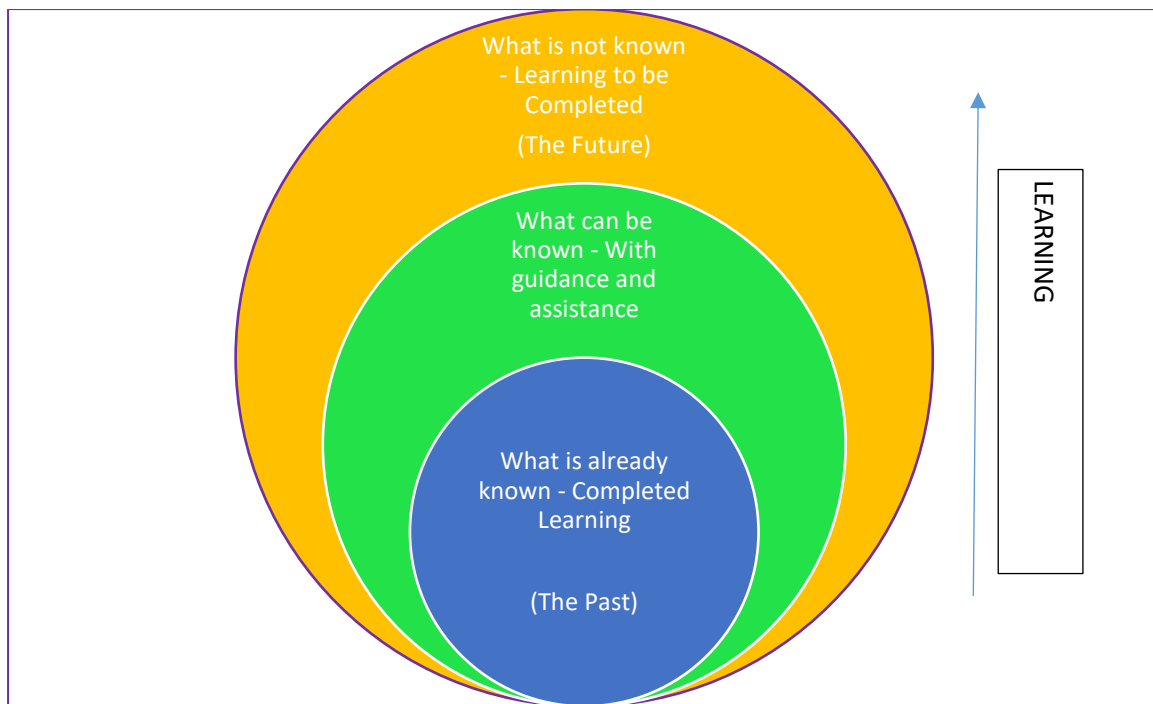


Figure 2.5 – Adapted from Vygotsky's (1986) Zone of Proximal Development

Timely feedback is seen as a critical component of assessment and learning at JC, particularly with respect to CBAs, as it allows students to quickly identify and address areas for improvement, reinforcing learning and promoting academic growth (NCCA, 2015). Additionally, prompt feedback fosters motivation and engagement by providing immediate recognition of students' efforts and guiding their subsequent learning strategies (Black and Wiliam, 2012). These are areas which are worthy of exploration with the cohort of students involved in this study as they are essential in understanding if students are motivated to learn as a consequence of feedback given to them by their teachers.

In summary, the sociocultural theorisation of assessment illuminates the complex relationship between assessment and the sociocultural context in which learning occurs. It underscores the inherently social nature of learning, and the collaborative, interactive and dialogic aspects of assessment, together with the role of cultural tools and the importance of considering the

cultural backgrounds of the learners. By endorsing this theoretical perspective, educators have the capacity to design assessment tasks and procedures that will not only measure students' learning outcomes but will also foster significant social interactions, support learners' development, and promote equitable educational experiences. This connection between theory and practice sets the stage for the next section of this chapter, where the purpose of assessment will be examined through a socio-historical lens.

2.2 Considering the Purpose of Assessment through a Social and Historical Lens

Numerous academics, notably Bennett (2018), Black and Wiliam (1998), Chen (2010), Orlando (2011) and Rogers (1994), have expressed consensus on the concept that assessment is an integral aspect of the learning process. However, they assert that the experience of assessment and learning can exhibit variability among students, contingent on the contextual factors that surround the assessment event. This potential variability will be explored in more detail in Section 3.1 of the second literature review chapter that relates to Affordance Theory (AT), but it is important to address one contextual factor at play at this juncture, which is teachers' views on assessment as it is enveloped by learning and teaching approaches.

Drawing on Rieskamp and Reimer's seminal work in 2007, along with subsequent research by Brown et al. (2011), the tenet is promulgated that teachers' conceptions of assessment are characterised as ecologically rational. This implies that teachers' views on assessment are influenced by the prevailing social and cultural priorities within a specific policy context. The notion of assessment beliefs as ecologically rational constructs finds resonance in Elwood and Murphy's (2015) research where they contend that assessment, as an educational practice, is intricately interwoven with cultural scripts that are part of a broader cultural and social

structure. These cultural beliefs project their influence onto society, shaping teachers' conceptions and approaches to assessment. Elwood and Murphy (2015, p. 184) contend that

these cultural beliefs are embedded in our thinking about learners, learning and assessment and are inscribed in our routines and behaviours as we engage with, and in, assessment activity. As learners and their assessors participate in assessment practices, they produce, reproduce and transform an instance of 'collective life', of society.

Thus, these societal norms are projected onto our students, in turn moulding their perceptions and experiences of assessment, an important facet of this research. This exploration of how societal norms shape students' perceptions and experiences of assessment naturally leads to a deeper analysis of assessment as a vital mechanism for promoting student development and growth.

2.2.1 Assessment - As Apparatus for Student Development and Growth

Murchan and Shiel (2017) contend that assessment does not serve just one role in education but that it proffers information that can be utilised by different stakeholders and for a variety of purposes; but they also aver that assessment plays a central role in shaping the what and the how students learn. Interestingly, Lucas (2021, p.14) avers that 'most assessments fail to capture the degree to which students have progressed over time.' Hattie (2023) recently undertook a meta-analysis of over 2,100 studies, with each reviewing research investigating what influenced student achievement in school. Hattie's (2023) research draws on data elicited from hundreds of thousands of students worldwide to summarise that methodologies associated with formative assessment and feedback are amongst the most influential correlates of achievement in students.

Building on the initial research of Hattie (2009), Chen (2010) espoused the notion that the fundamental objective of assessment should revolve around the continuous provision of constructive feedback to learners within the classroom setting. This feedback, rather than merely assigning a grade of attainment or descriptor, offers a clear trajectory for students to enhance their learning outcomes, aligning to what Hattie and Timperley (2007) label as feed forward and feed-up respectively. Bennett (2018) also contends that assessment serves as a valuable tool that fosters significant learning among students, thereby contributing to their in-depth understanding of specific subject matter.

In the Irish context, CBAs provide opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking, collaboration, and self-reflection, aligning with JC key skills such as managing information, being creative, and communicating effectively (NCCA, 2015). By integrating real-world tasks and formative feedback, CBAs foster metacognitive awareness and independent learning, enabling students to develop transferable skills that support their academic and personal growth beyond the assessment context. This alignment with ‘assessment literacy’ ensures that students not only understand the purpose and criteria of assessments but also actively engage in self-regulation, reflection, and the application of feedback, reinforcing their ability to use assessment as a tool for continuous learning and skill development.

Thus, assessment literacy encompasses the knowledge, skills, and understanding necessary to design, implement, interpret, and utilise assessment practices effectively, thereby enhancing educational outcomes. For teachers, particularly in secondary education, assessment literacy involves selecting appropriate assessment methods, accurately analysing data, and applying findings to inform instructional decisions. Mellati and Khademi (2018) emphasise that teachers’ assessment literacy significantly impacts their assessment practices and, consequently, students’ academic achievements. Similarly, Xu and Brown (2016) highlight

that teachers with high assessment literacy are better equipped to align assessments with learning objectives, thereby improving instructional quality. Furthermore, DeLuca *et al.* (2016) argue that ongoing professional development in assessment literacy is crucial for teachers to adapt to evolving educational standards and diverse student needs.

For students, assessment literacy refers to their ability to understand assessment criteria, self-assess their work, and engage in peer assessment, which fosters self-regulation and enhances learning. Leighton *et al.* (2010) highlight that students' involvement in assessment processes contributes to meaningful learning experiences and the development of critical thinking skills. Moreover, Andrade and Brookhart (2016) note that when students are assessment-literate, they can better understand feedback and set realistic learning goals, leading to improved academic performance. Additionally, Panadero, Brown and Strijbos (2018) found that students' assessment literacy is linked to increased motivation and engagement, as they become active participants in their learning journey.

Assessment, therefore, can be viewed as a systematic and integral component of the learning process that involves gathering and interpreting evidence to make informed judgements about an individual's or a group's knowledge, understanding, skills, behaviours and abilities. It is a complex phenomenon that has evolved beyond the traditional focus on testing and standardisation, incorporating the emotional and experiential dimensions of learning. Rather than merely assigning grades or descriptors, assessment functions as a tool for constructive feedback, enabling learners to continuously improve whilst also accounting for contextual influences such as cultural beliefs, social structures, affordances, and policy frameworks that shape their progress and development. However, assessment used as a tool for measurement, certification and selection, also directly relates to this study, as the students' experience state exams in JC and so this idea will be explored in the following section of the chapter.

2.2.2 Assessment - As Apparatus for Selection, Certification and Measurement

Assessment is also used as a mechanism for selection, certification and measurement. Throughout history, the predominant purpose of assessment has been selection (Broadfoot, 1996; Mauserhagan, 2013; Sutherland, 1996). Positions of status, privilege or authority were typically the preserve of individuals with familial or associative ties to those who wielded influence, dominance and control (Gipps, 1999). However, the requirement for a structured and organised civil service to administer large populaces and sizeable states, colonies and dominions, motivated the initiation of selection examinations (Gipps, 1999). Notably, this practice dates back approximately fourteen hundred years to Imperial China. Such historical context underscores the association of assessment with concepts of power, control and access. Furthermore, entrée to professional realms was rigorously controlled by familial connections, and apprenticeships were commonly bestowed through patronage or lineage rather than solely on the basis of academic competence (Gipps, 1999).

The onset of the Industrial Revolution during the eighteenth century marked a significant turning point in the landscape of assessment. With the emergence of numerous professional and managerial positions, there arose a pressing need for refined assessment techniques to identify suitable candidates. This imperative led to the establishment of formal education systems as a primary mechanism for talent evaluation (Gipps, 1999). In this context, many countries, including Ireland, which was at that time (circa 1870) part of the British Empire, instituted school examinations at the terminus of one's primary school education, with a School Certificate customarily being conferred on the student upon completion (Gipps, 1999). This development illustrates the enduring connection between assessment, access, and control. Education, and achievement in examinations, became pivotal pathways to a brighter future for countless individuals, highlighting the profound socio-economic implications inherent in assessment practices. Nevertheless, this perpetuated the hierarchical power dynamics within

the state as the criteria for assessment continued to be dictated by those in positions of authority (Gipps, 1999; Mauserhagan, 2013; Sutherland, 1996).

Assessment was additionally employed for selection within the educational framework, with the IQ test emerging as a pivotal instrument in this regard (Gipps, 1999; Sutherland, 1996). Originating in early twentieth-century France through Alfred Binet, IQ tests swiftly captivated the attention of education policymakers. Instituting IQ tests played an important role in determining suitability for secondary education with an academic focus in many countries (Gipps, 1999). Moreover, IQ tests were developed to recognise and classify students who required additional educational support due to their ‘subnormal’ intelligence results, facilitating their placement in specialised educational settings (Gipps, 1999). Clearly, assessment exerted a discernible impact on access to education within this context. Success in IQ tests correlated with enhanced opportunities for progression to secondary education, thereby expanding avenues for social and occupational progression (Sutherland, 1996). Contemporary educational systems (Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands) still rely on CAT scores to determine educational pathways for their students (European Commission, 2022).

In modern Ireland, success in state examinations still carries *cachet* in society. The Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) is the dominant qualification for entry to higher education and in most cases few supplementary requirements or other displays of competence are required (Curtin *et al.* 2020). This is also the norm in many other jurisdictions whereby the results of terminal examinations in schools satisfy most, if not all, of the necessary entry requirements for programmes in institutions of higher education (O’Donnell, 2018). The significance of examination results extends beyond individual academic progression, reflecting broader systemic implications. Assessment outcomes therefore are not merely a measure of student performance but serve as critical tools for curriculum control and institutional evaluation. At national level, standardised test scores influence educational policy and can influence resource

allocation, ensuring alignment with prescribed curricular goals. Internationally, these assessments contribute to the comparative analysis of educational systems, impacting national standings and guiding reform. These are areas which will be explored briefly in the following section of this chapter as they are critical components relating to the impetus for JC reform which formed an integral component of this research.

2.2.3 Assessment - As Apparatus for Curriculum Control and Systemic Evaluation

Recent trends indicate a shift towards utilising assessment for the regulation and advancement of curriculum and pedagogy, as well as for evaluating broader educational institutions (Gipps, 1999). The primary impetus driving these developments lies in economic considerations (Eivers, 2010; Resnik, 2006). Throughout the twentieth century, numerous pan-national organisations have emerged, progressively exerting greater influence over educational policy and assessment practices within individual nations (Auld, Xiaomin and Morris, 2020; Lee and Song, 2022; Milana, 2015). Pan-national bodies that play an influential role in educational policy in assessment include the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) – it has a substantial impact through its monitoring and reporting on education, such as the Global Education Monitoring Report shaping educational governance (Milana, 2015). Additionally, the World Bank influences educational policy through its research and funding, affecting educational reforms and assessment practices in various countries (Ansorger, 2021). These organisations’ policies and assessments often set benchmarks and standards that countries aim to meet or exceed, thereby influencing national educational policies and practices (Lee and Song, 2022) deepening the commodification and marketisation of education.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which administers the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), influences educational standards and practices for secondary education globally (Auld, Xiaomin and Morris, 2022). The OECD is recognised as having a prestigious reputation and its publications and data are considered as being both objective and scientific by member states (Eivers, 2010). The implementation of PISA assessments has led to the dissemination of global ranking lists, extensively shared and deliberated.

Broadfoot (1996, p.21, *italics in original*) avers that assessment is arguably

the most powerful tool in education. Not only can it be used to *identify* strengths and weaknesses of individuals, institutions and indeed whole systems of education, it can also be used as a powerful source of *leverage* to bring about change.

Broadfoot's (1996) assertion underscores the significance of assessment in education, highlighting its potential to evaluate individuals, institutions and educational systems, therefore working at individual, local, national and transnational levels. Wiliam (2008), Goldstein (2004) and Eivers (2010) proffer appraisals concerning the simplistic, one-dimensional response scaling of the PISA tests. Goldstein (2004, p. 328) emphasises that 'the reality of comparing countries is a complex multidimensional issue, well beyond the somewhat ineffectual attempt by PISA to produce subscales'. Goldstein (2004) pushes for the assimilation of social, cultural and ethnic specificity in assessment question development and the application of a representative arithmetical model. The importance of PISA can be investigated as a deeply persuasive and powerful discourse in the contemporary field of educational assessment. Transnational entities such as the OECD and the European Union (EU) are increasingly assuming pivotal roles in shaping the policymaking processes of individual countries through comparative testing discourses. There is, as Curtin *et al.* (2020, p. 131) assert 'a focus nationally and internationally on quality and standards which is reflected

in for example previously mentioned standardised assessments for students in many countries in way which tie to an agendum of monitoring and accountability’.

In examining the evolution and intensification of ‘accountability’ in education in Ireland, Conway and Murphy (2013) identify a confluence of factors they describe as a ‘perfect storm’: the PISA 2009 findings, the economic bailout, and a change of government. Historically, teachers have operated within a framework of accountability, yet the parameters by which this accountability is assessed have undergone significant transformation over the past decade. Ireland participates in numerous international assessment fora, such as PISA and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). However, when international performance metrics revealed subpar outcomes, such as happened with PISA in 2009, the then Department of Education and Skills implemented new curricular strategies and targets aimed at enhancing student literacy and numeracy. This shift heralded a new narrative of accountability focused on elevating educational quality and effectiveness.

The notion of professional responsibility for teachers has shifted from being predominantly autonomous to being embedded within policy directives. O’Donnell (2014) highlights the potential issues arising when teaching quality is equated with high performance on standardised assessments. Teaching is inherently complex, encompassing dynamic, contextual, and multifaceted dimensions. O’Donnell (2014, p. 13) further asserts that ‘set against a background of economic instability and market uncertainty, the approach nationally and internationally has been to prescribe standard-based reforms, externally imposed accountability and performativity measures on schools.’ To fully understand the implications of these changes, it is crucial to examine the concept of assessment itself, through a contemporary lens, exploring its definitions, purposes, and the various forms it can take within the educational landscape. This will be undertaken in the next section of this chapter.

2.3 Defining Assessment: The Definition and Purpose of Assessment for this Study

Building on the concept of SCT and its relevance to assessment, alongside Barbara Rogoff's (1995) perspective of assessment as a sociocultural practice, this chapter has thus far proffered an understanding of assessment as a complex and multifaceted process. It is not merely a means of evaluating academic achievement but also a dynamic entity that both influences and is influenced by social, historical, political, and cultural forces within the educational context. This exploration provides a solid foundation for defining assessment as a tool that is both reflective and instrumental in fostering educational development.

It is universally acknowledged that the artefacts which anchor educational systems rest upon three fundamental components: curriculum, instruction and assessment. Chen (2010, p. 77) aptly likens them to 'the three legs of the classroom stool'. Notably, he emphasises the importance of ensuring equal strength and support in each leg to achieve optimal equilibrium and functionality. Traditionally, educators and academics have primarily focused on questions surrounding pedagogy and methodology, relegating appraisal to a lesser concern. Consequently, the assessment aspect is referred to by Orlando (2011, p.70) as the 'weakest of the three, the least understood and the least effectively implemented'. However, the publication of the seminal work of Bloom, Hastings and Madaus (1971) entitled *Formative and Summative Evaluation of Student Learning* did reignite interest in assessment. The research advocated that education's primary purpose was the development of the individual, emphasising that assessment and evaluation were integral to the learning process, with classroom teachers playing a prominent role in enhancing and extending student learning. In the years that followed, esteemed researchers and educationalists such as Ball (2003), Black et al. (2004), Black and Wiliam (1998), Crooks (2011), Earl (2003, 2013), and Medland (2016) further explored the concept that assessment serves as a crucial educational tool supporting

student learning. Building upon these perspectives, contemporary research, such as that promulgated by Lucas (2021, p.4), promotes the view that the words we use in relation to assessment ‘come freighted with semantic and educational baggage.’

I have chosen to construct a word cloud [Figure 2.6] using the words Lucas (2021) has attached to assessment, with, as Lucas (2021) explicates, each word contributing to the description of the envisioned learning domain, the assessment methodology, the viewpoint guiding the assessment, or the credibility of the approach under consideration. The compilation of the word cloud serves as a foundational framework to understand the discourse surrounding assessment in educational contexts.

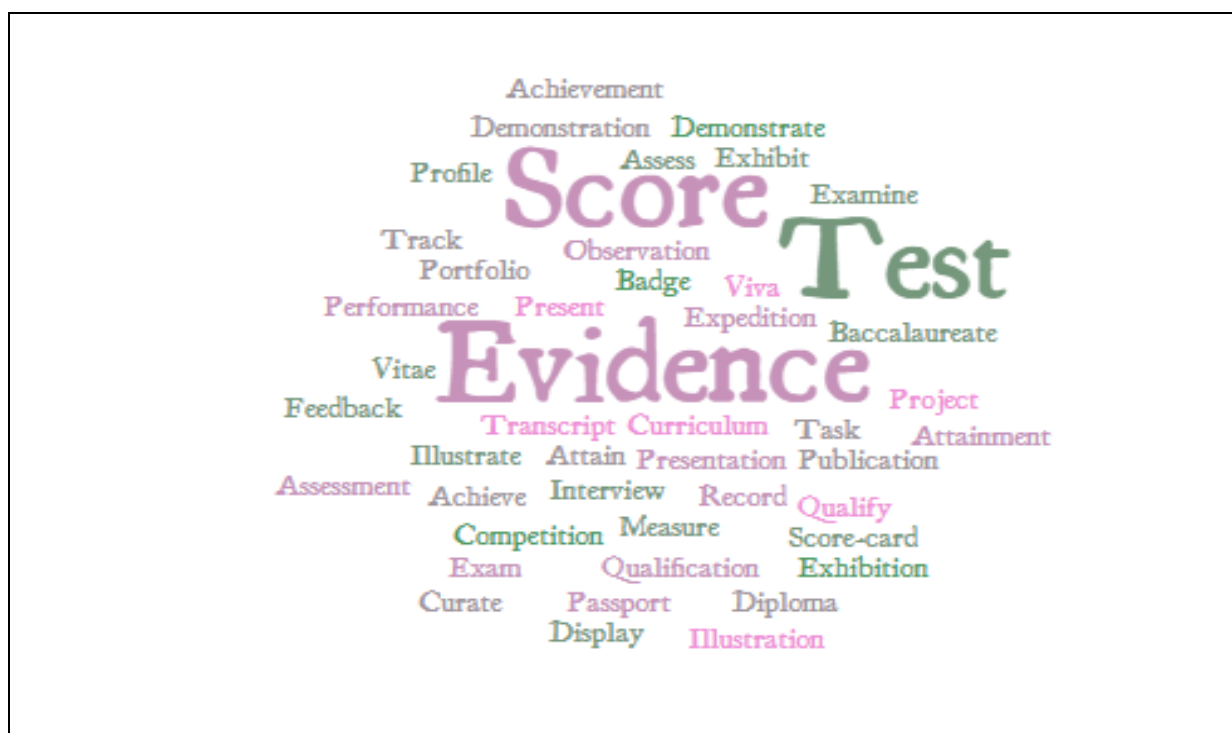


Figure 2.6 – Word Cloud formulated using the work of Lucas (2021)

The conventional notion of assessment is commonly linked to the concepts of testing, standardisation, and accountability, typically resulting in a final numerical grade or descriptor as is illuminated by the word cloud above where the words score, test and evidence are highlighted. Lucas (2021) posits that those involved in educational assessment have lost their

way over recent decades. He avers that what we evaluate has increasingly strayed from our aspirations for the knowledge, skills, identities, and potentials we desire young people to acquire in today's complex and dynamic world. Lucas (2021) contends that most assessment systems prioritise summarisation over comprehension, recall over application, and identifying shortcomings over appreciating strengths. He notes that 'we seem happier using numbers rather than narratives, keener on judging rather than prompting improvement' (Lucas, 2021 p. 19). The landscape of assessment, particularly in Ireland, has undergone substantial transformation due to educational reforms, rendering it notably intricate, subtle, and often subject to dispute. It can also be fraught with emotion, as elucidated by Rogers (1994), when he espouses that students engage in the learning process, including assessment, with the totality of their being, encompassing emotions and experiences.

Consequently, crafting a comprehensive definition of assessment that facilitates a complete contextualised understanding of this multi-faceted phenomenon presents considerable challenges. In 2007, the NCCA (2007, p. 7) defined assessment as 'the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using and reporting a child's progress and achievement in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes'. By 2024, that definition had evolved (NCCA, 2024a, p.1) to

the process of generating, gathering, recording, interpreting, using and reporting evidence of learning in individuals, groups or systems. Educational assessment provides information about progress in learning, and achievement in developing skills, knowledge, behaviours and attitudes.

In the 2007 definition, assessment is viewed through a lens with an individual focus where the language used is more individual-centric, highlighting the assessment of a child's progress and development. However, the 2024 definition has broadened its scope to include the assessment of learning in individuals, groups or systems. The language in the current definition is more holistic, encompassing not only knowledge, skills and attitudes but also considers behaviours

aligning with a more sociocultural approach where social and cultural contexts are being considered both implicitly and explicitly. Both definitions refer to the concept of student progress and development, thereby including the purpose of assessment.

Building on these evolving perspectives, it is my view that the definition and purpose of assessment are intricately intertwined, forming a cohesive and symbiotic relationship that underpins the efficacy of educational evaluations. Assessment, in its essence, refers to the systematic process of gathering and interpreting evidence to make informed judgements about an individual's or a group's knowledge, understanding, skills, behaviours and abilities. This definition, while highlighting the core nature of assessment, inherently incorporates its fundamental purpose – to provide valuable insights into the learner's progress, identify areas of strength and for development, and inform instructional practices.

Therefore, I would argue that the definition and purpose of assessment form an inseparable bond, as the articulation of its meaning facilitates the achievement of its objectives, fostering a dynamic educational environment centred on continuous improvement and individualised support. To further understand the complex role of assessment for the purposes of this research, it is essential to decode assessment cultures and explore the figured world of JC assessment, examining how these practices shape and are shaped by broader educational and societal contexts.

2.4 Decoding Assessment Cultures: Exploring Figured Worlds

Holland *et al.* (1998, p. 52) define a figured world as ‘a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others’ and that agency

develops within the practices of this world. In addition, Biesta, Priestly and Robinson (2017) aver that learner agency transpires through relationships between people and the social contexts in which they operate and is always exercised. The figured world of assessment for today's students is anchored in a space which both constructs, deconstructs and incorporates unremitting meaning and worth for each person involved in the system (Curtin *et al.* 2020).

In the context of mapping JC assessment experiences over time, it implies that examining how assessment unfolds within the situated context for this cohort of students can provide valuable insights into how students' identities are shaped through their unique assessment experiences. By considering social situatedness or figured worlds of assessment, this study can better comprehend the factors, such as the social construction of assessment environments or the cultural influence on these students' figured world of assessment, which influence students throughout their JC assessment journey. While learner identity and agency will be considered in the next chapter of this thesis, the following section of this chapter is concerned with the social construction of assessment environments (such as the JC classroom) and the cultural influences on the figured worlds of assessment.

2.4.1 Social Construction of Assessment Environments such as Junior Cycle

Reay and Wiliam (1999) assert that children are both actively engaged in the assessment process and are profoundly impacted by it. Curtin *et al.* (2020, p. 6) also noted that what was unearthed 'as the research progressed was that assessment and assessment moments had a permeating influence on their experiences and thoughts about learning'. This assertion strongly resonates with my own views regarding the practice and bearing of assessment on our students. They are deeply immersed in the daily routines, procedures, and systems of assessment within

our educational institutions, thus rendering it essential to listen to their perceptions on how these processes may affect them. Teachers, in the role as facilitators of learning and assessment, should strive to understand, contextualise, and decipher the diverse perspectives of their students. By doing so, they can gain valuable insights into how young minds experience, perceive, navigate and interpret the world around them. This understanding will ultimately lead to a more comprehensive appreciation of the unique figured worlds that shape the experiences of these young learners, who, according to Curtin *et al.* (2020, p. 67), ‘have so much of their externally interpreted identity bound up in school performance and perceptions of success and achievement’.

Assessment environments are socially constructed through various factors, including the purpose of the assessment, the context within which the assessment occurs, the tasks involved within the assessment process, the feedback processes and the social interactions that occur between students and between students and their teachers. These factors are part of a learning-centred approach to assessment design which does not prioritise any single aspect but does consider the impact on learners and on the academic content (Bearman *et al.*, 2016). The social situatedness of assessment is emphasised, particularly the importance of aligning student and teacher understandings of quality assessment responses (O’Donovan, 2018). However, the classroom assessment environment, as perceived by students, is influenced by the nature of assessment tasks and the environment in which they are undertaken, affecting student engagement and learning (Cheng, Wu and Liu, 2015). Moreover, group-based assessments, such as some classroom-based assessments at JC, are designed to facilitate social learning through engagement and collaboration, a mechanism critical for cognitive development and knowledge acquisition (Tumpa *et al.*, 2022). Assessment environments, therefore, are constructed via assessment design considerations, the perceptions and beliefs of educators and students, and the social contexts in which assessment takes place.

The social construction of assessment environments is influenced by cultural factors through a variety of instruments – teachers’ conceptions of assessment are shaped by their cultural and educational backgrounds, which in turn affect their assessment practices and beliefs (Muianga, 2023). The cultural context can also influence teachers’ perceptions of assessment literacy, impacting how they integrate assessment into their teaching (Kvasova, 2022). SCT emphasises the role of culture and language in shaping how students view, learn and communicate their understanding of subjects, which according to Lyon (2013), affects how teachers assess students. Furthermore, the sociocultural understanding of teaching and assessment suggests that learning is deeply embedded in cultural practices, and assessment is seen as a method of ‘generative dancing’ (Dayal, 2021, p.3), where learners draw on explicit and implicit forms of knowing from their sociocultural settings.

Expounding on these perspectives, what is clear is the significant influence of cultural factors on the social construction of assessment environments, and students’ conceptions, practices, and beliefs regarding assessment, which aligns with this study as it underscores the importance of considering the cultural context in which assessments occur. Understanding how cultural backgrounds shape students’ perceptions of assessment and their assessment experiences can provide valuable insights into the experiences of students within assessment environments. These cultural influences on students’ figured worlds of assessment will be explored in the final section of this chapter.

2.4.2 Cultural Influences on the Figured World of Assessment for Junior Cycle students

As students immerse themselves in various assessment processes, they embrace a sense of agency in the present, as they endeavour to unleash their understanding, skills and knowledge,

perhaps through purposeful answering or personal response. What is critical to understand however, is that their present assessment experience may not necessarily be detached from their past experiences, whether those experiences have been positive, negative, affirming or challenging. Students will invariably draw on their accumulated experience and repertoire, honed through habitual practice and exploration and this will be discussed in more detail in the third findings chapter of this research thesis. Sheridan, Zhang and Konopasky (2020), while discussing the work of art students, assert that in this intricate connection between the present and the past, students skilfully navigate the process, synthesising their past learnings and experiences, strategically incorporating relevant elements into their present work, thus showcasing their growth and development. The afforded cultural contexts within which these figured worlds exist is a central tenet of sociocultural theory and will be explored briefly in this section of the chapter while the concepts of identity and agency will be explored in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Students' perceptions of assessment tasks and the classroom assessment environment are influenced by the test-driven culture as outlined in the introductory chapter of this study; this culture invariably affects their learning experiences and academic self-efficacy beliefs (Cheng, Wu and Liu, 2015). This line of thinking resonates with my research focus on understanding how disparate assessment practices influence students' perceptions and attitudes towards learning and their own abilities along their assessment journey at JC. The social construction of assessment environments is linked to cultural influences through the shaping of students' experiences, perceptions, beliefs and practices in assessment, which are embedded in the broader sociocultural context of education (Jönsson, 2022). This is central to understanding the perceptions and experiences of assessment as illuminated by the students participating in this study.

Performance-based assessment, which emphasise the active participation of learners and the application of knowledge and skills in authentic tasks, is also influenced by cultural factors that affect students' academic motivation and engagement with assessment tasks (Heydarnejad *et al.*, 2022). Performance-based assessment resonates with the focus of this research in exploring assessment practices which push beyond traditional testing formats within JC such as CBAs.

2.5 Conclusion

This literature chapter has explored the origins and concepts of sociocultural theory, laying a foundation for understanding its application in educational theory and assessment. By considering the sociocultural theorisation of assessment and examining it through a Rogoffian lens, it has been possible to contextualise assessment within the dynamic and social environment of the classroom. Furthermore, the chapter has considered the various purposes of assessment from a sociocultural and historical perspective, highlighting its roles in learning, teaching, student development and growth, as well as its function in selection, certification, and measurement. The review has also illuminated how assessment serves as a mechanism for curriculum control, for seriation and selection, and for systemic evaluation. Finally, this chapter has examined assessment within the figured world of educational contexts, revealing the cultural influences that shape assessment practices. These insights collectively inform our understanding of the complex relationship between the aforementioned sociocultural factors and assessment, setting the stage for further analysis and discussion in the subsequent literature review chapter of this dissertation.

The theoretical framework of AT will be explored together with the role of assessment in identity construction at JC and the role of agency in assessment in the next literature review

chapter. The importance of student voice in educational research will be explored along with the challenges and opportunities in amplifying student voice. Students' experiences of assessment will also be considered with a particular emphasis on JC. As this research unravels the lived realities of students navigating their assessment journeys at JC level, it will further highlight the tenet that assessments are not merely evaluative tools, but intricate socio-pedagogical phenomena deeply intertwined with students' identities, aspirations, and learning trajectories.

Chapter Three - Literature Review

Empowering Voices: Navigating Student Identity and Agency through Experiences of Assessment at Junior Cycle

3.0 Introduction

As outlined in the previous literature review chapter, assessment is an indispensable facet of the educational landscape, it transcends the mere technocratic and rationalist domain of evaluation; it acts as a dynamic process that shapes and is shaped by the sociocultural environment within which it unfolds. This chapter explores the concept of student voice and students' experiences of assessment. It does so by casting a critical gaze upon the theoretical framework of Affordance Theory (AT) and how it connects to a sociocultural view of assessment and the principal sociocultural constructs of identity and agency.

In order to unpack these intricacies, this chapter explores AT, a lens borrowed from ecological psychology, which is brought into focus to illuminate the dynamic interactions between individuals, tools, and the sociocultural environment in the context of assessment. The chapter does not confine its exploration solely to theoretical perspectives but broadens its scope to encompass the lived experiences of students reported by empirical research. In doing so, it contemplates the agency and identity of students subsumed within the assessment process, acknowledging their roles as active participants in the construction of knowledge.

This chapter offers a journey through the intricacies of assessment, weaving together various theoretical threads to provide a nuanced understanding of how assessment unfolds as a sociocultural practice for second level students, its implications for their identities and agency, and the evolving dynamics of navigating such an assessment journey contextualised by a globalised and commodified educational milieu.

Section 3.1 of this chapter considers how AT might be applied in educational assessment settings. This is possible by highlighting how the design of assessment tasks and unique assessment environments within which they take place, provides various opportunities and constraints for student interaction and learning. This theoretical framework helps to understand how students perceive and utilise these affordances to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, shaping their overall educational experiences and outcomes. By examining how students engage with these affordances, it is possible to reveal how assessment practices also shape and reflect students' identities and sense of agency, themes which are relevant to this study and explored in Section 3.2 of this chapter.

The following section, Section 3.3, examines the concept of students as policy actors subsumed by the processes of assessment, with Section 3.4 reflecting on the literature pertaining to the inclusion of student voice in educational research, whilst acknowledging the challenges and opportunities that exist in doing so. The final section, Section 3.5, explores students' experiences of Junior Cycle assessment based on contemporary empirical studies (McGarr *et al.*, 2022, 2023).

3.1 Affordance Theory

AT, a pillar of ecological psychology, also known as Gibsonian psychology, was developed by psychologist James J. Gibson in the 1970s. The theory proffers a framework to support an understanding of how humans perceive and interact with their environment to self-organise their behaviour towards a desired outcome. The central tenet of AT is that the environment offers opportunities for action to individuals based on their capabilities and on the properties

of their situated environment (Gibson, 1986). Gibson (1986, p.127) describes an environment as what it

offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, but the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.

Hammond (2010, p. 1) avers that ‘an affordance then, is a relation between an organism and an object with the object perceived in relation to the needs of the organism’. He uses the analogy of a tree to illuminate the concept further – a tree may afford shelter from the rain, be a place of refuge from a hunter or be a source of sustenance in providing food or fuel. According to Hammond (2010), while the properties of the tree remain invariant, the opportunities the tree provides vary according to the needs of those interacting with it. Thus, the modest tree may afford disparate things at the same time to different organisms. The quintessence of an affordance, Hammond (2010, p. 2) posits, is that it ‘points both ways’ to the object and the organism.

Building on this theoretical concept, it can be said that affordances are the range of potential actions that an environment or object enables or ‘affords’ an individual to undertake to achieve its desired outcome. Affordances, according to Osiurak, Rossetti and Badets (2017, p. 405), can be both objective and subjective; ‘they are objective because they exist independently of the act of perception, but they are also subjective because the frame of reference is the individual’s action capabilities’.

Hammond (2010) contends that Gibson’s essential and distinguishing contribution is that AT provides a conceptual framework through which the world may be viewed; encapsulating an environment which is laden with meaning, offering boundless opportunities for action.

However, Hammond (2010, p. 2) further avers that there are also abundant constraints on actions within this environment while concluding that ‘the world is full of potential, not of things’. Gibson’s (1986) AT suggests that the environment proffers opportunities for action (affordances) that are perceived by individuals based on their capabilities and on their goals. In the context of education, and particularly considering assessment policies and practices as social and cultural affordances in education (Vyas, Chisalita and van der Veer, 2006), this theoretical framework could help to explain how JC assessment is experienced by students, for example to allow them to demonstrate their abilities in ways that are meaningful and relevant to their learning experiences. This could be curated through project-based or technology-enhanced learning - such as digital portfolios - which provide affordances to students in allowing them to demonstrate their understanding of the content taught in more authentic and engaging ways (Bower, 2008; Osborne, Dunne and Farrand, 2013; Whitelock and Cross, 2011) as opposed to traditional tests.

As discussed in the previous chapter, from a sociocultural perspective, assessment is not only about measuring individual knowledge or skills but also considers the cultural, social and environmental contexts in which learning and performance occur (Bruner, 1996; Curtin *et al.*, 2020; Elwood and Murphy, 2015; Lave, 1993; Rogoff, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978b). For the purposes of this research, I argue that AT aligns with this view by emphasising that an individual’s actions, experiences and perceptions are shaped by the specific environmental contexts within which they are situated, be it the subject specific classroom, the school context, or indeed the objective educational stage, here framed by the *Junior Cycle Framework* (NCCA, 2015). While AT focuses on how the properties of an object or environment enable or constrain certain actions or behaviours, it does not explicitly explain social or cultural factors such as education, or more particularly, assessment. Hence, it is clear that the affordances *perceived* by an individual can certainly be influenced by their sociocultural background and experiences.

In the next section of this chapter, consideration will be given to the application of AT in educational settings and how this links with sociocultural theorisation of assessment from the previous chapter.

3.1.1 Application of Affordance Theory in Educational Settings

In sociocultural theories of learning, such as Vygotsky's (1978b) Social Development Theory, learning is seen as a social and situated process. He avers that learning and assessment are embedded within specific contexts, and knowledge is co-constructed through dialogical interactions between others and with the environment. Vygotsky (1978b) coined the term Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and as outlined in the previous literature review chapter, the ZPD is a key concept in sociocultural theory, referring to the range of tasks that an individual can perform with the help of a more knowledgeable person, such as a teacher or a peer. Assessment as a social-constructivist practice should, therefore, take into account the learner's potential abilities with appropriate support and guidance. AT reinforces this idea by suggesting that learning and action are intimately tied to the possibilities and opportunities provided by the learner's environment (Gibson, 1986), thus highlighting the importance of considering the interaction between the assessment tool and the student, rather than treating the assessment as a standalone instrument.

A sociocultural perspective encourages the use of assessments that adapt to the learner's needs, cultural background, and prior experiences (Lucas, 2021). AT supports this principle by stressing that individuals perceive and interact with the environment based on their unique capabilities. Assessments designed with consideration of affordances can be better aligned with individual learners' abilities and needs – hence, assessment design cannot be perfected

until we engage with our students and allow them to voice what they perceive their affordances to be given their particular circumstances. For example, a student with a language barrier, as a result of a specific learning difficulty or because they are not native to the referenced cultural language, will interact with the proposed assessment with that particular challenge as a constraint. Sociocultural perspectives often advocate for performance-based assessments that evaluate real-world skills and abilities within authentic contexts (Scoular *et al*, 2020). AT supports this approach by emphasising that the environment directly influences an individual's actions (Gibson, 1986) thus highlighting the necessity of designing assessments that are not only practical and relevant, but also deeply connected to the environments in which students will apply their knowledge and skills.

Through a sociocultural lens, the focus is on promoting learning transfer which is the ability to apply knowledge and skills from one context to another (Wenger, 1998), a tenet endorsed by Curtin *et al.* (2020, p. 11) when they assert that

for many young people successful participation in assessment practice requires the crossing of boundaries within practices. We also believe that assessment as a setting and a practice in its own right challenges young people to take up positions in and cross over a number of boundaries in their practice of assessment to develop competencies in value-laden (assessment) enterprises.

I believe that AT underscores the significance of *context* in learning and action, and understanding affordances in different settings can enhance learning transfer by helping individuals recognise how their capabilities apply in various assessment settings. AT and a sociocultural view of assessment both emphasise the importance of understanding the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments. By considering the affordances present in a given context, educators and other stakeholders can design more effective and contextually relevant assessments that support meaningful learning experiences. This may in turn foster a culture of improvement and understanding, developing practical skills and

knowledge, something that the Gordon Commission (2013, p. 7) concurs with when they stated that ‘assessments must fully represent the competencies that the increasingly complex and changing world demands. The best assessments can accelerate the acquisition of these competencies if they guide the actions of teachers and enable students to gauge their progress’.

In summary, AT posits that the environment offers various opportunities for action and interaction, which individuals perceive and act upon based on their unique experiences and sociocultural contexts. In the milieu of education, I would argue that this theory suggests that assessments should be designed to afford students the chance to demonstrate their understanding, knowledge and skills in ways that resonate with their diverse backgrounds and abilities. By also viewing assessment through a sociocultural lens, educators recognise the influence of cultural and social factors on learning, making assessment practices more inclusive and equitable (Curtin *et al.*, 2020; Hopkins and Cameron, 2018; Lucas, 2021).

In the following section of this chapter, an exploration of the sociocultural dynamics of identity and agency will be undertaken to support the understanding of the lived assessment experiences and perceptions of secondary school students as they navigate their pathway of study.

3.2 Sociocultural Dynamics of Identity and Agency

Assessment experiences are integral to student identity construction as they provide a platform for student centred knowledge construction, which can be contextualised based on students’ needs, interests and goals (Eddy and Lawrence, 2012). Students’ perceptions of assessment are influenced by their learning environment (Jönsson, 2022) and the diversity of disciplinary approaches to assessment can challenge students, affecting their confidence and sense of

belonging - important components of their academic identity (O'Donovan, 2018). These contemporary perspectives emphasise the significance of assessment experiences as affordances in the construction of student identity. AT helps to illuminate how assessments serve as a mechanism for students to actively construct knowledge that aligns with their individual needs, interests, and aspirations.

Other academics, notably Wenger (1998) and Sfard and Prusak (2005), have explored the connections between learning and identity. Wenger (1998) suggests that learning and identity are closely intertwined, as learning has the power to transform our identity by shaping who we are and how we engage in communities of practice. Furthermore, learning is viewed as an experience of identity, as it involves becoming a member, or not, of a community of practice. Sfard and Prusak (2005) propose that identity consists of narratives or stories about a person, which shape their actions and constitute their identity. These narratives are not solely individual creations but are collectively shaped through contextual affordances, and interactions between people and social communities and their practices, which include assessment. However, Gardee and Brodie (2021) aver that the focus on social construction can limit our understanding of individual agency and the production of self in relation to identity. According to the authors, to ensure that a deeper understanding of how identity is formed, one must consider both its individual and social aspects.

Agency pertains to instilling in students a sense of responsibility for their own learning journey (Istance, 2015). From an AT or ecological perspective, student agency represents a dynamic process of social involvement that connects past experiences, looks towards future actions, and manifests in the present moment of decision-making (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2017). Student agency in education refers to the capacity of students to act purposefully and constructively to direct their learning. It encompasses individual resources such as interest, motivation, self-efficacy, competence beliefs, and participation activity, all of which are crucial

for students to engage intentionally in their learning processes (Jääskelä *et al.*, 2017). Agency is not merely an innate attribute but is enacted through interactions with the learning environment, (including affordances), and involves both individual and socio-cultural, interactional, and contextual aspects (Vähäsantanen, 2020). Agency is also seen as a way of coping with uncertainty and plays a key role in lifelong learning (Jääskelä *et al.*, 2017). The concepts of identity and agency will be explored in more detail in the following sections of this chapter.

3.2.1 The Role of Assessment in Identity Construction

The work of Marks and O'mahony (2014) espouses the argument that personal identity is constructed from the reflective self, driven by the individual's interests and actions. They aver that social identities are the navigated position between personal identities and how individuals perceive themselves in social settings. Personal identities inform learners' development of social identities affecting how they position themselves and how they hope to be perceived as members of their classroom communities (Marks and O'mahony, 2014).

Understanding the realisation of agentic identity hinges on the mediational methods learners adopt and implement, as well as the practices through which they employ them. Hall (2008) emphasises that these mediational means are developed from our interactions and engagements with others and, consequently, can be repeatedly shared and disseminated. The same argument can be made with respect to affordances. These meaning-making systems that influence our behaviour operate within what Holland *et al.* (1998) calls 'figured worlds' – domains that individuals enter and within which they develop and transform due to social interactions.

However, not every figured world is accessible to every individual, as noted by Holland *et al.* (1998); entry to some is proscribed, while others may be unintentionally overlooked. Learners may find themselves empowered by the affordances but confined by the limitations of the figured worlds accessible to them and the constraints of their fleeting contacts, interfaces and communications. McDermott (2001) argues that learners strive to establish an identity within their established community of practice. In reality, however, their self, character, or position within the group is collectively navigated and negotiated as a result of the cultural tools available to them. Therefore, individuals engage and learn fully within specific figured worlds to which they have access and are afforded, developing their own sense of social positioning amidst occasional challenges. This sense of agency will be explored in more detail in the following section of this chapter.

3.2.2 The Role of Agency in Assessment

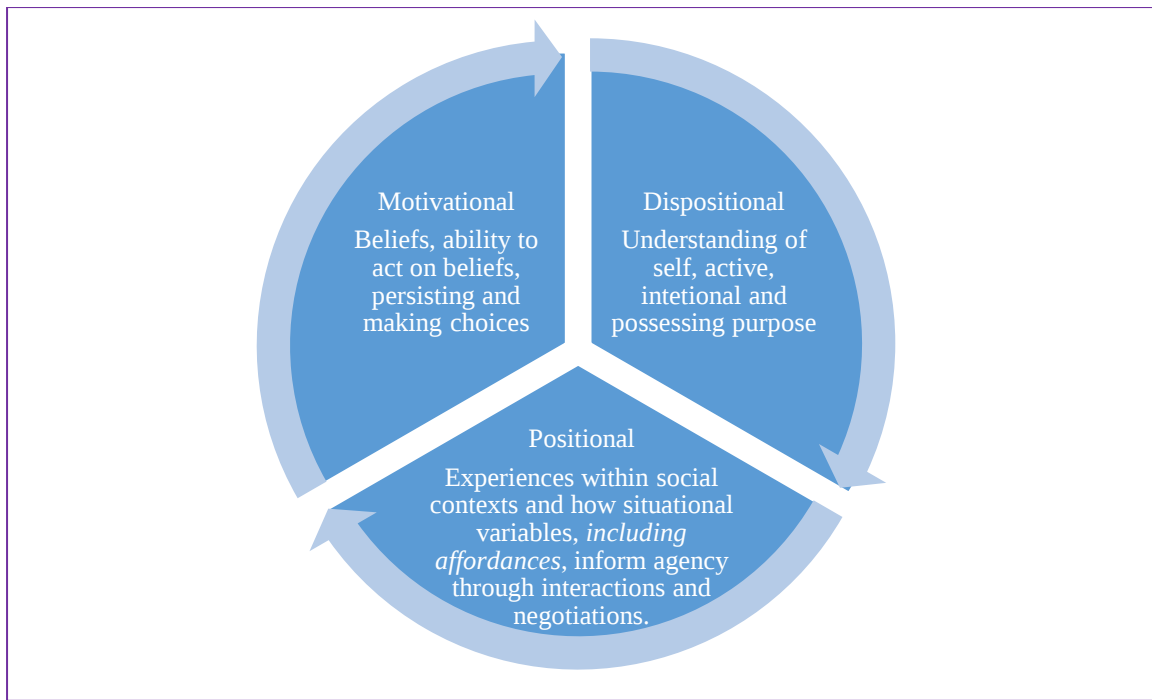
The concept of human agency has been explored extensively, emphasising various dimensions such as individual choice, deliberation, and self-efficacy. Dewey's (1922) view underscores the intrinsic nature of decision-making as fundamental to human essence, contrasting with deterministic approaches, while Vygotsky (1978b) emphasises the role of social interaction and tools in exercising agency. Moreover, perspectives from Bandura (1986; 2001) highlight self-efficacy, the contestation of societal norms, motivational aspects, identity construction, and the significance of dialogue and language in nurturing agency.

Building on those theoretical concepts, Gardee and Brodie (2021) assert that learners have the agency to construct their identities differently from what is offered to them and this agency involves learners making choices in how they participate, influenced by their social contexts.

In a similar vein, Vaughn (2019, p.4) emphasises the ‘positionality of individuals in that individuals negotiate and interact within complex social contexts’. I would contend that they are also shaped by the affordances available to them in their contextual, situated learning environment.

Gardee and Brodie (2021) further posit that learner agency emerges from the interaction between individuals and their social environments and is continuously exercised. As learners exercise agency, they learn more about themselves, reconstructing and reinforcing their personal identities, and they assess the significance of their membership in their classroom communities, shaping their social identities (Gardee and Brodie, 2021). As students’ assessment journeys progress along a learning continuum, it is certainly possible for their identity to change as it is influenced by their personal and social circumstances, highlighting the contingent nature of identities, which can be subject to change over time.

Vaughn (2019) also asserts that agency is associated with the dispositions of the individuals acting within a particular environment or context as it is concerned with the motivational aspects of individuals who regulate their behaviour within the contextualised environment, and can make choices and decisions. She curated a model of agency [Figure 3.1] (Vaughn, 2019, p. 20), which I have adapted to include the important concept of affordances which has been developed throughout this chapter.



A Conceptual Model of Student Agency

Figure 3.1: Adapted from Vaughn (2019, p. 20)

Within and across assessment settings, agency, or the crafting of the self within structures of authority, influence and power (Lewis, Enciso and Moje, 2012), differentiates between participation and learning (Curtin *et al.*, 2020). Learning is inherently embedded in active involvement, yet agentic learning expands upon this involvement by contextualising present actions within past and future engagements; such an approach empowers learners to take an active and influential role in shaping their own educational journey (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Therefore, the teacher, learner, task, and environment, under an AT perspective, come together to form the concept of agency, where identities are constructed through participation, and learning takes place in the transitional realm between action and knowledge, between decision-making and understanding the implications of those decisions (Curtin *et al.*, 2020).

Thus, agency does not occur in isolation, rather it is co-constructed in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

In the assessment journey of students at junior cycle level in Ireland, agency plays a pivotal role as it underscores the distinction between mere participation and genuine learning. This tenet is supported in the *Junior Cycle Framework* (NCCA, 2015, p. 9) where it is stated that these

assessment arrangements will promote a focus on active and collaborative learning. In particular, learners will be enabled to use and analyse information in new and creative ways, to investigate issues, to explore, to think for themselves, to be creative in solving problems and to apply their learning to new challenges and situations.

As students' navigate these contemporary assessment settings, their ability to shape their identities within structures of authority and power influences their active involvement in learning processes, empowering them to construct their own unique educational journey by contextualising their actions within past and future affordances and engagements. This idea is supported by the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (NCCA, 2015, p. 27) document which states 'the provision of a range of learning experiences in a developmental sequence that will assist students to acquire self-management skills so as to make effective choices and decisions about their lives'. Thus, the dynamic relationship between teachers, learners, tasks, affordances and environments fosters agency, allowing students to navigate the transitional space between action and knowledge, and between decision-making and understanding, ultimately shaping their educational trajectory.

For a sociocultural understanding of assessment, Curtin *et al.* (2020, p. 22) contend that 'this means the development of assessment processes which are authentic and provide meaningful points of connection between the learner and the task at hand'. They further argue that

assessment, practice, and the individual should be perceived as interconnected elements of the present, evolving within a particular social context and timeframe (Curtin *et al.*, 2020). In the context of this longitudinal study on assessment at JC, it is imperative to adopt a sociocultural perspective, emphasising the importance of developing authentic assessment processes that establish meaningful connections between the learner and the task, while recognising assessment, practice, and the individual as dynamically interrelated components evolving within a specific social and temporal context as suggested by the contemporary perspective of Curtin *et al.* (2020).

Extending the framework provided by these perspectives, it can be argued therefore that the exercise of agency, as it occurs within the realm of learning, does not originate from an internal mechanism but rather involves the positioning of oneself to enable new identities and new ways of being. Curtin *et al.* (2020) aver that one's capacity to place oneself within various contexts and activities across time is influenced by both individual agency and collective dynamics, shaped by power dynamics described by Foucault (1980) as generative and emerging from interactions and social relationships. It is, they aver, 'socially produced, rather than individually possessed' (Curtin *et al.*, 2022, p. 22).

Encouraging adolescents to view assessment as a process of experiential repositioning or as the cultivation of new identities intimately connected to their personal growth, rather than merely as evaluation or quantification of their existing abilities, can foster agency and boundary crossing within assessment environments from a sociocultural perspective (Curtin *et al.*, 2020). In mapping students' assessment journeys over time, as this research sets out to do, this perspective underscores the importance of recognising assessment as a transformative experience that enables students to redefine themselves and their capabilities. By acknowledging assessment as a mechanism to support personal development rather than a static measurement, this study aims to illuminate how students navigate and negotiate their identities

within the educational assessment landscape and map that development across their assessment journey.

Developing the structure provided by the ideas outlined in this section of the thesis, it may also be possible to think of students as policy actors, particularly in the context of assessment in education. Research has demonstrated that policy enactment regarding assessment in schools is not confined to the top-down route but involves interpretation and negotiation by various actors within the school environment, including students (Mausethagen, 2013). However, policy enactment is an area which requires further exploration in the next section of this chapter.

3.3 Sociocultural Advocates: Students as Policy Actors

The work of Stephen Ball (1993; 2003; 2009; 2012) and Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) on education policy, and education policy analysis, is particularly instructive as a mechanism to deconstruct reformation policy, using his toolbox (Ball, 1993, p.10) of ‘policy as text and policy as discourse’ and (Ball, 1993, p.15) ‘policy effects’. Policy as text denotes the construction (by the principal policy actors) of the artefact or document itself, a framework or model of policy application which has its own unique history of fabrication and arbitration (Curtin *et al.*, 2020). Policy as discourse signifies the ongoing dialogue, mediation and discussion between the education stakeholders, interested members of the public and the political establishment as the reform percolates down through the systems strata (Curtin *et al.*, 2020). Finally, policy effects may still be felt many decades after the reform has taken place. Ball (1993) insightfully contends that policy is simultaneously open to acquiescence,

resistance, perplexity, understanding, ridicule and respect from enactment through engagement to eventual evolution.

Curtin *et al.* (2020) confirm that elements of the reform at JC level in Ireland have triggered all of the responses listed and they recognise the criticality of acknowledging policy construction as embedded within the social, political and cultural fabric of the nation. Furthermore, Curtin *et al.* (2020, p. 68) bring to the fore ‘the illusory nature of policy construction’ an astute observation as one’s view of policy change very much depends on the context within which one is operating during the enactment and engagement phase and the work of Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012), is a valuable treatise which delineates the policy actors involved in education policy.

Building on this work, Golding (2017) researched curriculum and assessment change of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in England and added to the codification to include teachers with Curtin *et al.* (2020) expanding the taxonomy further within the teacher band [Table 3.1].

Policy Toolbox – Policy as Text, Policy as Discourse and Policy Effects

Table 3.1 – Curtin et al. (2020) p. 69

Policy Actors	Policy Work
Narrators	Interpretation, selection and enforcement of meanings
Entrepreneurs	Advocacy, creativity and integration
Outsiders	Entrepreneurship, partnership and monitoring
Transactors	Accounting, reporting, monitoring/supporting and facilitating
Enthusiasts	Investment, creativity, satisfaction and career
Translators	Production of texts, artefacts and events

Critics	Union representatives: monitoring of management, maintaining counter-talk
Receivers	Coping, defending and dependency
Survivors (Golding, 2017)	Endurance, adaptability
Resistors (Curtin <i>et al.</i>, 2020)	Resisting, obfuscating, objecting, refusing
Adopters (Curtin <i>et al.</i>, 2020)	Accepting, using, complying
Adapters (Curtin <i>et al.</i>, 2020)	Changing, adapting, compromising

Contemporary research (Flynn, 2015; 2018; Phillippo *et al.*, 2019; Welton, Cumings Mansfield and Salisbury, 2022; Wilkinson and Penny, 2021) is now highlighting the importance of creating formal spaces for student voice in policy discussions. This echoes Ball's (2012) call for a more inclusive approach to educational governance that recognises the agency of all stakeholders, including students. Flynn (2018, p. 6) asserts that their voices 'have the potential to contribute considerable expertise' to research, an assertion which resonates with this researcher. Thus, by situating student voice within the larger framework of educational policy, the research reinforces the idea that students are not merely recipients of policy but active participants who can influence change (Ball, 2012). All of these perspectives resonate with my view that students should be given that consideration; our learners are subsumed within the assessment process, their voices are critical to the discourse, and they should be heard, listened and responded to, as a consequence of the multiplicity of ways they are shaped by it.

Reay and William (1999, p. 345) support this perspective when they state that 'children are simultaneously active in the assessment process and profoundly affected by it'. So too do Ryan *et al.* (2020) when arguing that the concept of policy enactment suggests that policies are not merely implemented but are translated, modified and adopted by a variety of actors, which may include students, as is appropriate for the local context. Moreover, the role of individual actors, such as students, is recognised by Felix (2021) as a critical component in influencing how a policy is received and evolves and its impact over time. Students, as a central part of the

educational community, engage with and are affected by policies, and their actions and responses can shape the implementation and outcomes of these policies (Heineke and Davin, 2018).

Thus, the role of students in policy implementation can be understood through the lens of policy actors who navigate the tension between holistic and reductionist interpretations of educational impact, shaping policy enactment according to their interpretations and the material conditions of their context (Ryan *et al.*, 2020). In supporting the view of Heineke and Davin (2018), I would argue that students can and should participate in policy journeys, from development to enactment and subsequent review, exploring the multifaceted experiences of what Heineke and Davin (2018, p.9) aver are ‘policy-related plots and settings’ and contribute to the enactment of those educational policies which involve and affect them. Students can, according to Lee and Song (2022), influence policy by engaging in discussions and decision-making processes that affect their education, thereby ensuring that their voices and needs are illuminated and considered in policy development.

MacLean *et al.* (2013) conclude that students can act as professionals, arbitrating flexible policy frameworks, exerting intelligence and prudence in translating and enacting policy. The work of McGarr *et al.* (2022) acknowledges the important contribution that student perspectives bring to reform discourse in the Irish context via their ongoing, in-depth review of JC reform. The report suggests that students' insights and experiences can inform educational practices and policies, reinforcing the idea that they are essential stakeholders in the implementation of the JC Framework while referring to the students throughout the document as ‘actors’ and ‘stakeholders’.

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that students can influence education policy through engagement with the policy enactment, implementation and review phases and act as critical

policy actors who are uniquely positioned to advocate for inclusive and equitable educational reforms including those concerned with assessment policy. By understanding and advocating for the legal and sociocultural frameworks that support students' right to be heard, educators and policymakers can better facilitate genuine student participation in shaping educational policies. With this in mind, the next section of the chapter explores student voice in more detail and the challenges and opportunities in amplifying those voices in educational research.

3.4 Student Voice

The United Nations Rights of the Child refers to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which is an international human rights treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on November 20th 1989. It is one of the most widely ratified human rights treaties in the world, with almost all countries being party to it. The UNCRC outlines the fundamental human rights that should be protected and guaranteed to every child; defined as anyone under the age of 18, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, gender, religion or nationality. It is based on four principles; (i) non-discrimination, (ii) the best interests of the child, (iii), the right to life, survival, and development and (iv), participation.

It is the last precept which chimes with this research – the UNCRC (Article 12:1, 1989, *italics my emphasis*)

states parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views *the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child*, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

This precept from the UNCRC (Article 12:1, 1989), emphasising the right of children to express their views and to have them considered according to their age and maturity, aligns closely with the focus of this research on mapping students' experiences of assessment at JC.

A useful framework based on the UNCRC to support the concept of student voice is that proffered by Lundy (2007) [Figure 3.2].

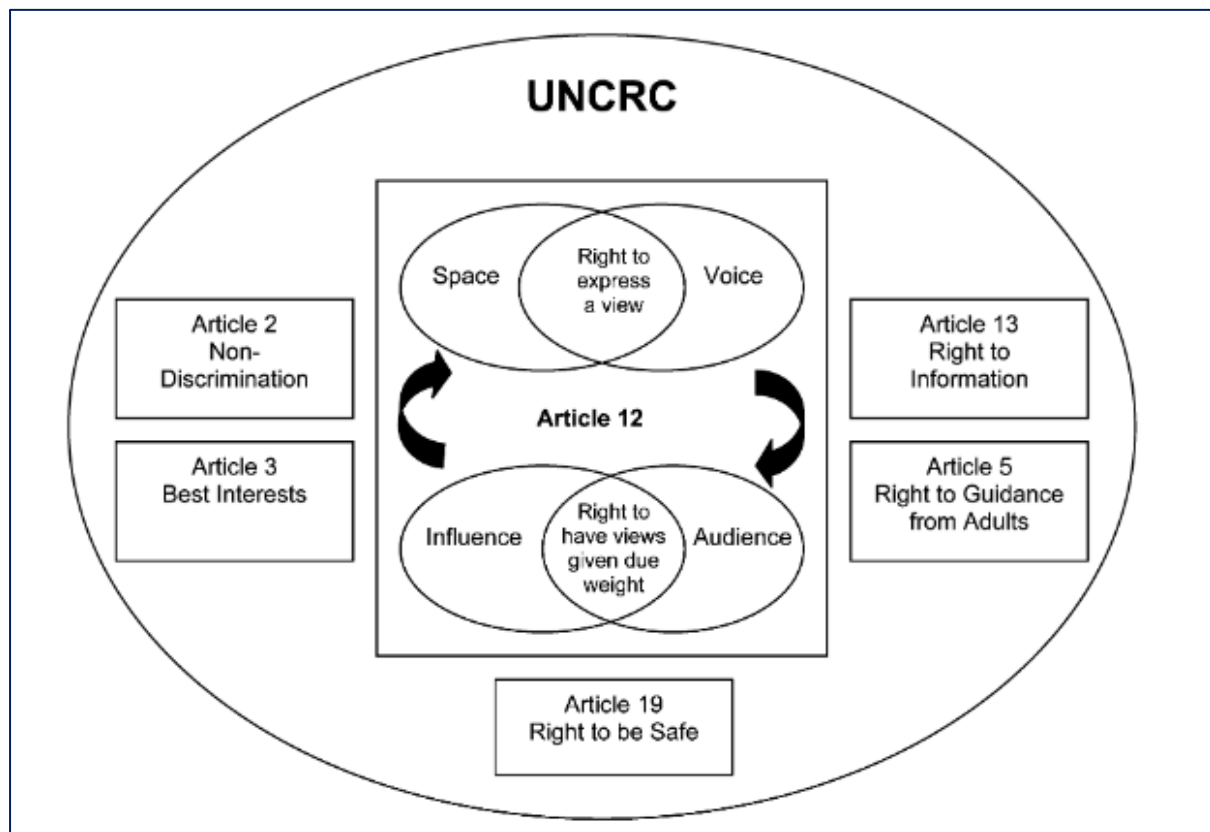


Figure 3.2 – Lundy (2007, p.6) Conceptualising Article 12

Derived from Article 12, Lundy (2007) further developed a conceptual framework – *Lundy's Voice Model Checklist for Participation* – which aims to assist those working with children to realise their fundamental rights. Comprising of four interconnected components - 'Space', 'Voice', 'Audience', and 'Influence' (Lundy, 2007) - this model anchors the concept of student

voice for this research due to its cogent categorisation and comprehensive rationale, aligning closely with this researcher's perspective on the significance of student influence.

‘Space’ emphasises creating a secure environment for students to express their views without adult interference, ensuring all perspectives are considered even if not all influence decisions (McVeety and Farren, 2020). ‘Voice’ extends from ‘Space’, focusing on the freedom of expression without adult sway and ensuring students can articulate their thoughts without constraints (MacKeith, 2022). ‘Audience’ and ‘Influence’ are connected in their emphasis on the necessity for students not only to be heard but also for their input to prompt meaningful action (McVeety & Farren, 2019).

Lundy’s Voice Model Checklist for Participation was included by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in their recent publication *Ireland’s National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making 2015 – 2020* (DCYA, 2015) [Figure 3.3].



Figure 3.3 – Lundy's Voice Model Checklist for Participation as included in Ireland's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020 (DCYA, 2015)

The Lundy Model (2007) underscores the significance of recognising students as active participants in their educational journey, highlighting the importance of illuminating their voices. Therefore, it is rightfully recognised that children are not merely passive recipients of

care but active participants in society who should have a voice in shaping their own lives and communities, have a right to express their point of view, and the right to have that point of view given due weight.

Thus, aligning with the perspectives discussed above, this research seeks to amplify the voices of the students involved in this study, recognising the affordances and constraints of their assessment journeys, in an effort to understand the complex dynamics of assessment and its impact on teaching, learning, and the curriculum. Through the lens offered by Lundy (2007), the study endeavours to contribute to the ongoing discourse on student voice, thus empowering students and perhaps reshaping educational practices to better serve their needs and aspirations. These are the principles that one must understand in order to frame student voice in a manner which is rights-based certainly, but which also recognises the value, merit and expertise of those voices. The *importance* of student voice in terms of research in education will be considered in the following section of this chapter.

3.4.1. Importance of Student Voice in Educational Research

To consider the importance of student voice, it is essential to firstly define the term as it relates to education and to this study. Rudduck (2007) defines student voice as being involved and engaging in meaningful conversations with students about relevant school matters, which encompasses discussing teaching and learning, seeking input from students on new initiatives and inviting feedback on ways to address challenges affecting both a teacher's ability to teach and a student's right to learn. Additionally, Rudduck and Fielding (2006) postulate that it also entails encouraging students to provide evaluative comments on recent developments in school or classroom policies.

Cook-Sather (2006, p. 363) contend that student voice is the ‘meaningful acknowledged presence ... the power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools’ with Thomson (2011, p. 24) stating that ‘student voice refers to the process through which children and young people, individually and collectively are able to speak up about their education’. The definition which initially struck a chord in terms of this research is that put forward by Thiessen, Cook-Sather and Thiessen, (2007, p. 579) and is the one that framed my initial concept of student voice for this study as

initiatives that strive to elicit and respond to student perspectives on their educational experiences, to consult students and to include them as active participants in critical analysis and reform of schools, and to give students greater agency in researching educational issues and contexts.

However, there is more to consider in this space. Irish studies have highlighted several potential advantages for students when their opinions are considered and they receive genuine feedback on their perspectives and research contributions (Flynn, 2014). Furthermore, she asserts that these benefits encompass notable enhancements in the quality of students' relationships with teachers and their sense of belonging and connection to the school community.

Building on the principles of meaningful student participation, Flynn (2018) explores the concept of transformative dialogue, a process that fosters genuine engagement and ensures that young people's voices lead to substantive change. She argues that a ‘transformative dialogue’ (Flynn, 2018, p. 30) can be achieved by expanding Lundy's (2007) model to incorporate key stages in the dialogic process. These stages include: (a) ensuring that young people's perspectives are preserved in their original form and not distorted, (b) providing feedback on how students' views have influenced decisions - or, if they have not, offering a clear explanation as to why, and (c) demonstrating how their contributions have led to meaningful change and

transformation. These are principles which are particularly pertinent to this research as the approach underscores the necessity of fostering a genuinely participatory and dialogical process in which students' voices are not merely heard but actively shape and inform their educational experiences, represented in Flynn's (2018) transformative dialogue model [Figure 3.4].

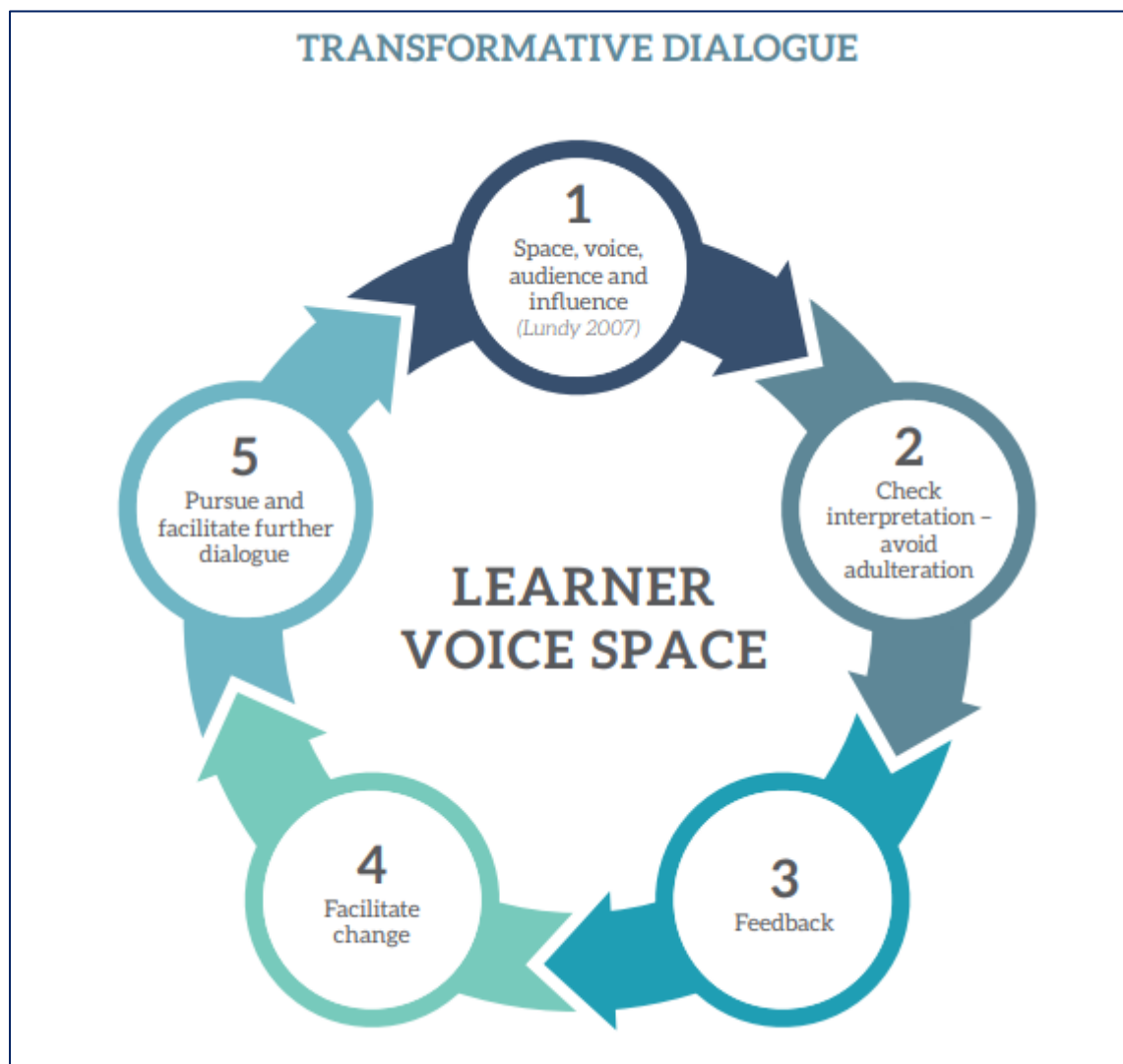


Figure 3.4 – Transformative Dialogue Model, Flynn (2018)

Central to this model is the recognition of the positive impact that engaging with learner voice can have, particularly within a school environment, by strengthening student-teacher relationships, promoting a sense of empowerment and agency, and cultivating leadership potential (Flynn, 2013), a tenet which also deeply connected with my understanding [Figure 3.5].



Figure 3.5 – Voice of the Learner (Flynn, 2013)

It is generally accepted that involving students in discussions about the positive and negative aspects of their schooling is still not widely practiced, despite more than three decades of

research in the field (Cook-Sather & Curl, 2016). Moreover, there has traditionally been a prevailing belief that secondary school students, seen as inexperienced young adults, lack the ability to express and advocate for their own interests. Consequently, they have been excluded from participating in ‘debate, design and decision-making’ and in discourses concerned with their schooling (Nelson, 2015, p. 286).

However, there has been an increasing acknowledgment that teachers can enhance current educational practices by considering student perspectives in their classrooms and schools (Fleming, 2017; Nelson, 2014; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004). The acknowledgment of the importance of considering student perspectives in educational practices, as highlighted by these eminent academics, resonates deeply with this research study. Furthermore, I support the view of Baroutsis, McGregor and Mills (2016) that the perspectives of children and young individuals play an important role in understanding the connection between learning, teaching and the curriculum. Likewise Flynn’s (2018) perspective is embraced here, in that their voices may be considered expert as they articulate their experiences and perspectives about their lived educational realities.

More significantly, the NCCA (NCCA, 2024b) emphasise the pivotal role of student voice in the Irish educational landscape, in their publication *Student Voice*. The document is grounded in the principles of Article 12 of the UNCRC, which asserts the right of children and young people to be heard in matters impacting them, with their views given appropriate consideration relative to their age and maturity (NCCA, 2024b). Recognising the distinct insights that students bring to learning, teaching, and education, the NCCA (2024b) underscore the necessity of providing students with opportunities to actively shape their educational journeys, thus developing agency. This commitment is reflected in various initiatives aimed at enhancing student engagement and fostering collaborative educational environments.

One such initiative is the Erasmus Student Voice Project (2019), particularly the ‘*Student Voice – the BRIDGE to Learning*’ project (2016-2019). This project seeks to empower students to engage meaningfully in enhancing their school experience, thereby fostering greater involvement in their learning processes and improving student-teacher relationships. In partnership with Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) and collaborators from Slovenia, the Netherlands, Hungary, and Scotland, the NCCA spearheaded efforts to create a more inclusive and participatory educational framework. Additionally, the NCCA's *Learner Voice Research Study* (2014-2017), conducted by Dr Paula Flynn (2018), focused on integrating student perspectives into the development of JC curriculum specifications and embedding student voice within educational discourse. Complementing these efforts is the *Negotiated Integrated Curriculum* (NIC, no date), which involves teachers co-creating curriculum content with students, thereby aligning educational practices with student concerns and promoting overall wellbeing through a structured ten-step process curated by Dr John O'Reilly. These projects collectively underscore the NCCA's understanding of the critical importance of student voice in shaping an adaptive and responsive educational system.

The literature promulgates copious benefits of employing student voice (Flynn, 2018; Graham *et al.* 2018; Keddie 2015; Mayes 2020). One such benefit is that of developing a democratic environment which students feel part of and deepening student agency. Keddie (2015, p. 226) explicates ‘the idea of schools as democratic communities where students, teachers and other school staff collaborate with each other to improve the quality of schooling’. Another benefit of encouraging student voice includes the deepening of meaningful dialogue between students and teachers which promotes trust (Cook-Sather, 2002). It may also spark reflective practice for teachers; Charteris and Thomas (2016, p.167) contend that ‘a student voice approach can provide further information in the form of a learner lens for teachers to reflect on and take pedagogic action’. Additionally, Baroutsis, McGregor and Mills (2016) aver that teachers can

both discover and be astonished by their students' proficiencies and understanding as a result of engaging in student voice discourse in the classroom.

The perspectives highlighted (Baroutsis, McGregor and Mills, 2016; Charteris and Thomas, 2016; Flynn, 2018; Graham *et al.*, 2018; Keddie, 2015; Mayes, 2020) underscore the transformative potential of integrating student perspectives into educational practices, particularly in the realm of assessment. In the 21st century, where education is increasingly considered to be a collaborative endeavour, understanding students' perspectives of assessment is essential. Research that considers students' perspective on assessment aligns with the principles of democratic education, promotes meaningful dialogue, builds trust and enhances the quality and relevance of assessments to better serve our students' learning needs and aspirations. Students should have a voice in shaping their educational environment at all levels including school curricula, school policies and national policy frameworks to foster a more inclusive and democratic learning environment. This is particularly important in an area such as assessment, which will be considered in the next section of this chapter.

3.4.2 Considering Student Perspectives of Assessment

Students' perspectives do offer valuable insights regarding changes in assessment methods, although these insights are frequently overlooked (Barrance and Elwood, 2018; Elwood, Hopfenbeck, and Baird, 2015). Typically, shifts in assessment culture within schools are driven by top-down policy adjustments, often resulting in unintended consequences such as heightened accountability pressures, compromised teacher and student well-being, and a narrower curriculum (Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Spina, 2019). The very recent research undertaken by Willis *et al.* (2023) employed a top-down assessment policy change in

an Australian school as an opportunity to investigate the influence of assessment on student well-being and agency; ideas which resonate with this researcher and chime with this study. Willis *et al.* (2023) aver that the concept of student agency is becoming increasingly intertwined with wellbeing and that agency materialises when individuals possess the capacity and authority to make choices within their social contexts.

Interestingly, the agency exhibited by students in their assessment actions always emerges, according to Adie, Willis and Van der Kleij (2018, p. 3) ‘within the temporal-relational contexts of activity’. The domain of school assessment remains under the control of examination commissions, boards and teachers, often communicating that only specifically cultivated forms of agentic aspirations are permissible (Consuelo, Grazia and Molinari, 2020) and only for particular students (Woods *et al.*, 2019). Martin (2016) contends that proficient students, and in particular, girls, might associate agency with compliance when their school environment rewards such forms of agentic identities. In some instances, agentic students might find that their assessment choices go unnoticed or unvalued by their teachers (Charteris and Thomas, 2016; Harris, Brown and Dargusch, 2018). Willis *et al.* (2023) make a valid point when they aver that exercising agency that challenges the prevailing assessment culture within a school can be risky, especially for students reliant on assessment outcomes to access opportunities beyond their educational journey.

While Burcaş and Creţu (2021) argue that students are encouraged to play a more active role in shaping assessments in the current educational milieu, this invitation can clash with prevailing cultural pressures to excel, apprehensions concerning failure and the prevalence of assessment-related anxiety. Moreover, Burcaş and Creţu’s (2021) research reported that up to 60% of students experience assessment anxiety, with girls often being disproportionately affected, despite possessing coping strategies and preparation techniques (Putwain and Daly, 2014). When it comes to high-stakes assessments, this stress can be amplified. Koretz (2017,

p.2) quotes from a disturbing letter written by principals in New York to students' parents regarding such a high-stake assessment; 'we know that many children cried during or after testing, and others vomited or lost control of their bowels or bladders. Others simply gave up. One teacher reported that a student kept banging his head on the desk ...'.

The recent research of Burcaş and Creţu (2021) emphasises the importance of engaging with students about their assessment experiences to ensure that educators endeavour to minimise assessment stress and anxiety. It is important to consider those experiences, to try to understand them and to help to mitigate them when reviewing assessment practices, routines and policy. Over the past few years, there has been a shift in perspective regarding the value of student voice research in shaping the advancement of assessment practices. The efficacy of utilising assessment to bolster student learning, as highlighted by Black and Wiliam (1998), and the pivotal role students play in assessment (and feedback), emphasised by Wylie and Lyon (2016), underscore this transformation. Furthermore, with the evolution of students from passive recipients to active participants in the educational process, the exploration of student perspectives on assessment has fittingly begun to gain momentum, importance and relevance. Andersen (2020, p.22) endorses this approach when he argues that

voice and agency is not just a novel idea, it is an ethical and educational responsibility. The more students understand how and why they are being assessed, the more confidently they are able to tackle tasks and perform to a higher standard overall in assessments.

In light of the evolving assessment landscape where students are recognised as active contributors in their educational journey, the exploration of student perspectives on assessment has gained significant traction. This shift is underscored by the growing recognition of the value of student voice research in informing and enhancing assessment practices. As emphasised by Black and Wiliam (1998) and Wylie and Lyon (2016), assessment holds great potential to foster student learning, with students occupying a central role in this process.

Moreover, Andersen's (2020) assertion regarding the ethical and educational imperative of amplifying student voice and agency resonates deeply. As the focus shifts towards understanding how students perceive and experience assessment, it becomes increasingly apparent that their insights are crucial for driving improvements in assessment practices, a motivating factor which was the spark that began this research. In the next section of this chapter, consideration will be given to the challenges and potential tensions inherent in amplifying student voice, drawing upon these insights to inform this research study.

3.4.3 Challenges and Opportunities in Amplifying Student Voice

Skerritt, Brown and O'Hara (2021, p. 1) aver that student voice has recently become a popular area for research with a significant volume of the literature concerning student voice 'being used at the classroom level in positive and well received ways'. However, the literature also signposts that student voice is still not commonly employed in Irish classrooms (Forde *et al.*, 2018; Harrison, McNamara and O'Hara, 2020; Mooney Simmie, Moles and O'Grady, 2019). Skerritt, Brown and O'Hara (2021, p. 4) note that 'even in ETB (Education and Training Board) schools, which might be thought of as being somewhat more open and receptive to student voice, the situation does not appear to be too dissimilar'.

The challenges inherent in amplifying student voice can involve several complex areas of difficulty. Firstly, institutional resistance often manifests as hesitancy within educational institutions to grant students a significant voice in decision-making processes, hindering progress toward more inclusive practices (Seale, 2010). Addressing power imbalances between students and educators presents a formidable challenge, as entrenched hierarchical structures may impede genuine student participation and discourage students from presenting

their views (Hall, 2017). Moreover, effectively amplifying student voice necessitates dedicated time and resources, a demand that may strain educational settings already stretched thin by various demands (Roffey, 2012). Ensuring that all students' voices are heard poses another hurdle, especially within diverse student populations where cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic factors may influence participation levels (King, 2015).

Contextual, cultural and historical challenges also present themselves as factors which inhibit the use of student voice as an informative contributor to classroom praxis. Skerrit, Brown and O'Hara (2021) aver that in Ireland the concept of student voice has become more amplified in official documentation and discourse in recent times, however, the contemporary literature suggests that student voice is still not ordinarily utilised in Irish classrooms (Forde *et al.*, 2018; Harrison, McNamara and O'Hara, 2020; Mooney Simmie, Moles and O'Grady, 2019). Nonetheless, there has been a rise in academic research recording a desire amongst students in post-primary schools in Ireland to share opinions, engage in discussions and have more input into their classes (Harrison, McNamara and O'Hara, 2020; Smyth, 2016).

However, there may be fear among stakeholders that amplifying student voice could disrupt established norms or curriculum structures, further complicating efforts toward meaningful change (Bourke and Loveridge, 2014). Criticism has also been mounting against approaches that do not improve the status and role of students in power dynamics within schooling (Mayes *et al.*, 2017; Nelson, 2017), methods that treat students primarily as sources of data (Fielding, 2012), and those that focus on student voice as a mechanism for monitoring teaching practice (Herriot, 2013; Lodge, 2005; Skerrit, 2023).

In giving consideration to the views expressed in the previous paragraphs, I would contend that this research focuses on understanding *how* students perceive assessment practices and *how* they experience them; the concerns raised about amplifying student voice primarily address

broader issues related to institutional resistance, power dynamics, resource allocation, and inclusion of diverse perspectives. While these areas touch on student involvement in educational decision-making, the specific focus of this research on assessment experiences does not directly involve the complexities of institutional resistance or power imbalances between students, educators and other stakeholders. Skerritt, Brown and O'Hara (2021, p. 2) suggest, 'context is likely to be a key factor in how student voice is enacted and experienced, both in different education systems and in different schools within the same system' and I would concur with this view. This study may contribute to broader discussions on student voice and participation in education by providing insights into how assessment practices impact students' educational experiences and perceptions in a particular context over time.

It is also important to consider the opportunities that amplifying student voice does proffer. Studies which promote student voice can offer opportunities for stakeholders in secondary school education to involve students in discussions about their assessment experiences and the affordances experienced by them. It may also include engaging them in conversations focused on improving learning and recognising their perspectives' impact on the quality of education (Tong and Adamson, 2015). Additionally, Tong and Adamson (2015) aver that including student voice is crucial for policymaking and developing classroom practices, as they offer diverse viewpoints and insights that may differ from those of teachers or policymakers. Moreover, initiatives promoting student voice have the potential to reshape traditional power dynamics in education, empowering students to influence school policies and functions, thereby boosting their engagement and motivation for learning (Charteris and Smardon, 2019).

Integrating student voice perspectives into prevailing or innovative assessment methods can foster a learner-centred approach, where students actively participate in assessing their own learning, potentially enhancing their self-regulation and motivation (Bui, 2023). Additionally, students can serve as knowledgeable observers of educational practices, aiding educators and

researchers in reflecting on their methods and planning for further student and teacher development (Charteris and Smardon, 2019). Creating environments conducive to dialogue, nurturing student identity and agency, and recognising student accountability are also essential aspects of this endeavour according to Hall (2000).

The inclusion of student voice in educational discourse, as highlighted by Tong and Adamson (2015), offers significant opportunities for stakeholders in secondary education to engage students in discussions concerning their assessment experiences. By acknowledging and valuing students' perspectives on assessment, educators and policymakers can gain diverse insights that may diverge from their own, thus enriching the policymaking process and informing classroom practice. This approach, as advocated by Charteris and Smardon (2019), not only empowers students to influence educational policies but also reshapes traditional power dynamics, fostering increased engagement and motivation for learning.

By soliciting students' perspectives on assessment practices, I believe that it is possible to bridge the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. This not only validates students' voices but also enriches the assessment policy process by taking cognisance of and perhaps incorporating their unique insights and approaches. Moreover, engaging students in discussions about assessment can foster a sense of ownership, agency, empowerment, and engagement with their learning, aligning more closely with the principles of democratic education and enhancing the overall quality and relevance of assessments. Thus, recognising and addressing the contextual, cultural, and historical challenges hindering the use of student voice can lead to more inclusive, student-centred assessment practices.

Finally, integrating student voice into assessment practices, as suggested by Bui (2023), promotes a learner-centred approach where students actively participate in evaluating their own learning, potentially enhancing their self-regulation and motivation. Building on these

contemporary perspectives, it is clear that students can serve as insightful observers of educational assessment practices, aiding educators and researchers in critically reflecting on their methods, planning and delivery for continuous student development in the field of student assessment and learning. How students actually experience these assessments will be explored in the penultimate section of this chapter.

3.5 Students' Experiences of Assessment in Ireland at Junior Cycle

Reay and Wiliam's (1999, p.345) assertion that 'children are simultaneously active in the assessment process and profoundly affected by it' is a tenet which resonates with this researcher's understanding of how our students view and undertake assessment. Our young learners are both engaged and affected by the process of assessment within which they are enveloped on a daily basis, and it is crucial that their voices are heard with respect to the myriad of ways in which they navigate their assessment journey. Their experiences must be narrated, discussed and considered by those involved in assessment research, assessment policy and assessment practice. Sociocultural theories of learning and assessment and AT provide researchers with a lens system through which we can examine the figured world of assessment, the concepts of identity and agency, and provides us with a medium of mediated action to understand these experiences as they unfold over time.

Figure 3.6 outlines pictorially the journey a student will navigate in one subject throughout their Junior Cycle assessment journey.

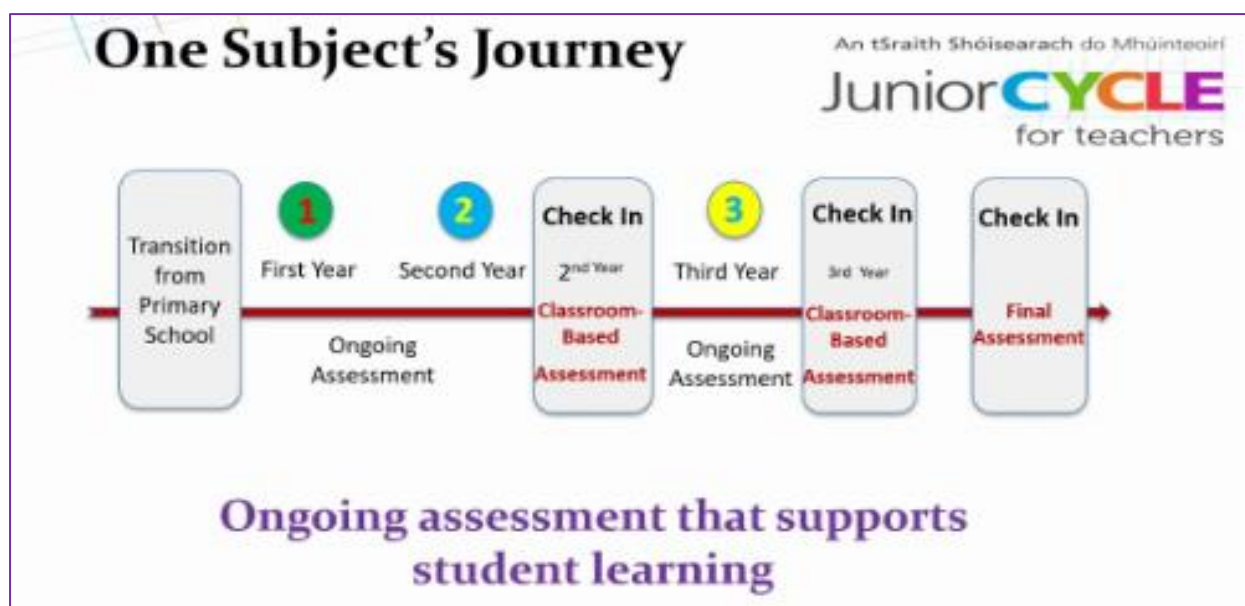


Figure 3.6 – *One Subject's Journey*, JCT (2019) - *Ongoing Assessment that Supports Student Learning*

Interestingly, the JCT labels the diagram as the journey a *subject* will take, as if the subject had a life of its own. Using the title 'One Subject's Journey' for a diagram that represents a student's progression along a learning and assessment continuum can be somewhat at odds with the key message of the JC Framework. Firstly, the term 'subject' typically refers to a specific academic discipline or area of study, such as mathematics or history. Labelling a diagram in this manner appears to disconnect the student from the heart of the learning process.

A second factor to consider is that many students will engage in as many as ten of these assessment journeys as they embark on their individual and unique navigation of the JC. While the diagram clearly states 'One Subject's Journey', it is not too difficult to image what a journey of ten subjects might look like for a typical JC student. It is essential, in my view, that all of the documentation published regarding JC places the student (and not the subject or teacher) at the centre of the experience.

When it comes to terminal assessments at JC, the focus shifts to evaluating the students' understanding, skills, and capabilities within the context of all the subjects they study.

Assessments aim to measure students' mastery of subject-specific content and their ability to apply this knowledge effectively (NCCA, 2015). However, the assessment journey is inherently personal and unique to each student. Students' assessment journeys are marked by growth, challenges, discoveries, and reflections. They adapt and evolve in response to feedback, experiences, and changing educational contexts. Assessments, as outlined by the JCT diagram above, serve as checkpoints along this journey, providing insights into students' progress, strengths, and areas for improvement.

Thus, while subjects provide the structure and content for learning, it is the students and not the subjects who embark on the assessment journey, navigating their way through the educational landscape, acquiring knowledge, developing skills, and demonstrating their understanding via a variety of checkpoints along the assessment continuum. Therefore, assessments are intrinsically tied to students' individual learning journeys, reflecting their unique experiences and progress in mastering subject content. These journeys can also be incredibly challenging for students. As Curtin *et al.* (2020, p. 101) aver 'the emptiness of the exam script is not reflective of the learning of the student; it is a reflection of their disenchantment, disengagement and loss of confidence to express their learning in the form demanded'.

McGarr *et al.*'s (2023) report, *Exploring the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle: A longitudinal study. Interim report No.2* is one contemporary piece of research which has considered the views of students and their experiences of JC assessment. This seminal work has acted as a lever to prise open a deeper understanding of student engagement with assessment practices, one important component of the study. The report reveals that students actively engage with their educational environment by employing strategic behaviours, such as memorising content and making informed study choices, to navigate academic expectations which they termed 'playing the game' (McGarr *et al.*, 2023, p. 16). Their experiences with the

JC Framework vary widely; while some students reported positive transitions and support from schools, others expressed dissatisfaction, particularly due to challenges posed by the Covid19 pandemic (McGarr *et al.*, 2023). This highlights the diverse perspectives students bring to the educational process based on the affordances they experienced in their situated learning environments at primary school.

Moreover, the report (McGarr *et al.*, 2023) also noted that students value not only academic success but also the social aspects of their education, emphasising the importance of belonging and enjoyment in school. The insights of these students, gathered through surveys and focus group discussions, positions them as essential stakeholders in shaping educational practices and policies, reinforcing the concept that their voices are crucial in the review of the implementation of the JC Framework. This highlights the significance of student voice and agency, aligning with the findings of McGarr *et al.* (2023) that frames the critical role of students in influencing and shaping policy, as key policy actors, through research of this magnitude. Thus, McGarr *et al.* 's (2023) report underscores the significance of this study as it serves to augment and triangulate the findings and proffer additional insights from students in a different context thereby enriching the literature with further diverse perspectives of JC assessment experiences.

3.6 Conclusion

The previous literature review chapter examined SCT and its application in assessment which underscored the significance of cultural contexts in shaping the figured worlds of assessment, highlighting the need for culturally responsive approaches. The purpose of assessment was

considered through a sociocultural and historical lens and a definition of assessment proffered for the purposes of this research. This chapter explored some of the dimensions of assessment within educational contexts, shedding light on the complex relationship between AT, social construction of identity and agency, student voice, and students' perceptions of assessment.

AT has provided a theoretical lens through which to examine how educational settings offer opportunities and constraints for learning and assessment practices. By applying AT to educational contexts, it is possible to gain insights into the potentialities inherent within disparate assessment environments, offering a framework for understanding as to how they afford or limit student engagement and participation.

Central to this exploration has been the concept of student voice, emphasising the importance of incorporating student perspectives in educational research and assessment practices. Recognising students as active agents in their learning journey, it has been possible to explore the challenges and opportunities in amplifying student voice, striving for more inclusive and student-centred assessment approaches. By understanding students' perceptions, challenges, and successes in assessment, it is possible to inform the development of assessment policies and methodologies that are responsive to their needs and experiences.

The concept map [Figure 3.7] compiled on the following page is a visual representation of both chapters of the literature review, illuminating the connexions between the key concepts, theories and themes within the literature which frame this study.

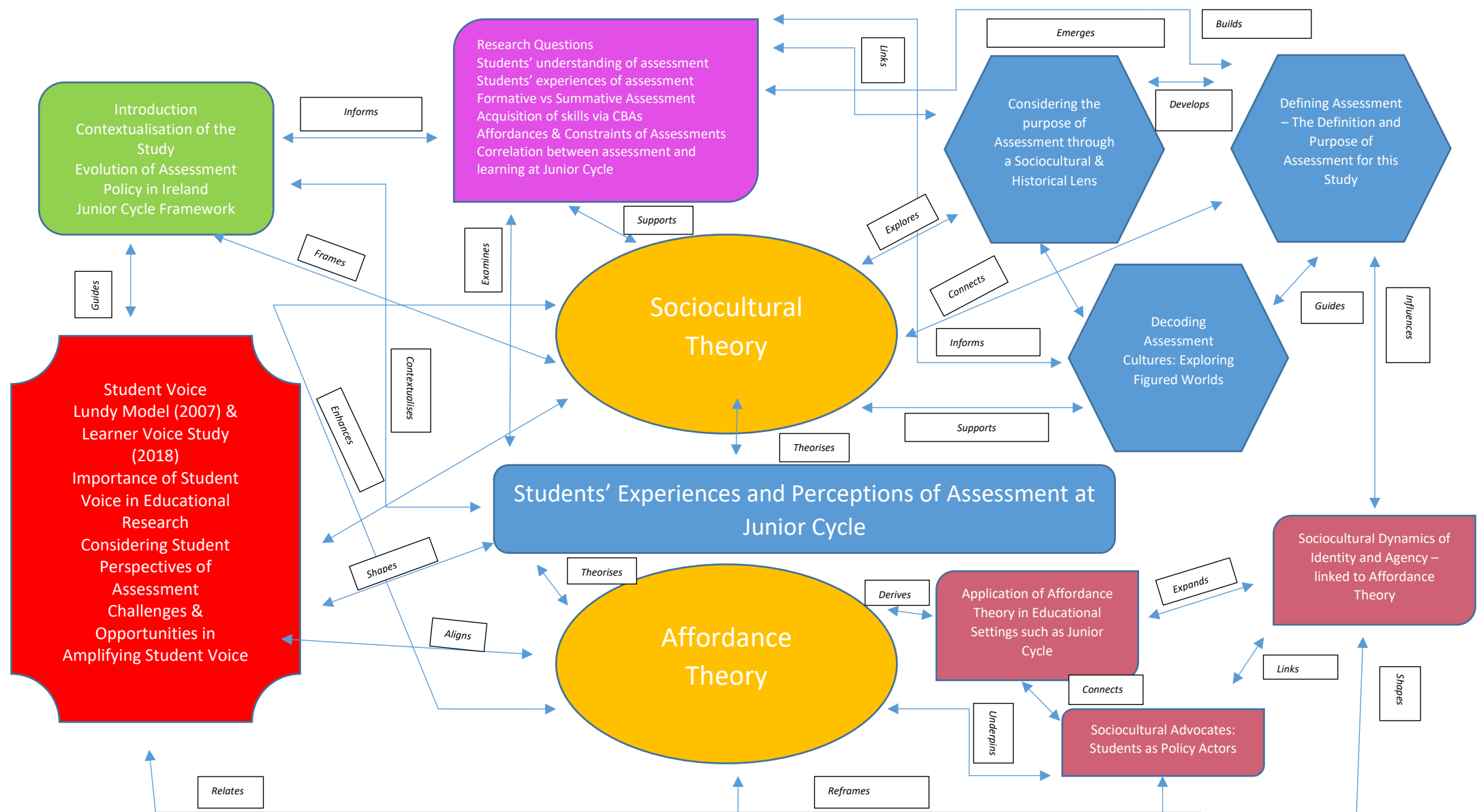


Figure 3.7 – Concept Map – Literature Review

In conclusion, as the transition to the Methodology chapter of this study approaches, it is imperative to carry forward the insights gleaned from the review of the literature with a commitment to operationalising the theoretical frameworks and research questions into practical methodologies. Through the implementation of rigorous research methods, the aim of this study is to delve deeper into the complexities inherent in assessment practices at Junior Cycle and to understand how students perceive and experience them.

Chapter Four - Methodology

4.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology and research design employed in this longitudinal study, which maps the assessment journey of nineteen students throughout their JC phase of scholarship, in an all-girls' secondary school situated in an urban area in Munster, Ireland. Section 4.1 describes the objectives of the research while Section 4.2 explores the rationale for choosing a qualitative longitudinal research approach. The conceptual framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) underpinning the research design is discussed in Section 4.3, while Section 4.4 presents an overview of the research study including constructing the research questions, choosing the sample and the timeline required for the study. This section also considers and proposes the most apposite research instruments to answer the research questions which include sketches, focus groups, interviews and questionnaires and finally, the data collection procedures employed. Section 4.5 explicates the data analysis procedures utilised which are informed by the conceptual framework of IPA, while Section 4.6 outlines the ethical considerations of the study. The concluding section, Section 4.7, summarises the chapter and proffers signposts for the contextual findings and discussion sections of this work.

4.1 Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of the research is to glean a deeper understanding of JC assessment experiences from the perspective of those who are subsumed by it - the students. In contributing to the existing

literature on students' assessment experiences, it aims to amplify the voices of this particular cohort of students as they engage with their JC assessment journey and to illuminate their experiences and perceptions as they navigate the complex and multifaceted landscape of learning, progression, evaluation and measurement. My research endeavours to bridge a gap in the literature by exploring the relatively under-examined realm of students' perspectives of assessment, across a complete learning cycle, at JC level in Ireland. The resultant findings may provide valuable insights for educators, policy makers and educational researchers, ultimately enhancing assessment practices and fostering a more supportive and engaging learning environment for all students throughout JC. The aim of the research study is underpinned by the following five research questions:

- RQ1. What does a first year/second year/third year student understand the term 'assessment' to mean and does that understanding shift as they move through their first three years of post-primary schooling?
- RQ2. (a) What factors shape students' preferences for summative or formative assessment and do these experiences alter as they move through their Junior Cycle assessment journey? (b) What are the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as perceived and enacted by students at Junior Cycle and how do these assessments influence their educational experience?
- RQ3. What skills, values, knowledge and understanding do students' perceive they acquire or develop specifically as a result of classroom-based assessments undertaken in second and third year?
- RQ4. How do students' perceive the correlation between the assessments they complete and their overall learning experiences?

- RQ5. How do students' assessment experiences evolve throughout their Junior Cycle, and in what ways do these experiences contribute to their growth, development and learning?

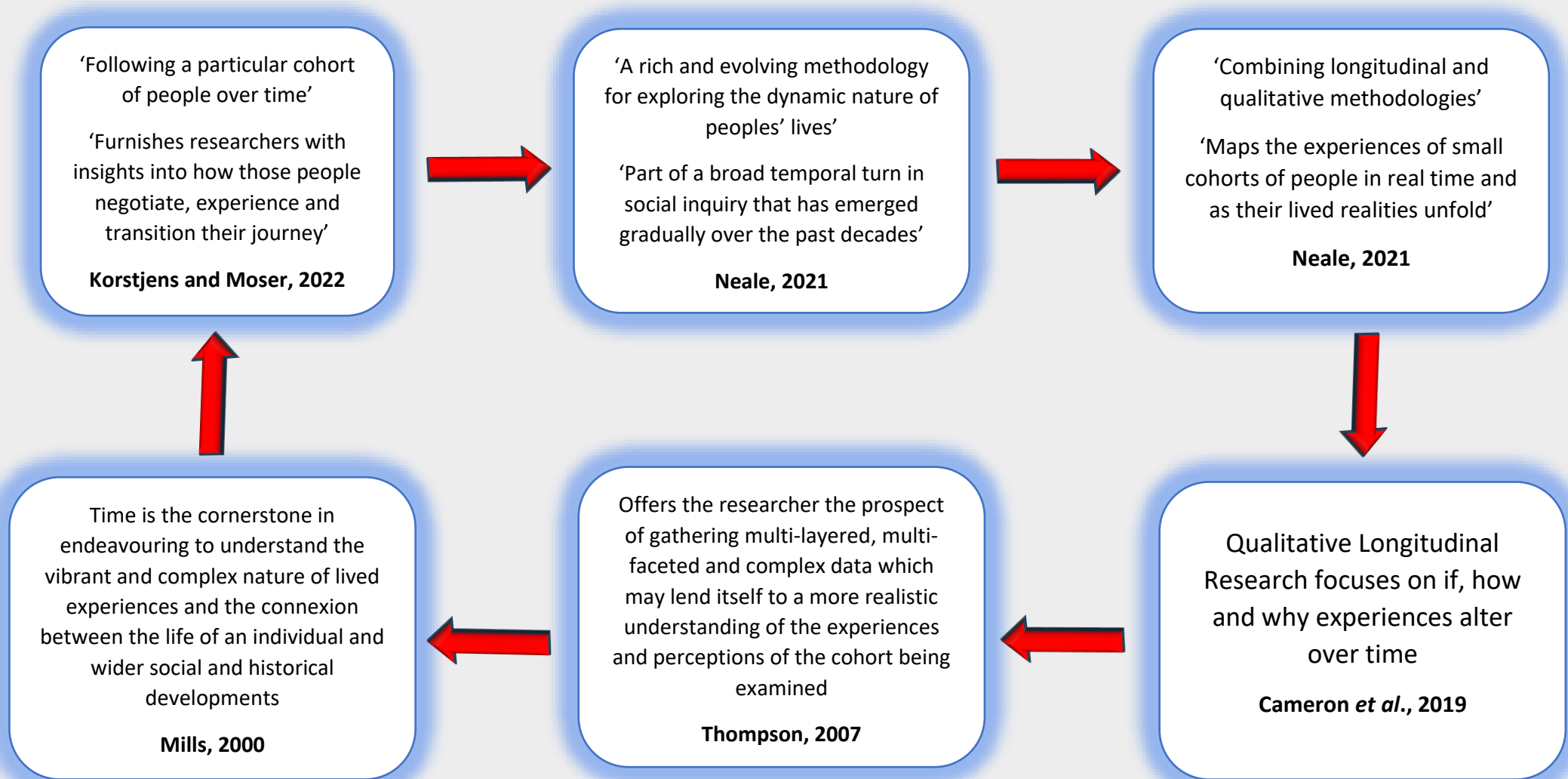
Through mixed methods encompassing focus groups, semi-structured interviews, sketches and an anonymised questionnaire, the research design captures the complexity and richness of the students' individual experiences, while also allowing for the identification of broader patterns and trends within the cohort as a whole. This approach ensures a rounded understanding of the phenomenon, capturing the richness of the participants' subjective experiences over a three-and-a-half-year period. By employing a qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) approach, this study reveals the underlying meanings, motivations, personal narratives and lived experiences captured by data from the students throughout their programme of study. In the next section of this chapter, a comprehensive exploration of the QLR approach will be undertaken, substantiating why this methodology was the best aligned fit for this study.

4.2 Discussion and Rationale for using a Qualitative Longitudinal Research approach

QLR is concerned with following a particular cohort of people over time and furnishes researchers with insights into how those individuals negotiate, experience and transition their journey (Korstjens and Moser, 2022). Neale (2021, p.1) asserts that this type of research 'is a rich and evolving methodology for exploring the dynamic nature of people's lives ... part of a broad 'temporal turn' in social enquiry that has emerged gradually over the past decades'. Encompassing a duality of traditionally established methodologies, that of longitudinal research and qualitative research, QLR endeavours to map the experiences of individuals or

small cohorts of people in real time and as their lived realities unfold (Neale, 2021). It offers researchers a panoptic lens with which to explore how individuals navigate, negotiate and make sense of their lived experiences over time [Figure 4.1]. It is a particularly useful method to underpin this study as I map students' experiences of assessment *through* JC, but it also engages with the sequential and progressive components of experience which Neale (2021, p.2) suggests as 'opening up the potential to 'think dynamically' in creative, flexible and innovative ways'.

Rationale for taking a Qualitative Longitudinal Research Approach



Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) offers researchers a panoptic lens with which to explore how individuals navigate, negotiate and make sense of their lived experiences over time. It is a particularly useful method to underpin this study.

Figure 4.1 – Rationale for taking a Qualitative Longitudinal Research Approach

Undoubtedly, there is scepticism in the research community concerning the scientific value of stand-alone qualitative research (Bammidi, 2019; Erikson, 2018; Gobo, 2005). Henwood and Lang (2003, p. 49) counter such scepticism by arguing that ‘studies based on a quantitative model are unable to access the fluid and often highly situation-specific experiences, understandings and perceptions that mediate the ways in which people deal with and respond to social change’. It is clear therefore, that qualitative research studies can proffer a deep and comprehensive treatment of a topic, allowing for the exploration of how people's usual attitudes and behaviours are intertwined with broader patterns of socio-cultural change (Henwood and Lang, 2003). Advancing this line of reasoning, it can be argued that QLR offers this researcher an opportunity to gain a deep insight into the complex phenomenon of students’ perceptions and experiences of assessment at JC *over time*.

The goals of QLR are to study peoples’ experiences over time, consider how those experiences are navigated, whether the experiences change along the continuum and why that change occurs (Cameron *et al.*, 2019; Thompson, 2007). Firmly anchored within the social sciences, QLR offers the researcher the prospect of gathering multi-layered, multi-faceted and complex data which lends itself to a rich understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the cohort being examined (Thompson, 2007). QLR, as it pertains to this study, offers an ongoing understanding of the phenomena compared to that of cross-sectional and single data points of research by aligning the value and benefits of qualitative research with those of a longitudinal approach.

Thinking through time has never been so critical given the pace of social change (Neale, 2021), however given the pace and substance of change in Irish education over the past decade, it has become even more significant. Mills (2000) put forward the view that time is the cornerstone in endeavouring to understand the vibrant and complex nature of lived experiences, and the connexion between the life of an individual and wider social and historical developments.

Neale (2021) further espouses that is it only by researching through time can we endeavour to grasp the development and progression of social change, the instruments through which this change occurs and the methods by which these organisational dynamisms mould the lived experiences of individuals and groups, and as a consequence, are re-moulded by them.

In a QLR study such as this, careful consideration of the term ‘longitudinal’ was critical due to its emphasis on capturing evolving perspectives, changes and developments over an extended period. Educational research underpinned by a QLR framework generally conform to the academic calendar or school year. Examples of this are those of; Zhang *et al.* (2022) who devoted one year to their longitudinal study involving private tutoring in Mathematics, or Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2020) considering teacher burnout in their longitudinal study over a period of eight months. QLR employs the synchronised biographical timelines of both the researcher and participants as a means of transitioning between the past and the present, facilitating the exploration of both forward-looking and backward-looking narratives of experience (Carduff, Murray and Kendall, 2015; McCoy, 2017; Thomson and McLeod, 2015). Furthermore, Thomson and McLeod (2015) contend that taking a narrow, doctrinaire approach would be counterproductive due to the investigative, flexible, creative and dynamic nature of the method and I concur with that view. This study, encompassing a learning cycle of three-and-a-half years, delivers a unique contribution to the field of assessment at JC as it considers the perspectives of students over a *full cycle* of their education, offering prospective and retrospective insights.

Today’s contemporary social and educational landscape is muddled, complex and ever evolving, thus the method underpinning the gathering of data within this realm should be flexible and malleable to allow it to bend with the perpetual dynamism within which it operates. Clearly, the experiences and perceptions of the students participating in this study could only

have been mapped over time to allow the rich, complex and dynamic educational landscape they are subsumed by to be highlighted.

Nevedal, Avalon and Briller (2018) assert that the advantages of QLR may be conceptualised from its capacity to yield a flexible approach to appraise interactions involving context and time in a non-linear approach. Adding to this assertion, Korstjens and Moser (2022, p. 119) note that QLR ‘can enable participants to experience emotional distance while reflexively viewing past and present events’. In turn, Lloyd *et al.* (2017) contend that this type of longitudinal research tends to promote dialogue and trust between the participant and the researcher, enabling the researcher to raise searching topics and issues at a more appropriate juncture along the continuum than in a once-off interview. It is for these reasons that a QLR approach was the best aligned method for this investigation as it proffers a panoptic, theoretical lens, to narrate, understand and interpret the JC assessment experiences of the contributing students.

The conceptual framework underpinning this research is that of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a methodology which will be discussed in more detail in the following section of this chapter.

4.3 Conceptual Framework – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

A variety of research methodologies exist, frequently with disparate and sometimes with competing ontological and epistemological stances. Asserting that there are extensive differences in the types of social science observed in universities, Greenwood and Levin (2000, p. 92) highlight ‘quantitative, qualitative, mixed method, positivist, constructivist, postmodernist, poststructuralist, and so on’ while Meyrick (2006, p. 801) avers that there can

often be a ‘polemic debate, pitting quantitative research against qualitative’ referring to a ‘disciplinary tribalism’ within the realm of qualitative research. Critical of the extreme stances some academics take, Eisner (1992) and Pring (2000) explore theories that dispute such a false dualism. The range of methodologies and their disputes are underpinned by the central philosophical beliefs of the researchers or are inextricably linked to their research designs in relation to what delineates reality (ontological) and the manner through which it is interpreted and understood (epistemological). Searle (2008, p.8) articulates compelling points to support this view when he argues that subjective experiences (ontological) have an epistemologically objective manifestation (epistemological):

All representation of reality, human or otherwise, and a fortiori all knowledge of reality, is from a point of view, from a certain perspective. But the perspectival character of representation and knowledge does not imply that the knowledge claims in question are dependent on the preferences, attitudes, prejudices, predilections, of observers. The existence of objectivity is in no way threatened by the perspectival character of knowledge and representation.

Creswell (2003, p. 179) depicts a ‘middle ground’ while promulgating (Creswell, 2009, p.10) a ‘pragmatic worldview’, whereas Hammersley (1996) advocates that deciding between qualitative and quantitative approaches involves judgement with due regard to the situation and purpose of the research, rather than on judgement based on an obligation to one or another opposite philosophical interpretation of the world. Thus, the extended nature of data collection and focus on the lived experiences of the students as they occur and eventually change from a personal perspective, naturally align with a phenomenological approach. IPA is the most appropriate methodological approach for mapping students' experiences of assessment over time at JC, as it aligns with Cuthbertson, Robb, and Blair's (2019) emphasis on IPA's idiographic, inductive, and interpretative nature, which allows for a nuanced exploration of lived experiences within specific contexts. Unlike other qualitative methods, IPA's

commitment to phenomenology and hermeneutics facilitates an in-depth understanding of how students construct meaning around assessment, acknowledging both individual cognitive processes and the broader socio-cultural influences shaping their evolving academic journeys. The extended nature of the data collection and focus on the students' lived experiences as they occur and eventually change from a personal perspective, naturally align with a phenomenological approach. The adopted philosophical underpinning of the research is inextricably linked to the research design. Hence, the research is philosophically grounded in IPA.

IPA is a comparatively contemporary methodological approach which has its roots firmly anchored in psychology developed by Smith (1996), but which has now been embraced across a variety of disciplines (Pringle *et al*, 2011). IPA is now a well-known qualitative approach which is commonly employed in the psychological sciences to investigate topics such as psychological affliction and illness experience (Smith, 2011). However, IPA has been used in some educational research to examine a plethora of experiential matters (Gauntlett *et al.*, 2017; Guihen, 2020; Noon, 2018; Rabitte, Prendeville and Kinsella, 2017). IPA is concerned with investigating how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021) and those undertaking IPA research endeavour to build an understanding of how those individuals experience their lived realities. In essence, the students in this study are constantly making sense of their assessment experiences while I undertake to make sense of the students trying to make sense of their world – a double interpretation or double hermeneutic is the process involved within this approach.

Ontologically, this study adopts a position where it is acknowledged that the researcher, participant and reality are inseparable, whilst epistemologically the research approach is framed on the basis that knowledge is constructed through the description of human experience which creates meaning and understanding. The axiological foundations of the study will be

explored in more detail in the section on ethics later in this chapter, but it is important to state at this juncture that IPA is rooted in the understanding that individual's experiences are subjective and should be explored in-depth (Oxley, 2016). Building on this premise, one critical axiological underpinning for this researcher is the value placed by IPA on the students' subjective experiences and the importance of giving voice to their perspectives, acknowledging their lived realities.

Oxley (2016, p.55) argues that the methodology 'is firmly situated in qualitative research, as experiences are not easily translated into quantifiable data and much would be lost in the translation'. The focus of IPA is experiential but there is an understanding that it is only possible for the researcher to glean an understanding of the experience of the participant via their own words, as it is not possible for both parties to have shared the experience directly (Oxley, 2016). Moreover, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2021, p. 33) aver that this is the mechanism by which 'the meaning which is bestowed by the participant on experience, as it becomes an experience, can be said to represent the experience itself'. Oxley (2016) posits that this engenders a position where two layers of filters exist between the research and the first-hand experiences; initially the participant will articulate their view on the experience (the first filter) and secondly, the investigator will interpret what has been said (the second filter). For the purposes of this study, this will firstly involve the researcher listening to the audio recordings of the students' experiences of JC assessment and secondly, interpreting that assessment experience, known as the aforementioned double hermeneutic or double filter approach.

Within the framework of this study, Oxley's (2016) narrative serves as a judicious reminder that while capturing the authentic voices of the students, one must be cognisant of and acknowledge the substantial influence one wields in shaping the ultimate interpretation of those perspectives. In the case of children, one must be cognisant of not adulterating (Flynn, 2018)

their perspectives. The challenge of the double filter is acknowledged by those involved in IPA research and is an integral component of the philosophical position where participants are cited as ‘meaning makers’ - undoubtedly this position within the conceptual framework of IPA supports this research as the students involved make sense of and create meaning from their lived experiences of assessment at JC level.

Oxley (2016) notes that the IPA methodology offers an approach that embraces the importance of the individual’s perceived experience and the value in exploring the idiosyncratic accounts of small samples of ‘expert groups’ - which clearly aligns with this study. One might argue that this could be labelled the ‘third filter’ – the step from *connecting the individual’s experience to the individuals’ experiences of the expert group*. The shift from individual to collective interpretation within IPA requires a philosophical commitment to understanding the interconnectedness of individual experiences within a broader socio-cultural context, which can be argued as a good fit to the SCT as an underpinning theoretical framework of this research. It involves recognising the dynamic nature of interpretation, the influence of shared cultural factors, and the inevitable intersection between the individual and the collective.

As a conceptual framework, IPA offered this researcher a mechanism by which the rich individual experiences of the students involved can be gathered. Underpinned by the work of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009; 2021), through thematic analysis, common themes and patterns across individual experiences can be constructed, facilitating the transition from the individual to the collective by identifying and understanding shared perspectives and concerns. IPA also acts as a lens through which the researcher can develop theories and concepts based on the data itself, moving from abstract philosophical ideas to more practical and technical dimensions within the broader theoretical context of assessment at JC.

In the next section of this chapter, the theoretical basis of IPA, which develops the concept of the centrality of human experience further, will be discussed in more detail.

4.3.1 The Theoretical Basis of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and Idiography

The conceptual framework of IPA is supported by three principles: (i) phenomenology, (ii) hermeneutics and (iii) idiography (Miller and Barrio Minton, 2016; Oxley, 2016; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Smith and Osborn, 2008). In this section of the chapter, each of the three theoretical principles will be discussed briefly to illuminate their importance in scaffolding IPA and this researcher's approach to the conceptual framework advocated for in this study.

4.3.1.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is concerned with 'the study of human experience and the way in which things are perceived as they appear to consciousness' (Langdrige, 2007, p.10). The word 'phenomenology' is used to explicate a philosophical movement and a variety of research methods first promulgated by Husserl (1901) at the beginning of the twentieth century, with a focus firmly centred on the theoretical study of 'being' (Gil-Rodriguez and Hefferon, 2015). Moving away from the positivist archetypes of the period, Husserl envisaged himself as a leader and emphasised the importance of focusing one's gaze directly on the phenomenon in question, avowing that one should 'go back to the things themselves' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.12).

Developing a sequence of steps denoted as ‘reductions’, which involved ‘bracketing’ presumptions and establishing knowledge to unearth the quintessence of a phenomenon, the approach was envisioned to afford the researcher a phenomenological approach requiring a reflective stance (Gil-Rodriguez and Hefferon, 2015). From a practical perspective, it is of course problematic to put one’s own interpretation of the world to one side, and this concern with Husserl’s work was appreciated by Heidegger (1973) in his seminal work, *Being and Time*.

Heidegger (1973) espoused the view that an individual cannot consciously recognise reductions because our understanding is derived from our own nuanced position within the world and therefore, the nearest we can come to fully understanding a phenomenon is through interpretation. IPA, according to Gil-Rodreiguez and Hefferon, (2015) makes no attempt to identify Husserlian reductions to uncover the crux of a phenomenon; rather it concentrates on capturing the unique lived experiences of a particular set of individuals. Consequently, Oxley (2016) suggests that Heidegger’s research which expresses phenomenology, with its explicitly interpretative nature and strong ties to hermeneutics, is central to IPA, an approach that, as its name implies, is both interpretative and phenomenological.

4.3.1.2 Hermeneutics

Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) aver that IPA fuses ideologies from both interpretation and phenomenology, leading to a method that is descriptive, as it focuses on how things present themselves and allows them to speak on their own terms, while also being interpretative, acknowledging that no phenomenon exists without interpretation. This refers to hermeneutics,

defined by Dallmayr (2009, p.23) as the ‘practice or art of interpretation’ and which involves, according to Ricoeur (1970, p.8) ‘the restoration of meaning’.

Hermeneutic phenomenology appreciates that the views, values and opinions held by the researcher are intrinsically interwoven with the method by which they interpret the experiences of their research participants, and, because of this, IPA researchers should embrace a recurrently reflexive stance (Oxley, 2016). While hermeneutics is the second principle to be addressed in this section of the chapter, it is perhaps timely to reflect specifically on how this principle featured and was applied to this research [Figure 4.2].

Hermeneutics – A reflection on how it features and is applied to this study

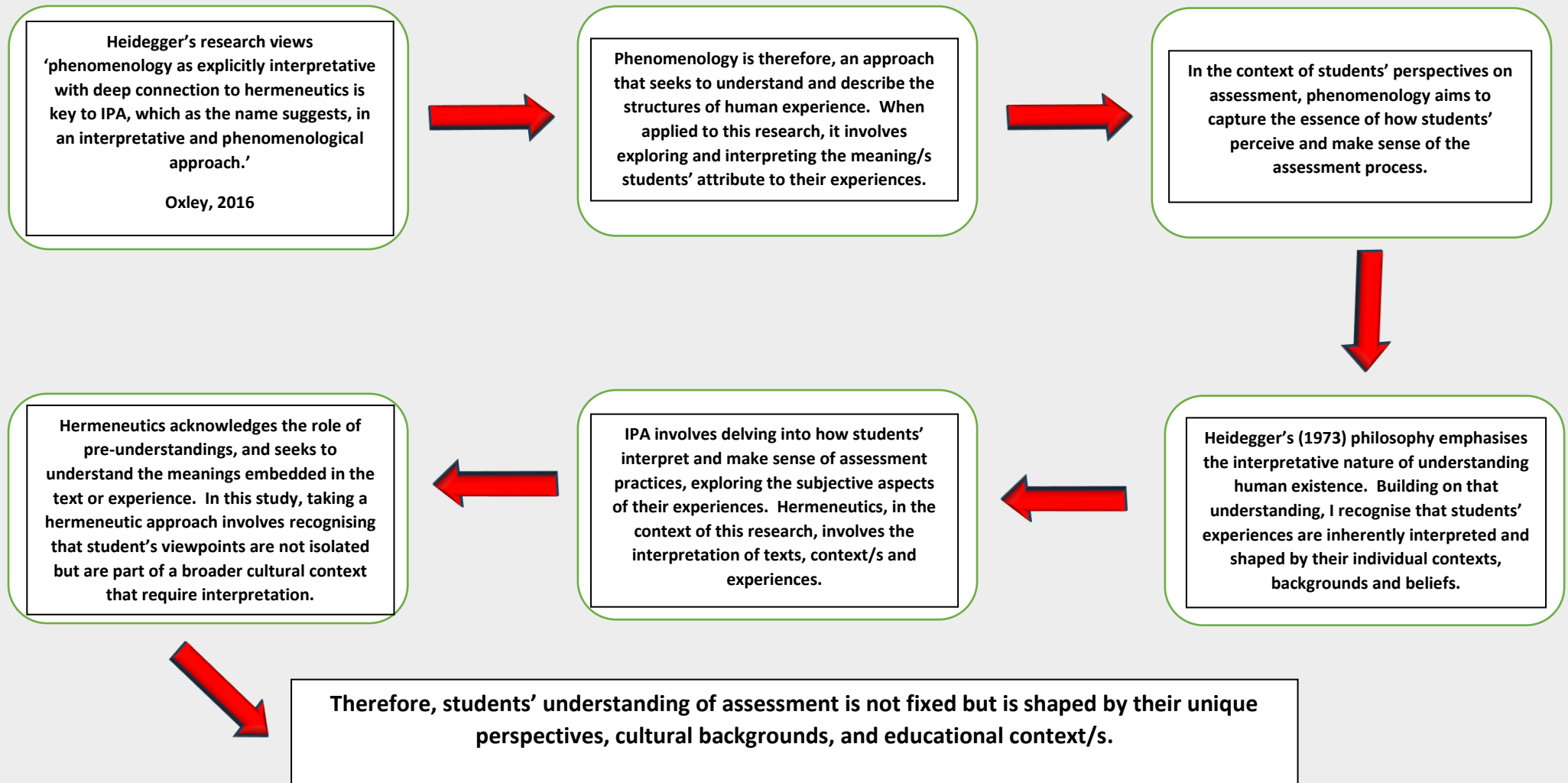


Figure 4.2 – Hermeneutics – A reflection on how it features and is applied to this study

One's own understanding, knowledge, values, context and predeterminations are invariably brought to the happenstance of the phenomenon, and it is incumbent on the researcher to acknowledge this from the outset of the research process and to reflect on it dynamically throughout. It may not, as Oxley (2016) suggests, be easy for a researcher to identify their own presumptions at the outset of a body of study. Concurrently, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2021) aver that it might not be until the researcher is provoked by something inimitable unearthed during the research process, can they then begin to identify a potential preconception which they have brought to the process. The process is, according to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2021) both cyclical and incomplete; cyclical due to the repetitive nature of the unearthing of further preconceptions throughout the interpretative process, and incomplete because the process is continual and unearthing is only ever going to be partly complete, a concept which resonates with this researcher.

The relationship between the researcher and the participant's interpretation of their experience is complex since the researcher may only become cognisant of their preconceptions when the data has begun to be interpreted (Oxley, 2016). The highlighting of the intricate nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participants' interpretation of their experiences was recognised by this researcher during the data collection phase of the research when students may have voiced concerns or opinions regarding assessment or their experiences of assessment which may either have jarred or resonated with my own. A continual awareness of further preconceptions being unearthed during the interpretative process is a key component of being a reflective IPA practitioner and formed a critical component of this research study; an awareness that moments of revelation can and will occur as the interpretation of data evolves and deepens over time. Oxley (2016) contends that this dynamic, where the researcher encounters challenges to their initial assumptions while interacting with the data, is referred to as the hermeneutic circle.

Such is a precept which Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2021) aver stands at the core of IPA – the objective of the researcher is to understand the whole by investigating the component part, but recognising that to understand the part, one must consider the whole. In the case of this research, the whole could be defined as the researcher's interpretation of both the individual and the collective assessment experiences of the students whilst acknowledging that preconceptions will be unearthed throughout the process and the part might be the students' individual experiences of assessment throughout JC.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2021) contend that the researcher may be able to proffer an interpretation which may illuminate a particular aspect, or aspects of the participant's experience which they have not shared or cannot share; a phenomenon which is considered to be veiled within the narrative of the participant's experience and which may only be exposed as a consequence of the researcher's engagement with the data. Oxley (2016) suggests that the function of the researcher is to then construct the data into a meaning which is both intelligible and reasoned, a tenet which guided my research, particularly when I was compiling the findings and discussions chapters of this thesis.

4.3.1.3 Idiography

The final theoretical principle from IPA to be discussed is idiography. Idiography is associated with an emphasis on the particular and on exacting individual detail. It is concerned with individualism, and a responsibility to a thorough finely textured examination of reliable, unique and usually subjective phenomena (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). However, Smith and Osborne (2008) contend that, because an idiographic study is developed from case studies based on individual experiences, it is viable to construct distinctive and explicit accounts or narratives

apropos those individuals. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2021) add the view that it is possible to connect the idiographic to the collective by examining the broader patterns, themes or implications that emerge from the individual experiences of the ‘expert group’ – a contention which sits well within this particular investigation of students’ assessment experiences at JC.

IPA can be said to take an idiographic approach as it concentrates on a small sample of participants, elicited from within a particular expert cohort, without any effort to generalise the findings beyond their specific context (Oxley, 2016). Smith (2004), the principal contemporary academic responsible for progressing the IPA methodology, does not support the quest for generalisation, rather he argues that there is value to be unearthed through an investigation of each individual case. However, other contemporary academics, such as Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), Gil-Rodriguez and Hefferon (2015) and Allan and Eatough (2016), note that in an archetypal IPA investigation, each case is examined autonomously (and considered to be significant and weighty on its own merit), followed by an investigation to identify themes which are considered to be distinct and indistinct *across all cases within the study*. Elaborating on this line of reasoning and applying it to this research study, I have incorporated this approach to my research study by giving voice to all the participants involved, while also identifying themes, both distinct and indistinct from *within and across the cohort*.

Oxley (2016) posits that it is possible to use findings from IPA research to illuminate existing research which has been completed by using a nomothetic approach a little more deeply. Again this tenet brings one back to the concept of examining the whole to make sense of the part, and the part to make sense of the whole; the hermeneutic circle. This is precisely what is possible with the findings yielded from this research, as the data can be used to further illuminate the student findings connected to McGarr *et al.*’s (2023) *Exploring the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle: A Longitudinal Study*, concerned with evaluating the

implementation and impact of the *Junior Cycle Framework 2015* (NCCA, 2015) in post-primary schools in Ireland.

4.4 Research Design – Overview of the Research Study

Many academics have promulgated detailed structures and procedures for effecting IPA research (Finlay, 2011; Larkin and Thompson, 2011; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Smith and Eatough, 2007; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Smith and Osborn, 2008). Interestingly, Smith and Osborn (2008, p. 55) contend that there is no absolute, conclusive method to conducting this type of study and advise that, as the researcher proceeds, ‘you may find yourself adapting the method to your own particular way of working and the particular topic you are investigating’. They note that IPA research is a particularly suitable approach when the topic being examined is either complex or new; given the novel nature and longitudinal aspect of my study, their words resonated with me. In the next section of this chapter, the research design and fieldwork components for this study will be outlined, encompassing the following elements: (i) constructing the research questions, (ii) choosing the sample, (iii) timeline, (iv) sketches, (v) focus groups, (vi) semi-structured interviews and (vii) questionnaire.

4.4.1 Constructing the Research Questions

Research questions in IPA studies are generally framed openly and broadly; there is never an attempt to test a preordained research hypothesis by the investigator. Rather, the purpose of the study is to examine flexibly and in detail, a particular topic of interest (Smith and Osborn, 2008). When constructing the research questions for this study, the work of Larkin and

Thompson (2011) and Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) underpinned the approach in formulating an overarching research question – how do students *experience* assessment *throughout* their JC learning journey? The IPA philosophy of understanding how people make sense of their lived experiences is fundamentally an interpretative endeavour, best accomplished through an exacting investigation of individual cases which have experienced or are experiencing the phenomenon of interest to the researcher (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009); a philosophical approach that resonates with the researcher and best suits this qualitative inquiry. When research questions are focused primarily on how the participants in an inquiry make sense of their experiences, IPA is the correct method of approach (Larkin and Thompson, 2011). By deconstructing the initial research question into smaller components, the five research questions guiding this study were crafted, here replicated from Section 4.1 for clarity and convenience.

- RQ1. What does a first year/second year/third year student understand the term ‘assessment’ to mean and does that understanding shift as they move through their first three years of post-primary schooling?
- RQ2. (a) What factors shape students’ preferences for summative or formative assessment and do these experiences alter as they move through their Junior Cycle assessment journey? (b) What are the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as perceived and enacted by students at Junior Cycle and how do these assessments influence their educational experience?
- RQ3. What skills, values, knowledge and understanding do students’ perceive they acquire or develop specifically as a result of classroom-based assessments undertaken in second and third year?

- RQ4. How do students' perceive the correlation between the assessments they complete and their overall learning experiences?
- RQ5. How do students' assessment experiences evolve throughout their Junior Cycle, and in what ways do these experiences contribute to their growth, development and learning?

When comparisons are made between questions formulated for IPA research with those produced for a more traditional phenomenological approach, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) contend that the IPA questions are usually related more to the how rather than the why of the particular phenomenon. This concept will be demonstrated more clearly in relation to this study when the questions above are deconstructed further and outlined in the schedule for the focus groups and semi-structured interviews later on in this section of the chapter. Once the pertinent research questions had been formulated, the next step in the process was to find a cohort with whom to work; a process outlined in the following paragraphs.

4.4.2 Choosing the Sample

Before any participants could be identified, there were several permissions to be sought and compliance matters to be fulfilled, to ensure that the research would be undertaken with due regard afforded to the required ethical considerations when working with persons under the age of 18, the safeguarding of data, and other permissions needed to conduct the study within a school site. I was guided throughout the research process by University College Cork's (UCC, 2021) School of Education Research Ethics Committee's *Principles and Procedures for*

Undertaking Research in Undergraduate and Taught Postgraduate Programmes, Key Ethical Practices and Expectations for Postgraduate Students and Supervisors (June, 2021) and by UCC's *Code of Research Conduct*, V2.3 (October, 2019). The steps undertaken are outlined in Figure 4.3. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018, p. 202) assert that 'the quality of a piece of research stands or falls by the appropriateness of its methodology and instrumentation and by the suitability of the sampling strategy that has been adopted'.

When choosing participants for a study which takes an IPA approach, Larkin and Thompson (2011) contend that the researcher should choose a sample that can deeply relate to and proffer insight and understanding into the experience of the phenomenon in question. In order to map students' longitudinal experiences of assessment at JC level, the most appropriate cohort to consider was a group I could follow throughout their JC continuum.

I chose to ask students to participate from within my own school site. Given the restrictions experienced during Covid-19, I considered it to be more practical to ask for participants in my own school as this would be the least problematic in terms of access without knowing whether there would be further lockdowns as the pandemic unfolded (this was essential considering that the data collection process started in 2021 while a level of school and social restrictions were still in place). This is known as Purposeful Sampling - a method extensively used in qualitative research to ascertain and select participants which are evidence-rich for the most efficacious use of constrained resources (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002).

Permission and Compliance Steps involved in this Research

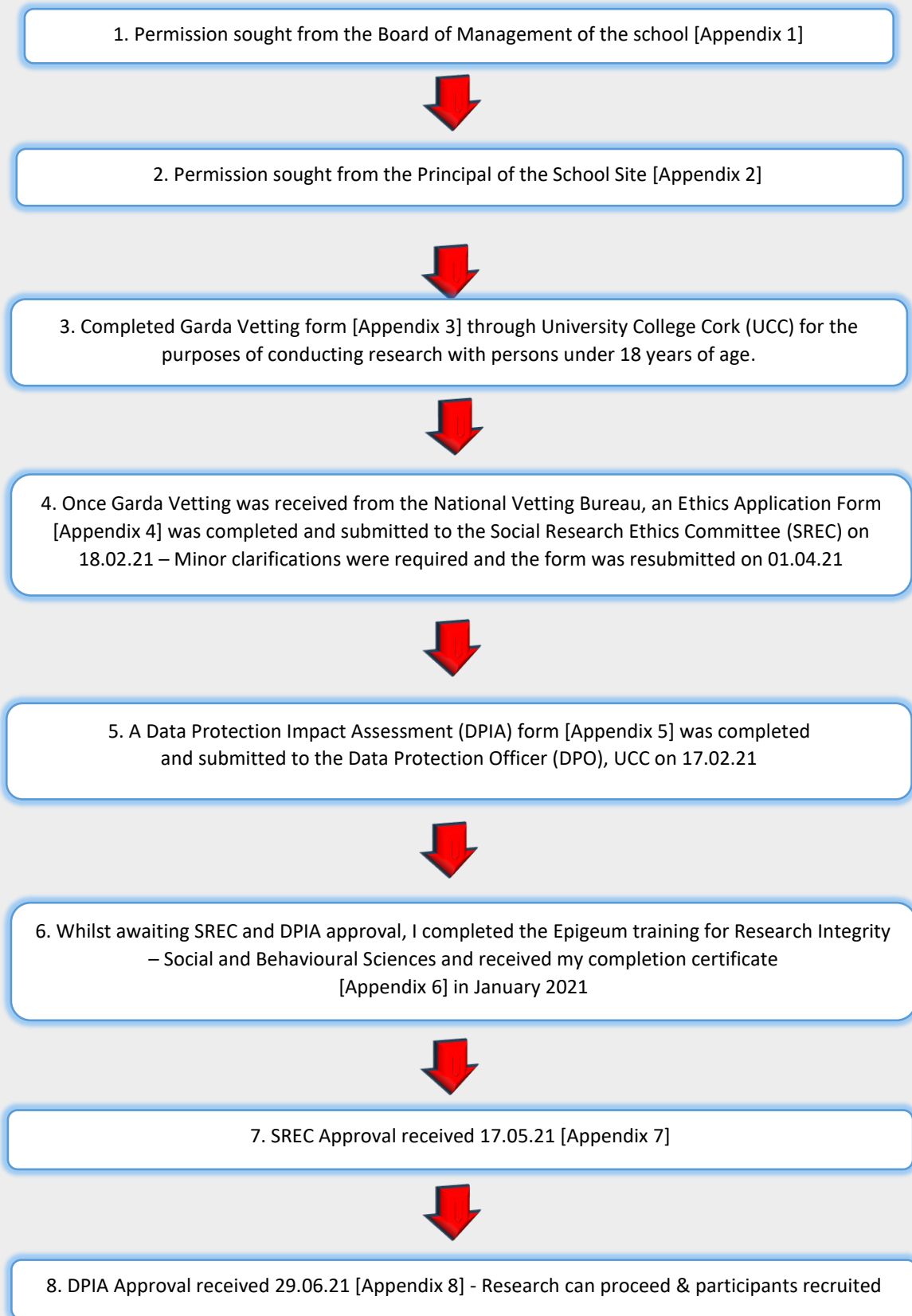


Figure 4.3 – Permission and Compliance Steps involved in this Research Study

I chose to ask for participants in the study from the ninety-six students who began their educational journey in the school in September of 2020, once approval had been received from the Board of Management and the Principal. My intention was to follow those who volunteered to participate in the research through their Junior Cycle journey until they received their Junior Cycle results in October 2023. Approval was given for the study to proceed by the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) of UCC on the 17th May 2021 and by the Data Protection Officer (DPO) on the 29th June 2021. When the students returned to school on the 31st August 2021, each of the students (then in second year) was given an A4 envelope which contained a Parent/Guardian Information Letter [Appendix 9], a Student Information Letter [Appendix 10], a Parent/Guardian Consent Form [Appendix 11] and a Student Assent Form [Appendix 12].

I personally gave the students their packs and I described the nature of the research to them during their class form time. I made it clear to the students that they were not obliged to participate in any aspect of the study and that there would be no consequence incurred on those who did not wish to participate or on those who decided to take part initially and later opted out of the research.

Students were also informed that there were no special rewards for participating in the study and that they could withdraw at any time prior to completing any of the questionnaires or within one month of focus group or interview participation. I explained the longitudinal nature of the study which would involve checking in with the students at important moments during their assessment journey throughout JC.

Those who were interested in participating in the research were asked to complete the required paperwork, including the consent and assent forms. Nineteen students agreed (with parental consent) to participate in the study and they were recruited once the forms had been returned to me. Significantly, there was no attrition during the focus groups and interview components

of the study. Each student remained engaged with the process throughout the focus group and interview stages in second and third year. However, there was participant attrition. Three students did not complete the last stage of data collection, the anonymous, qualitative, online questionnaire. Miller, Chan and Farmer (2018) aver that the more significant the experience is to the participants, the more likely they are to offer detailed and rich data. Given that the students participating in this study are subsumed by the assessment process on a daily basis in school, I was confident that the data generated from them would be abundant, informative and revealing.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) aver that within IPA research there is no definitive answer to the question of sample size, while Clarke (2010) avers that a sample size of between four and ten would be the default case study size for a doctorate study. Coyle (2014) specifies a number of between one and twelve. However, I did not want to turn any student away from participating in the study. I was also cognisant of the fact that students might drop out of the research (given its longitudinal nature) and so I decided that the best course of action was to work with the nineteen students who were willing to participate in the study using all the data gathered.

Of the 19 students who participated in the study, I taught 13 of them. When conducting research with children whom one teaches, it is imperative to critically engage with the inherent power dynamics that shape the research process. As Lundy (2007) argues, ethical research with children necessitates more than merely granting them a voice; it requires ensuring that their perspectives are actively facilitated, respected, and meaningfully acted upon. Tisdall (2017) further emphasises the need for a participatory approach that accounts for childrens' agency while recognising the complexities of vulnerability and social accountability in adult-child interactions. To mitigate power imbalances, researchers must adopt reflexive practices and employ a child-rights-based framework that prioritises ongoing, informed consent and

dialogical engagement. Clark (2020) highlights that fostering a ‘listening culture’ is essential in ensuring that research does not merely extract data from children but instead co-constructs knowledge in a manner that empowers them. By embedding these principles into the research design, I believe that I created an ethical and inclusive methodological approach that foregrounded the students’ experiences without reinforcing hierarchical structures.

4.4.3 Timeline of Data Collection

Generally, focus groups and interviews are regarded as the cornerstone of qualitative research and conducting them in-person has always been regarded as the ‘gold standard’ (Novick, 2008; Opdenakker, 2006; Sy *et al.*, 2020;). It was for this reason that a schedule [Table4.1] was developed to try to ensure that the in-person element of the research was conducted as soon as possible, given the volatile and dynamic educational landscape created by the pandemic.

Table 4.1 – Timeline for the Data Collection Process

<u>Schedule</u>	<u>Dates</u>
<u>Focus Group 1.1; Focus Group 1.2 and Focus Group1. 3</u> Second Year students reflecting on their experiences and perceptions of assessment throughout First Year with consideration given to their Entrance Assessment also. Sketches depicting the term assessment drawn by students.	Completed in November of 2021
<u>Focus Group 2.1; Focus Group 2.2; Focus Group 2.3 and Focus Group 2.4</u> Second Year students reflecting on their experiences and perceptions of assessment throughout Second Year, including Classroom Based Assessments.	Completed in April/May of 2022

<u>19 Individual Semi-structured Interviews</u> Third Year students reflecting on their experiences and perceptions of assessment throughout Third Year, up to their Pre-Examinations.	Completed in February/March of 2023
<u>Questionnaire</u> Final qualitative, anonymous, online questionnaire issued to participants when they received their Junior Cycle results, in an effort to deepen understanding in areas that require it and to potentially ask more sensitive questions which could not be asked during the focus group or interview process.	Completed in October & November of 2023

4.4.4 Participant-produced Sketches

Sketches are used in IPA research as a mechanism ‘through which participants can better explore and communicate their lifeworlds’ (Boden, Larkin and Iyer, 2018, p. 218). Researchers who use the IPA methodology have traditionally gathered data via participants’ verbal narratives, with interviews generally being espoused as the most suitable mechanism of data collection (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). However, Boden and Eatough (2014) suggest that the completeness of the human lived experience is not easy to communicate verbally, with Todres (2007) avowing that the complexity of the human experience can frequently seem beyond words. The use of participant-produced sketches has become increasingly prevalent with researchers in the social sciences and humanities (Ganesh, 2011; Hogan and Pink, 2012; Sheehan, 2016). Hogan and Pink (2012) aver the importance of emphasising the experiential, sensory aspects, and modes of understanding, existence, and recollection that may not be easily expressed verbally, while Ganesh (2011) contends that this approach can be used as a descriptive or analytical tool in research.

I considered the fact that some students might be more visually inclined than others and to ensure that I endeavoured to get as experience-near as possible, I decided to incorporate an element of drawing into my IPA canon, asking students to draw what the term assessment meant to them at the beginning of the first focus group session. Boden, Larkin and Iyer (2018) argue that visual imagery can serve as a valuable complementary starting point for exploring lived experiences within the framework of IPA. The act of drawing itself seemed to settle the students and lent itself to narrowing the students' focus for a few minutes, allowing them to think about assessment at the beginning of the first focus group session and what they perceived their assessment experiences looked like at that moment in time. In this study, the nineteen students were asked to complete sketches at the start of the first focus group interviews on what the term assessment meant to them or how it made them feel. They were given a short period of time to complete them (5-8 minutes), and four of these sketches are presented in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

4.4.5 Focus Groups

While focus groups appeal in qualitative research generally (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005; Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub, 1996), there is some debate as to whether focus groups should form part of the IPA approach as a method of collecting data. Criticisms of focus groups centre on the challenges encountered by the researcher in inferring the idiographic accounts which tend to be more aligned with the collective experience of the focus group setting (Palmer *et al.*, 2010), or the group voice dominating the account of the individual (Tompkins and Eatough, 2010). However, recent perspectives on this criticism (Love, Vetere and Davis, 2020; Mills *et al.*, 2023; Satherley *et al.*, 2022; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021) contend that focus groups

can be used where the groups are relatively small, the participants have shared similar experiences, and where the idiographic accounts each individual narrates can be illuminated clearly. The group of students who participated in this research meet the criteria of these recent perspectives as they are all in the same year group within the same school, which represents not only a similar but indeed a *shared experience* of assessment.

Building on these contemporary perspectives, I chose to work with the students initially through the focus group mechanism to build confidence in terms of speaking about their experiences of assessment as young adolescents, and to build a rapport with me as the researcher. There is also no doubt that the difficulties Covid-19 posed at the time also led me to use the focus group as a mechanism to begin the data collection of the longitudinal study at the earliest juncture possible as I was concerned that further disruptions and school closures could take place during that academic year.

The focus groups did not engage in collective discussions around assessment experiences, rather they provided a space for students to give voice to their individual experiences and perceptions within a group space that was reassuring and respectful as I collected the students' data via a series of semi-structured questions. Informed by the literature and policy documents on assessment at JC level and through discussion with my supervisors, I constructed an initial focus group semi-structured question schedule [Appendix 13] that consisted of open, probing and experiential questions. These were intended to encourage the students who took part in this study to reflect on their subjective experiences in detail.

The focus group sessions ranged in length from 32 minutes to 44 minutes, were recorded using a digital recording device, and were transcribed verbatim by me to ensure accuracy and authenticity. Student names were anonymised at the point of transcription (using the following letters from the Greek alphabet, Delta, Sigma and Kappa and numbers e.g. Delta 1, Sigma 5,

Kappa 3 and so on), however, more personal pseudonyms were assigned at the point of writing up the findings. The study took place in an all-girls school, thus all groups comprised of girls. The initial focus groups held during the first week of November 2021 [FG1.1, n=6; FG1.2, n=6; FG1.3, n=7 (Total n=19)] were conducted using the Covid-19 guidelines for schools and both the researcher and the students were wearing face masks, which made it challenging to decipher the voice recordings for transcription afterwards. The composition of the focus groups, (including students with an additional educational need), was entirely dependent on timetabling constraints and extra-curricular activities which the students were involved in and were not in any way contrived by this researcher. Student sketches were produced in the first focus group sessions [FG1.1, 1.2 and 1.3].

Restrictions had eased by April of 2022 and the second set of focus groups, which took place during the last week of April and the first week of May, were less constrained by Covid-19. Interview questions were modified to incorporate questions about classroom-based assessments [Appendix 14]. Again, the composition of the focus groups, (including students with an additional educational need), was influenced by timetabling constraints and by extracurricular activities.

Thus, in order to ensure that all nineteen students had an opportunity to articulate their experiences in this phase of the study, four focus groups took place [FG2.1, n=5; FG2.2, n=4; FG2.3, n=3; FG2.4, n=7 (Total n=19)]. Therefore, every student involved in the study took part in two focus group sessions in the academic year 2021/2022 [Table 4.2]. There were two students with an additional educational need; both students have a specific learning difficulty (dyslexia).

Table 4.2 – Focus Group Composition and Descriptive Overview of Participants

Date of Focus Group (FG) and FG Number	Number of students in FG	Age Range	Mean Age	Number of Students with an AEN in FG
02.11.21 (FG1.1)	6	13yrs 3mths – 13yrs 11mths	13yrs 7mths	0
04.11.21 (FG1.2)	6	13yrs 4mths – 13yrs 10mths	13yrs 7mths	2
09.11.21 (FG1.3)	7	13yrs 4mths – 13yrs 11mths	13yrs 8mths	0
26.04.22 (FG2.1)	5	13yrs 9mths – 14yrs 3mths	14yrs 0 mths	0
26.04.22 (FG2.2)	4	13yrs 9mths – 14yrs 4mths	14yrs 1mth	1
28.04.22 (FG2.3)	3	13yrs 10mths – 14yrs 4mths	14yrs 1 mth	1
03.05.22 (FG2.4)	7	13yrs 11mths – 14yrs 6mths	14yrs 2mths	0

The small numbers involved in the groups and structure of the sessions allowed for idiographic accounts to be generated without difficulty and individual responses generated to questions posed during these sessions were linked to the longer individual participant interviews which took place in April 2023. The combined data produced a rich, multi-dimensional, longitudinal account of the assessment experiences of the students over time, appropriate to an IPA approach. The focus group data analysis and the interview analysis were guided by standard IPA practice of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009).

4.4.6 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are the cornerstone of any IPA research approach. As an early career researcher using the semi-structured interview framework, I reflected that my approach mirrored the experience of Guihen (2020). I endorsed the flexibility of being able to probe the students' responses to the various questions asked, while having a list of further pre-planned questions at my disposal very reassuring. The interviews took place in April of 2023, just after the Pre-Exams (held in February 2023) and before the Junior Cycle exams (scheduled for June 2023) so that the nineteen students did not feel under pressure in terms of giving up their time to meet with me. In acknowledging that these interviews took place towards the end of the data collection timeline and that focus groups were used as an early strategy, the aim was to achieve a level of trust and rapport with the students that supported and facilitated one interview with each of the nineteen students in the participant cohort. The interview questions were again modified slightly given the fact that the students had almost completed their third year in secondary school at this stage of the study [Appendix 15]. Although the interviews were planned to run for forty minutes approximately, effectively, the interviews were a little shorter. This occurred as students were arriving to the interview room coming from classrooms on the other side of the campus and unforeseen interruptions could occur, as is normal in a busy school site. Interviews ranged in length from 26 minutes to 34 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed by me to ensure an immediate construction of familiarity and knowledge with the data obtained. Student names were again anonymised at the point of transcription using the same Greek letter and number assigned to them from the focus group sessions. This allowed me to seamlessly link the data gleaned from students in the focus group to their individual interview data.

While the semi-structured interview questions aided my navigation through the interview process, it certainly did not restrict the dialogue. Instead, I felt that the conversation regarding

assessment flowed, for the most part, and allowed the students an unconstrained mechanism to discuss their experiences and perceptions without any undue boundaries. Participants were not given access to the interview schedule before the interviews; this was done to avoid potential bias, maintain objectivity, preserve confidentiality and promote naturalistic remarks and accounts to elicit authentic and genuine responses. However, as the participants of the study are adolescents, it is important to mention that there were a couple of students who found the free flow of conversation difficult and who struggled to perorate about their experiences, while others were more adept at immersing themselves in the conversation and provided rich accounts of their experiences.

Noon (2018) considers the area of prompting interview participants during the IPA semi-structured interview process and concludes that, in circumstances where participants find it challenging to discuss a phenomenon in detail, or where a question was not understood, prompts may be drawn upon to augment the fullness of the response. Prompting during the interview process did occur on occasion during these interviews where necessary.

4.4.7 Questionnaire

An anonymous online questionnaire [Appendix 16] was administered to the 19 participants of the study in October 2023 when the students were in fourth year and had received their Junior Cycle results. Toepoel (2017) avers that online platforms are now the prevailing mode for qualitative questionnaire or survey delivery. The questionnaire contained fifteen questions, four of which were closed, offering only a yes or no reply, and one was a Likert scale type question. The remaining ten questions were open-ended, three of which aimed to investigate a small number of assessment areas I considered sensitive and which were not explored during

the face to face focus groups or interviews, such as parental input into classroom-based assessment projects and/or presentations. Braun *et al.* (2021) demonstrate through their research that qualitative surveys, when considered as a whole, can offer richness and depth, even if individual responses are brief. Qualitative surveys offer a broad lens to the researcher to explore a topic of interest, and has the potential to capture a wealth of experiences, perceptions and meaning making (Braun *et al.*, 2017). The questionnaire administered for the purposes of this research also offered an opportunity to explore the students' perceptions of their performance in the JC exams – as they had received their results from the State Examinations Commission at that juncture.

Sixteen of the nineteen participating students completed the questionnaire, placing participant retention at 84% across all data points and procedures. One student had left the school in September 2023 and two students did not complete it. Analysis of the questionnaire was again guided by standard IPA practice outlined in Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), an area which will be explored in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

4.5 Data Analysis

Larkin and Thompson (2011) contend that there is no singular correct way to undertake data analysis within the IPA framework. However, all IPA research is rooted within the same critical focus which consists of a deep consideration of individual participant's experiences, reflecting on the ways in which the participants construct meaning from those experiences, and interpreting the experiences of the participants within theoretical and social constructs. The insights generated through this study were derived from a specific cohort of 19 students, attending a single-gender school situated in an affluent and socio-culturally homogeneous

context. While this setting enabled a rich and contextually grounded examination of student experiences, it does limit the extent to which the findings can be extrapolated to the wider Junior Cycle student population in Ireland. In particular, the homogeneity of the participants' socio-economic and cultural backgrounds restricts the study's capacity to capture the potentially divergent experiences of assessment encountered by students in more diverse educational contexts, including co-educational schools, socio-economically disadvantaged environments, or ethnically heterogeneous communities. For the purposes of this research, the data generated from the focus groups, individual interviews and questionnaire was analysed according to the Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) framework [Table 4.3].

Table 4.3 – Six analytic steps of IPA: Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.82)

Step 1	Reading and re-reading of the focus group/interview/questionnaire transcript while listening to the audio file where relevant
Step 2	Initial noting
Step 3	Developing emerging themes
Step 4	Searching for connections across emerging themes
Step 5	Moving on to the next case
Step 6	Identifying patterns across cases

The six steps outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) presents a structured analytical framework, while offering the freedom to explore and delineate my own pathway to collate and examine the data. Listening to one interview recording, while simultaneously reading through the transcript ascribed to it helped me to situate the individual student within her lived experience of assessment, placing her at the centre of the systematic process.

The following sections outline the manual thematic coding process using IPA to explore students' lived experiences of assessment. Data from interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and sketches were analysed through descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual lenses to identify

key themes and patterns. By integrating textual and visual data, the analysis captured both individual complexities and shared perspectives, offering a deeper understanding of how students made sense of their assessment experiences.

4.5.1 Thematic Coding – Working Manually with the Data

Once I had developed a knowledge and basic understanding of the data, I then embarked on the second step which involved the initial annotation process. By following the work of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), I began to re-familiarise myself with each individual's experience (via sketch, focus group, interview and questionnaire data). I then began to annotate the printed narratives physically [Appendix 17], by making handwritten notes in the margins 'to understand what matters to the participants, with attention to specific events, particular relationships, core values, and so forth' (Miller, Chan and Farmer, 2018, p. 246). It is important to note that the data was aggregated and analysed in two different clusters, one represented by the focus groups, individual interviews and questionnaires and the other represented by the sketches collected at the first focus group sessions. The analysis process for each of these clusters is described below.

4.5.1.1 Analysis of Focus Groups, Individual Interviews and Questionnaires

Exploring the semantic content of the data allows the researcher to subsume oneself in the data, to become immersed in the process. Aligning to the first step, I explored the data from a descriptive perspective, considering the experiences of the students from an expressive point

of view. Then, I re-read the data considering the language used by the students as they described their lived experiences of assessment, noting particular words and expressions that the students used to describe their experiences.

Moving to the second step, I read the data once more through a conceptual lens, with a view to identifying the key concepts emerging from the narratives and again noting these in the margins of the transcripts. The principle of considering the data through three disparate lenses was employed for all nineteen participant interviews, seven focus groups and respondent questionnaires which aided the next step of the data analysis.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) aver that the third step of an IPA approach to data analysis is to develop emerging themes from the data. They assert that this is the most challenging step of the process as one endeavours to bend pieces of narrative together with one's notes into existent and authentic themes which were succinct yet multi-faceted, anchored within the text but nonetheless conceptual, and I would concur with this view. The process takes time and the labels attaching to the themes occasionally changed as my gaze narrowed and refocused on particular areas of the narrative.

Continuing to be guided by the literature on IPA but rooted in the work of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), the next step involved identifying possible links and/or patterns developing across the emerging themes. While the idiographic principle emphasises the uniqueness of each participant's experience, patterns and themes may be identified *across individual data accounts*. Throughout this phase of the analysis, attention was paid to commonalities and differences in how participants made sense of their experiences. The developed themes highlighted shared aspects and experiences of assessment at JC, or variations in individual perspectives, thereby ensuring that the study captures the depth and uniqueness of each

participant's subjective reality whilst also revealing commonalities that contribute to a nuanced understanding of the collective experience.

Aiming to find connections between themes in keeping with conceptual similarities (Smith and Osborn, 2008), I completed this part of the process on a separate piece of paper to the transcript, listing the themes chronologically based on the order in which they materialised in the narrative. Then, I clustered themes which were broadly related together until I had compiled a sequence of super-ordinate themes across the data set [Appendix 18]. Upon further analysis, sub-ordinate themes [Appendix 19] began to be more evident from within the super-ordinate themes. Other themes were abandoned as the process evolved as I believed they were constructed on an incidental foundation which was too fragile to support them. However, if a particular theme was put to one side during this process, it can be argued that the idiographic focus remains intact because further analysis of the data continued to seek a nuanced understanding of participants' personal experiences. The essence of idiography lies in the commitment to understanding individual experiences deeply, and adjustments in themes are part of the iterative and reflexive nature of the IPA approach (Noon, 2018).

The penultimate stage of the process involved moving on to study the next transcript and examining it using the same systematic approach taken with the first. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 100) note that 'it is important to treat the next case on its own terms, to do justice to its own individuality'. In effect, the researcher acknowledges the findings and meanings unearthed from the first piece of data but must 'bracket' same or put it to one side to consider the next piece of data on its own merit. The final stage of the process was concerned with endeavouring to identify patterns, connections and correlations across the cases, leading to the construction of a master table of super-ordinate themes and sub-ordinate themes [Appendix 20].

4.5.1.2 Analysis of Sketches

The sketches produced by the students during the first focus group were also analysed. Sheehan (2016) argues that the drawings can be used as a descriptive tool to uncover individuals' perceptions of a particular concept or idea. Used from an analytical perspective, sketches could be used to compare how an individual changes perspective over time (Ganesh, 2011). The sketches produced by the students for this study are used as a descriptive tool to elude their understandings of and perceptions towards assessment *at that moment in time* during their first focus group session.

Banks (2001), Noth (2011) and Sheehan (2016) provide an approach to make sense of the sketches which is employed in this research, that of the internal and external narrative of the image. Banks (2001) avers that the internal narrative is related to the actual content of the image whereas the external narrative refers to the socially constructed context which contributed to the production of the image. Noth (2011, p.304) contends that 'what pictures depict is very often already a symbolic sign whose interpretation required cultural knowledge'. Furthermore, Noth (2011) notes that the internal narrative of the sketches may be analysed using visual salience and pragmatics. The visual salience of an individual and their positioning in a drawing or sketch, whether it be in the foreground, background or is a central position, corresponds to its importance in pictorial meaning. Meanwhile visual pragmatics is concerned with the way sketches are used and the effects they can have on those who view them (Noth, 2011).

Ganesh (2011, p. 238) states that drawings or sketches produced by participants in a study have the following features:

- they can be projective; they permit expression of feeling and imagery;
- they allow for defining and redefining shared attitudes held by society;
- and they can be analysed using psychological, sociological, and

cultural lenses with attention to the phenomena or concepts under study.

For the purposes of this research, the sketches produced by the students during the first focus group offer not only a rich data set but rather another stand-alone lens through which the term assessment might be considered and interpreted.

The analysis of student-produced sketches followed a structured approach, primarily guided by Banks' (2001) framework of internal and external narratives, with additional insights from Sheehan (2016) and Noth (2011). The students had been asked to write their names on the back of the sketches. Once scanned on to my computer and saved on a data encrypted file, I anonymised the sketches assigning the students' corresponding pseudonym to the file name. The process began by examining the internal narrative of each sketch, focusing on the content within the sketches, including symbols, objects, figures, and spatial arrangements. Visual salience (Noth, 2011) was considered, analysing the prominence and positioning of elements within the drawings to determine their significance. Following this, the external narrative of each sketch was explored, interpreting how the sketches reflected broader social and educational contexts. This involved assessing how students' lived experiences and institutional influences shaped their representations of assessment, alongside considerations of visual pragmatics, examining how the sketches functioned as a communicative tool.

Once the internal and external narratives had been analysed, emerging themes were identified across the sketches, highlighting common representations of assessment, such as stress, success, pressure, or failure. The use of visual data provided an alternative perspective on assessment, reinforcing the value of a multi-modal approach in capturing the complexity of students' meaning-making processes. Four sketches were chosen for discussion in Chapter 5 of the thesis due to their clarity, ease of interpretation, and ability to effectively illustrate key

themes emerging from the data, providing insightful visual representations of students' perceptions of assessment.

4.5.1.3 Synthesising the Data

The integration of visual data with focus group, interview, and questionnaire findings followed the principles of IPA to provide a comprehensive exploration of students' lived experiences of assessment. By synthesising textual and visual data, the analysis captured both explicit verbal reflections and the meanings conveyed through sketches, offering a deeper interpretation of individual and collective perspectives. The internal and external narratives of the sketches (Banks, 2001) were examined alongside participants' spoken and written accounts, enabling connections to be drawn between how students articulated their experiences linguistically and how they represented them visually. Data from each participant - sketches, focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires - were matched to provide a holistic understanding of their experiences. This multi-modal approach enriched the interpretative process, offering a more holistic understanding of how students made sense of assessment while maintaining IPA's focus on individual meaning and context.

The interpretative vigour of IPA is a critical benefit of the approach which allowed me to engage with how the students were experiencing their assessment journeys at JC and the meaning they attached to those experiences throughout the process. The hermeneutic circle which speaks to the vigorous, non-linear relationship between the part and the whole (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) can be identified within this research; the sketch, the single word uttered by a student which is connected to a sentence, an extract which illuminates a transcript, or all of the transcripts informing the research study collectively.

It evokes for this researcher the scientific concept of onion weathering; a peeling away of layers exposing what lies at the centre in a new light. The hypothesis of unwrapping the sketches and the narratives to mine ‘gems’ within the data is also an important component of the interpretative process with Clifford, Craig and McCourt (2019, p. 249) suggesting that phrases ‘can act as a window into an entire experience’. Smith (2011, p. 7) avers that when considering the analytic possibilities of IPA and the significance of ‘gems’ in heuristic research, it is ‘the thing that stands out when you are reading a transcript, it’s the extract that demands attention and prompts further analytic work’.

The use of ‘gems’ is one approach utilised in this study in relation to data analysis and the development of the findings of this research; the analysis of the sketches – along with the transcripts from the focus groups and interviews, combined with the narratives generated from the questionnaires were found to be littered with them when the data was explored, analysed and deconstructed. These will be discussed in detail in the findings sections of the thesis.

4.5.2 Presentation of Data and Findings

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) posit that, as the writing process unfolds, certain themes become more prominent while others diminish, ultimately shaping the report. As I began to unpack the thematic tables and proffer a narrative to explicate the experiential accounts of the students during the writing up of the findings phase of the research, it felt that this explicatory process acted as a lever of breadth once more; illuminating those themes which required descriptive elucidation, interpretation and revelation. Noon (2018, p. 80) avers that ‘researchers must seek to distinguish between what participants actually said, and their interpretation of it’. I opted therefore to produce a narrative argument unambiguously

punctuated with precise extracts from the transcriptions in an effort to give voice to the participants' experiences of assessment at JC and of their lived realities.

According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), IPA researchers can employ one of two methodologies to present their data. On one hand, one can write up distinct results and discussion chapters where the results chapter is concerned with explicating the emergent theme analysis and the discussion chapter focuses on connecting the analysis to existing literature. On the other hand, one can combine both components into a section which deals with both results and discussion. I decided to present my data utilising a combined results and discussion approach linking my findings to the research questions posed.

It must also be acknowledged that sketches and short narrative quotations are, in essence, incomplete and cannot entirely replicate the lived assessment experiences of the students in this study. However, IPA's commitment to affording privilege and voice to individual experiences and taking an idiographic approach to the data collection ensures that the themes identified remain personalised to the narrative of the individual (Jeong and Othman, 2016) making it an ideal methodology to utilise for this study.

Noon (2018) argues that the flexible framework that IPA offers to researchers is invaluable as it allows researchers to tailor their methodology to suit the phenomena being studied and the preferred data collection methods, while also incorporating their own interpretations based on personal experience. However, given the personal nature of IPA in exploring the participants' experiences, it is essential to reflect on the ethical considerations of the study. These will be discussed briefly in the penultimate section of this chapter.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Cavan (1977, p. 810) defines ethics as ‘a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others’, while Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018, p. 111) broadly note that ethics relates to ‘that which is good and bad, right and wrong’. Wellington (2010, p. 129) suggests that ethics ‘comes in at every stage: planning, doing and writing up research’ with Simons and Usher (2000) contending that ethics are contextually situated and the responsibility of decoding, deconstructing and explaining these unique, localised and particular considerations lie with the researcher. Mertens (2014, p. 33) avers that ‘ethics in research should be an integral part of the research planning and implementation process’. Throughout the research process, strict ethical guidelines were employed and guided the course of the study.

4.6.1 Ethics

From a regulatory ethics perspective, I was aware that particular areas would have to be fulfilled; UCC Garda Vetting, SREC and DPIA approval and a thorough understanding of the UCC Child Safeguarding Statement which outlines the legal obligations for those conducting research with young people under the age of 18. I also completed the Oxford University Epigeum online course on *Research Integrity – Social and Behavioural Sciences*. The course helped me to view every aspect of my research through an ethical lens using the *Singapore Statement* (2010) underpinned by the four principles of (a) honesty in every aspect of the research, (b) accountability in the conduct of research, (c) professional courtesy and fairness in working with others and (d) good stewardship of research on behalf of others. I was also guided by UCC’s Code of Ethics (2019, V.2.3), the Lundy Model of Child Participation (2007) and Flynn’s Transformative Dialogue Model (2018), to ensure that I created a safe space for learner

voices and maintained the highest standards of professionalism and rigour throughout the research process.

4.6.2 Ethics as Praxis

Once the Garda Vetting procedure was completed, SREC approval received and the DPIA processed, I began the data collection for the research. My guiding considerations were grounded in the three ethical principles extrapolated from the *Singapore Statement* (2010), and illuminated by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018), as delineated below:

1. Beneficence – striving to advance the objectives of science, humanity and individual research participants, with a concurrent commitment to mitigating potential risks or harm to the latter.
2. Respect – ensuring that all participants in the study are treated with the highest levels of courtesy, respect, dignity and sensitivity.
3. Justice – safeguarding that all procedures adhere to standards which are fair, non-exploitative and reasonable.

Within the realm of this research, it was imperative for me to consider the effects of the research on the participating students. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018, p. 112) aver that ‘ethical problems in educational research can often result from thoughtlessness, oversight or taking matters for granted’. Informed by this portent, I based the ethical protocols for this study on those extended by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) and Mertens (2014) and considered three of the key tenets pertaining to ethical research – informed consent and participant assent, confidentiality and consequences.

➤ Informed consent and participant assent

The ethical principle of informed consent and participant assent, rooted in the concept of autonomy, underscores the participant's right to freedom and self-determination. Consequently, ethical standards dictate that participants, in this case, children under 18, have the autonomy to choose whether to participate in this study and withdraw at any point without repercussions. As the participants in this study were children under the age of 18, both student assent [Appendix 12] and parental/guardian consent [Appendix 11] were sought and obtained before the data collection took place. Information letters regarding the study were also given to parents/guardians and students which outlined the detail of the study [Appendix 9 and Appendix 10]. The student assent and information forms were written in clear language using terminology which was accessible to all the potential participants of the research study.

I personally handed out the information forms, consent and assent forms in school to ensure that if there were any questions from potential participants, I was available there and then to answer them. All potential participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and without repercussions. Students who wished to participate in the research returned the assent and consent forms to a dedicated locked box in the reception area of the school marked UCC Research Study.

➤ Confidentiality

Ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the students who participated in the study was also a critical ethical component of the research. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) contend that in environments where intensified levels of quotidian surveillance are experienced and where the possibilities of data storage, retrieval and theft are infinite; the guarantee of

confidentiality, anonymity and privacy has become a progressively challenging and contested space for researchers.

While focus groups inherently pose challenges to confidentiality, this was addressed by ensuring all students signed an assent form, one section specifically asked the students to agree to maintain confidentiality and not discuss others' viewpoints outside the discussion space. Given that group composition varied due to timetabling and extracurricular commitments, the importance of respecting peers' contributions was reinforced at the start of each focus group session, emphasising the ethical responsibility to uphold confidentiality regardless of the composition of the group.

Data from each participant - sketches, focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires - were matched to provide a holistic understanding of their experiences. Ethically, this process was managed by maintaining participant anonymity and using the same pseudonyms across data sources, while ensuring consistency in interpretation, with careful handling of identifiable information to protect confidentiality and uphold ethical research standards.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) also aver that the principal mechanism researchers employ to safeguard anonymity is to eliminate all means of identification using pseudonyms and password-protected files. Employing Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2018) hypothesis regarding confidentiality as a framework, I was steadfast in my approach with regard to protecting the anonymity of the participants in the study; data was anonymised at the point of transcription (completed personally by the researcher) with pseudonyms assigned to all participants, files pertaining to the study were password protected and my laptop encrypted to ensure the highest security standards possible were adhered to.

➤ Consequences

Given that this study is concerned with ‘a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-life context’, the requirement to protect human participants is paramount (Yin, 2014, p. 18). Accordingly, the ethical principle of beneficence is pertinent here and the aggregate benefit to the interviewee, coupled with the significance of the knowledge obtained should outweigh the prospective for harm to the participants (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). In upholding this ethical principle, I felt it was important to acknowledge that assessment can be a sensitive topic for students, potentially causing stress or emotional discomfort; this was discussed with participating students at the outset of the research and mitigation strategies were put in place (such as supporting resources and/or debriefing sessions) should any student experience concerns throughout the research process.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018, p. 136) aver that researchers may find themselves situated in ‘an asymmetric position of power with regard to the participants’ and as a teacher-researcher whose study participants were some of her own students, I grappled with the potential power-relations which had the potential to unfold over the course of the study. I used the work of Morrison (2013) as a framework to mitigate the challenge as much as possible; he suggests treating the student participants as important, ensuring they are aware of their significance and centrality to the research, and making them feel as comfortable as possible so that they regard their interviews as an experience which was positive. All of these ingredients are essential in overcoming the power relations which were present between this researcher and her students.

As the research study evolved, I found the process of reflexive journaling to be beneficial as a mechanism to acknowledge and address both obscure and overt power differentials when I perceived that they had arisen. I also considered the fact that students might feel obligated to please me with their responses which could lead to a potential bias in their responses but having established a comfortable and trusting environment for the participants, I believed that the students felt empowered to express their genuine experiences and opinions. I was concerned

that students might become emotive while discussing the topic of assessment and from the outset of the initial focus groups, I endeavoured to establish a supportive and non-judgemental environment to minimise the potential impact on the participants by establishing rapport and showing empathy to each contributor. No student expressed her discomfort at any stage during the process and no written or verbal contact was made by a parent to alert me to any difficulty which had been experienced by their child during the process.

4.6.3 The Role of the Researcher

Throughout the study, I acted as a facilitator to create a safe and supportive environment for the participating students which empowered them to share their assessment experiences openly and honestly. Building a rapport with the participants was essential to encourage them to express their thoughts and emotions freely (Morrison, 2013). I practiced reflexivity throughout the research process, acknowledging my personal biases, assumptions and preconceptions that might influence the study, and I felt that being aware of these biases helped me to approach the data with openness and minimised potential distortion as the interpretation process evolved. I found that by transcribing the data personally, I developed an intimate knowledge of the data from the outset, while the IPA approach involved a comprehensive, particularised and iterative technique of data analysis, which placed the researcher firmly at the heart of the process.

During that analysis, I aimed to understand the meanings that the students ascribed to their assessment experiences which involved a deep exploration of their lived experiences, emotions, beliefs and thoughts. Throughout this phase of the study, I engaged in phenomenological reduction; a process of bracketing or setting aside my own assumptions and preconceived

notions about JC assessment to grasp the essential structure of the students' experiences in an attempt to stay true to their perspectives.

While striving to understand the participants' experiences as authentically as possible, I also used an interpretative framework to make sense of the data which included relevant theories, literature and concepts which provided a hermeneutic lens for analysing the data and uncovering meaningful insights. I have presented the findings of the longitudinal study thematically, framed by each of the research questions, presenting the emergent themes and their interpretations in a coherent and cohesive manner, teeming with direct quotes from the participants which explicate their experiences and perceptions of assessment at JC.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a comprehensive account of the methodology employed in conducting an IPA on the longitudinal assessment experiences of students at JC level in Ireland. The utilisation of IPA as the primary methodological framework held significant promise for this research as it allows for a far-reaching exploration of the subjective experiences of the participants. By focusing on the individual narratives and unique perspectives of the students, this study seeks to unveil the intricacies and complexities of their assessment encounters, illuminating the personal, emotional and cognitive dimensions of their educational assessment journey.

The recruitment of participants from a purposive and homogenous group is a key strength of this study as this expert group engaged with research questions which are meaningful to them thereby enhancing the richness and depth of the data collected (Oxley, 2016). Moreover, the employment of a range of data collection tools fosters a deep and meaningful dialogue,

proffering an opportunity to capture students' thoughts, feelings and reflections in a supportive and open manner.

Data analysis, systematically following the principles of IPA was a highly interpretative and iterative process. In acknowledging that this study does not represent a sample from which generalisations can be drawn, it aligns with Thomas's (2011, p. 142) argument that it can 'set off strands of analytical thought in the readers' minds'. Thus, in adopting an interpretative phenomenological stance, it is hoped that the perceptions and experiences of the students involved in this research provide valuable insights to practitioners and policy-makers in evaluating assessment practice at JC and provide a roadmap for reflexivity, leading to improvement.

In conclusion, by maintaining a rigorous analytical process, this research strives to contribute in a meaningful way to the very contemporary body of knowledge in the field of students' assessment experiences at JC in Ireland and will hopefully pave the way for future research endeavours in the area.

Chapter Five - Findings and Discussion Chapter

Through the Lens of Assessment – Student Journeys and Perceptions

Exploring Research Question 1

5.0 Introduction

Understanding how students perceive and interpret the concept of assessment is crucial for educators aiming to develop effective pedagogical strategies. This chapter examines Research Question 1: *What does a first/second/third year student understand the term ‘assessment’ to mean, and does that understanding shift across their first three years of post-primary schooling?* By exploring students' definitions, perceptions, experiences, understandings and visual representations of assessment throughout their JC journey, this study seeks to uncover the evolving nature of their understanding along their assessment continuum.

This chapter is organised into three main sections. The first section is concerned with a discussion of student definitions of assessment through visual and written lenses. I have chosen to curate four of the sketches drawn by students and the common themes, symbols, affordances and cultural influences these drawings reveal. The section also triangulates the visual data with verbal descriptions of assessment provided by students during their first focus group sessions, highlighting their emotive responses and the implications for researchers seeking a deeper understanding of assessment.

Building on the findings gleaned from the first section of this chapter, in the second section attention is focused on comparing student, policy and academic definitions of assessment using word clouds. By visualising these definitions, it is possible to identify overlapping concepts and distinct emphases offering insights into how students' understandings align with or diverge from the perspectives of other stakeholders thus deepening our understanding of how students

perceive assessment at a particular moment in time on their learning continuum. The comparisons are enriched by examining the findings through the lens of sociocultural theory and considering the implications of the findings on assessment practices.

Having explored the students' sketches depicting the term assessment and their oral considerations of the word assessment in the first two sections of the chapter, the concluding section prompts the students to build on those ideas and explores their *understanding* of the concept of assessment as they navigate their assessment journey through JC. This section traces their understanding from their initial assessment (the entrance assessment), to other complex challenges, documenting their growth and adaptation over time. By examining student perspectives of assessments in this manner, I aim to provide a unique and original view of how assessment practices shape and are shaped as students negotiate the developmental stages of JC.

The literature review conducted in Chapter 2 illuminated several areas that connect the students' sketches of the word assessment, their thoughts and perceptions of the term assessment given voice during focus groups and interviews and their progression as learners throughout their JC assessment journey. It was possible to connect the findings as central themes extracted from the data (having coded the sketches, focus group discussions and the individual interviews as outlined in the Methodology chapter) with specific concepts from the literature [Table 5.1].

Table 5.1 – Themes, Relevant Literature, Critical Concepts from the Literature, Findings in Context and Summarised Explanations pertaining to Research Question 1

Themes	Relevant Literature	Critical concepts from the Literature	Findings in Context: Sub-Themes	Summarised Explanation
Students' Conceptualisations of Assessment	Ames and Felker (1979), Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020), Elwood and Murphy (2015), Holland <i>et al.</i> (1998), MacPhail, Halbert and O'Neill (2018), McGarr <i>et al.</i> (2023), Rogoff (1995).	Elwood and Murphy (2015): Assessment practices shape collective experiences, including emotional responses. Holland <i>et al.</i> (1998): Figured worlds theory explains how assessment shapes roles and actions that influence emotions. McGarr <i>et al.</i> (2023): Emotional stress linked to assessments.	There is an emotional and psychological impact connected to assessment.	Students experience significant stress, anxiety, and emotional strain due to what they perceive as high-stakes assessments. Terms such as 'stress', 'nervous', and 'afraid' appear frequently in their sketches and discussions.
		Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020): Cultural scripts influence students' engagement and understanding of assessment. Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020): Cultural scripts shape assessments. Elwood and Murphy (2015): Assessment is situated within broader social and structural frameworks. Rogoff (1995): Personal and cultural experiences shape our conceptualisation of assessment.	Students' perceptions of assessment are shaped by sociocultural influences.	Students' perceptions are shaped by societal and cultural expectations, emphasising grades and comparisons. Assessment is viewed as a cultural construct tied to achievement and competition. Assessment moments are interconnected.

		Ames & Felker (1979): Competition heightens emotional responses, linking success with pride and failure with shame. Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020): Educational environments prioritise individual achievement. MacPhail, Halbert and O'Neill (2018): JC still mischaracterised as a high-stakes exam Rogoff (1995): Personal experiences shape how students conceptualise their learning through assessment	Assessment is perceived as competitive and high stakes.	Students view assessment as a comparative tool, emphasising individual success and ranking against peers. Comparisons influence their self-worth and performance.
The Concept of Assessment: Perspectives differ between students, academics and policy frameworks.	Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020), Elwood and Murphy (2015), NCCA (2015)	Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020): Cultural scripts can vary in primary and secondary education, shaping how assessments are perceived. Elwood and Murphy (2015): Assessment methods are embedded within social networks and frameworks, changing across stages.	Policy frameworks and research tends to focus on technical aspects of assessment. Students focus on the emotional realities of assessment.	Word cloud comparisons reveal differences in focus, with students emphasising stress and emotional responses, while policy documents and research into assessment tend to focus on technical and product aspects of assessment.
Cultural and Contextual Influences of Assessment.	Chamberlin, Yasué and Chiang (2018), Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020), Elwood and Murphy (2015), Rogoff (1995)	Chamberlin, Yasué and Chiang (2018): Grading promotes competitive individualism. Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020): Cultural norms affect what students perceive to be appropriate goals for assessment Elwood and Murphy (2015): Societal demands and networks shape the objectives behind evaluative practices	Grades are perceived as sociocultural tools that validate success, value, identity and self-worth.	Grades and percentages are seen as validations of personal success, contributing to self-worth and motivation. Students associate higher grades with greater personal value.

		Elwood and Murphy (2015): Grades as cultural tools influencing identity. Assessment shapes identity and learner development. Rogoff (1995): Personal identity development through curriculum engagement		
Cultural and Contextual Affordances of Assessment	Bennett (2018), Elwood and Murphy (2015), Rogoff (1995).	Bennett (2018): Assessment drives deeper understanding of subject matter. Feedback fosters deep learning and progression. Elwood and Murphy (2015): Feedback as key to student development Rogoff (1995): Participatory appropriation, guided participation and apprenticeship.	Active participation in assessment fosters continuous learning. Findings suggest that assessment as a sociocultural practice supports student engagement and connects them with the tools and resources in their communities.	Students become more comfortable with assessments they more they do of them. Feedback is valued as a constructive tool for improvement and growth. Teacher interactions provide guidance and emotional support, helping students navigate assessment challenges.
Students' Initial Experiences of Assessment at Secondary School	Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020), Brown <i>et al.</i> (2021).	Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020): Entrance assessments construct early identities for students, influencing their assessment journey. Entrance assessments create formative perceptions of academic potential and expectations. Brown <i>et al.</i> (2021): Considers the 11+ transfer test in Northern Ireland, finding state that it reinforces educational inequality despite ongoing debates over its fairness and effectiveness.	Entrance assessments shape students' early perceptions of assessment in secondary school and may introduce them to post- primary exam culture. They can create stress, reinforce competition, and contribute to inequalities in primary school classrooms.	Entrance assessments shape students' early perceptions of assessments at secondary school. The exam tends to be the first experience of assessment at post- primary level for many students. These exams often create stress for students. The entrance assessment can also help students form early definitions of assessments, which can lead to ideas of competition, the merits of grading and sorting and identity. Entrance assessments may also create landscapes of inequality in primary school classrooms.

Learner Progression into Junior Cycle: Adapting to Challenges Experienced	Galton, Grey and Rudduck (1999), O'Connor and Flynn (2021).	Galton, Grey and Rudduck (1999): The triple transition of moving from primary to secondary education. O'Connor and Flynn (2021): Students' experience difficulties in adjusting to secondary school assessments and developing metacognitive skills.	Students' initially find the increased frequency and perceived high stakes nature of secondary school assessments unfamiliar and intimidating.	Students struggle with adjusting to the increased frequency and nature of assessments in secondary school. The new environment introduces regular, more high-stakes exams (students' perception) that students initially find unfamiliar and intimidating.
Evolution of Assessment Perspectives over Time	Bennett (2018), Elwood and Murphy (2015), Rogoff (1995).	Bennett (2018): Assessment fosters deep learning and development of understanding Elwood and Murphy (2015): Assessment practices transform societal collective life, influencing learner progression. Rogoff (1995): Curriculum fosters personal development and learner progression. Learning and identity evolve over time through interaction with assessments.	Development occurs across personal, interpersonal and community planes. Findings illustrate how students' transformation through participation aligns with broader sociocultural practices in assessment.	As students' progress through Junior Cycle, they begin to see assessments as opportunities for reflection and growth, moving beyond performance to a deeper understanding of learning.

5.1 Student Conceptualisations of Assessment through a Visual Lens

What do you understand the term assessment to mean? Draw me a sketch!

In exploring students' conceptualisations of assessment, the use of visual representations, such as sketches, provides a unique lens through which to examine their internalised understandings and interpretations of assessment practices. By focusing on the sketches of second-year students, completed during their first focus group meeting at the beginning of second year, this research seeks to uncover the nuanced meanings that emerge when assessment is articulated in its simplest form, revealing how the term 'assessment' is understood within the educational experience of our students. These sketches provide a unique lens through which to discuss how students initially conceptualise assessment at post-primary school, offering valuable insights into their cognitive and emotional responses.

Sketches serve as a tool in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research, facilitating participants' deeper exploration and communication of their lived experiences (Boden, Larkin and Iyer, 2018). Recognising that students vary in their verbal acuity levels, as explained in Chapter 4, I incorporated drawing into my IPA methodology to enhance the experiential element of the study. At the outset of each of the first focus group sessions, I prompted students to illustrate their understanding of the term 'assessment.' Boden, Larkin and Iyer (2018, p. 220) contend that 'visual imagery may therefore provide an important complementary starting place for researching lived experience within the context of IPA'. The act of drawing seemed to steady the students, facilitating a moment of focused reflection that allowed them to illustrate their perceptions of assessment and their assessment experiences to this point in their assessment journey. Four sketches (three initially, one thereafter) are presented for discussion due to their richness and because they comprehensively encapsulate

all relevant themes of this research question while effectively summarising the remaining sketches.

5.1.1 Student Sketches: Visual Interpretations of Assessment

The first of the sketches introduced in this chapter was drawn by Holly [Figure 5.1]. Holly's drawing presents a retrospective visual representation of her experiences and perceptions of



Figure 5.1 - Sketch Drawn by Holly, 2nd Year

Focus Group 2, Session 1(FG1.2), Thursday 4th November 2021

assessment as a second-year student. Key elements contained within this image include Holly's pre-test expectations, post-test reactions, the negative emotions linked to assessments

including stress and pressure, the purpose of assessment, and the disappointment and lowered self-esteem that Holly experiences as a consequence of not meeting her assessment expectations.

In Holly's pre-test expectation image, she depicts herself imagining her test result, reflecting the anticipation and expectation surrounding assessments. This illustrates how cultural tools, such as grades and percentages shape students' mental frameworks *before* the actual assessment (Curtin *et al.*, 2020). Holly then depicts herself receiving her test results which captures the immediate emotional response, emphasising the impact of assessments on personal identity and the construction of self. From a sociocultural perspective, this suggests how the outcomes of assessment are internalised, influencing one's self-perception and sense of achievement (Rogoff, 1995). Words such as 'negativity', 'disappointment', 'worry', 'scared', 'nervous' and 'afraid' highlight the range of adverse emotions associated with assessments. These emotions may stem from perceived societal pressures and the high stakes impact often tied to academic performance (Bennett, 2018), revealing the psychological impact assessments can have on students (Howard, 2020; von der Embse *et al.*, 2018). In another section of the sketch, Holly writes '*the results can bring you down if it's not what you are hoping for*' again indicating how assessments can affect students' self-esteem and motivation. This reflects the societal and cultural expectations placed on students, where performance is closely linked to self-worth (Howell, 2017).

Holly depicts herself surrounded by test dates (Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, next Monday) which indicates the ongoing stress and pressure from frequent assessments. This points to the broader educational environment where continuous evaluation can lead to heightened anxiety and strain (Howard, 2020; Swain, Prendergast and Cumming, 2018; von der Embse *et al.*, 2018). What is particularly revealing is that Holly writes '*helpful – teacher knows where you are in the class*' which is one of the positive aspects of assessment in that she recognises that

her effort will provide feedback to her teachers about her progress, aligning with the sociocultural view that assessments guide instructional practice and support learning (Bennett, 2018). However, by linking her performance to knowing where she is in relation to others in the class indicates not only the performative implication of the assessment but also the comparative and competitive element. Curtin *et al.* (2020, p. 99) aver that this ‘emphasises the necessarily sociocultural construction of success through the paradigm of individual assessment and testing in school’. Finally, the overarching theme of ‘expectations’ illustrates how assessments are a means of cultural transmission, shaping learners’ identities and their place within the educational system. The process of meeting or failing to meet these expectations influences personal growth and identity formation and/or transformation (Reay and Wiliam, 1999).

In the following sketch [Figure 5.2], Barbara proffers a telling retrospective insight into her perceptions of assessment. The first item of note is that she writes assessment is a ‘*farce word*

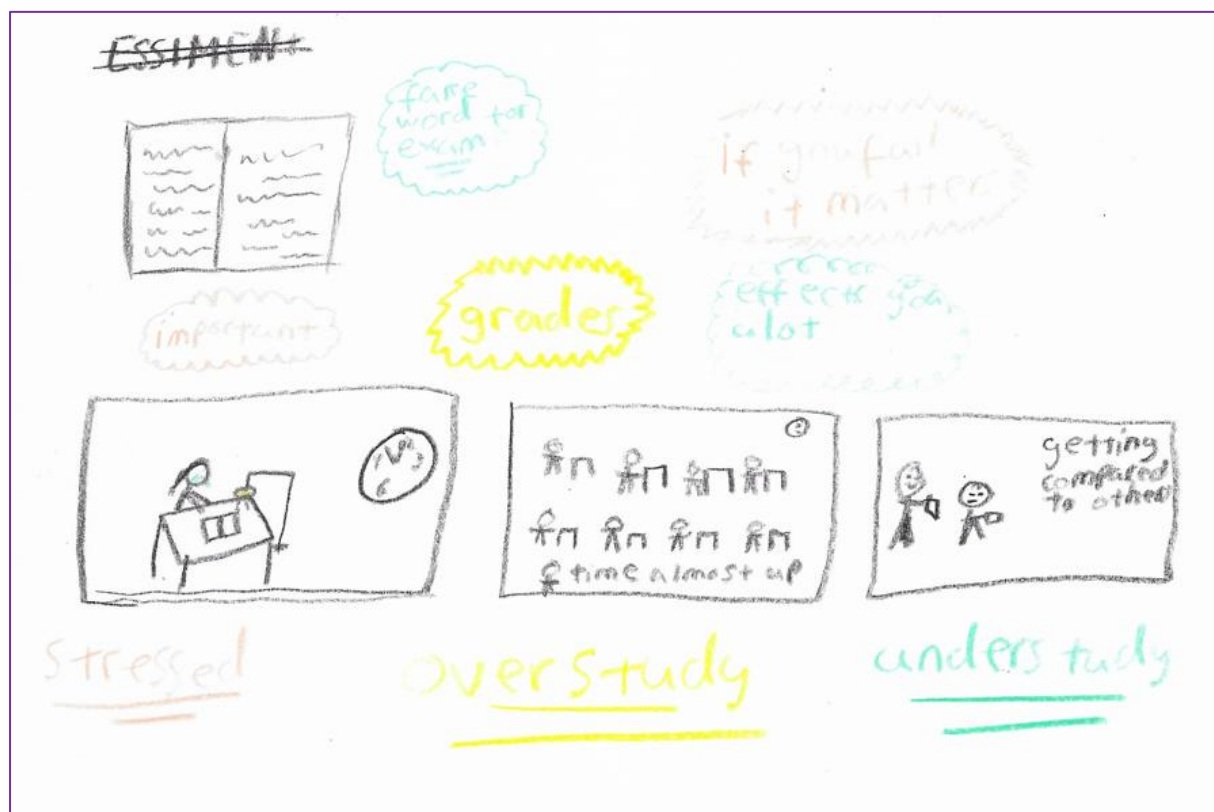


Figure 5.2 - Sketch Drawn by Barbara, 2nd Year
Focus Group 1, Session 1(FG1.1), Tuesday 2nd November 2021

for exam’ indicating a cynicism about the terminology being used. Barbara is critical of educational jargon and the use of euphemistic language. In essence, she is likely voicing a critical view that the term ‘assessment’ is just another word for ‘exam’, and this rebranding of the term by this researcher does not change the stressful and evaluative nature of her experience. Words or phrases such as ‘important’, ‘grades’, ‘if you fail it matters’ and ‘effects you a lot’ underscore the high stakes outcomes students associate with assessments (Howell, 2017). These elements, again, reflect societal and cultural pressures that emphasise the significance of academic performance (Swain, Prendergast and Cumming, 2018). The term ‘overstudy’ suggests the intense effort some students invest in preparing for assessments, suggesting a cultural norm that places value on hard work and diligence. Conversely, ‘understudy’ implies a lack of adequate preparation, perhaps highlighting the difficulty some students face to find a balance in their study habits.

The image of Barbara at her desk with a clock indicates the time constraints often associated with assessments, contributing to stress and anxiety with the word ‘stress’ reinforcing the emotional toll that time-bound assessments can impose on students. This aligns with the findings of the McGarr *et al.* (2023, p. 118) JC study who reported that

stress was a very significant theme across the conversations in student focus group discussions. Stress was primarily associated with everyday workload in balancing homework, CBAs, CBA scheduling and attempting to memorise large amounts of content for summative exams.

Furthermore, the depiction of Barbara ‘*getting compared to others*’ reflects the comparative and competitive nature of assessment environments, a significant cultural and social aspect of education influencing students’ self-esteem and motivation (Curtin *et al.*, 2020) and, may also

be representative of the ethos of the school context in which the study took place. Finally, the part of her illustration which presents students sitting in rows in a classroom, emphasises the traditional assessment environment, where individual performance is evaluated in a collective context, a premise which is indicative of the structured and regulated nature of assessment systems (Finch and Willis, 2021).

A third sketch by Anna [Figure 5.3] illustrates a progression of graded assessments moving from lower to higher scores and her corresponding emotional states, which she depicts as a transition from a sad face to a happy face. The series of test papers show increasing percentages; 79%, 82%, 87%, 93%, 95%, 97% and 100%, indicating a continuous improvement in her performance over time. The progression from sadness to happiness again reflects the significant impact that assessment can have on a student's self-identity and emotional well-being (Rogoff, 1995). Sociocultural theory emphasises how social interactions and cultural norms influence learning and the construction of identity (Reay and Wiliam, 1999). In Anna's sketch, the grades appear to act as feedback from the assessment system, endorsing Anna's self-worth on a graduating scale where only perfection will bring true happiness.



Figure 5.3 - Sketch Drawn by Anna, 2nd Year

Focus Group 1, Session 1 (FG1.1), Tuesday 2nd November 2021

The improving scores suggest that Anna is receiving and possibly responding to feedback through her assessments, an affordance of her particular lived experience, leading to continuous improvement. This again aligns with sociocultural perspectives where learning is seen as a socially mediated process (Elwood and Murphy, 2015) – the feedback gleaned through the completion of assessments motivates the student to adjust their learning strategies and improve. However, the emphasis on numerical grades highlights the cultural value placed on quantifiable achievement in education; success is measured through these grades which are seen as indicators of knowledge, intelligence and competence. This, despite academics such as Fullan (2021, p. 8) contending that ‘the pervasive obsession with academic grades and degrees, and corresponding elite rewards at the expense of other people ... results in narrow learning that severely distorts what people learn and need in the 21st century’. Finally, the upward trajectory of scores may imply that Anna has increased her effort, developed better study habits or her

understanding of the material has improved over time. It can be argued that Anna may feel that assessments motivate her to work harder and strive for better results, again reflecting the cultural expectation of continual improvement towards excellence.

5.1.2 Common Themes and Symbols

Based on a critical evaluation of all the sketches completed, it was possible to extract some common themes and symbols which the students' related to the word assessment as follows; (a) emotional impact (stress and anxiety), (b) comparison and competition, (c) grades and results, (d) feedback and teacher interaction, and (e) preparation and study habits. Each of these findings will be explored in this section of the chapter.

➤ Emotional Impact (Stress and Anxiety)

On the sketches there were many sad faces drawn, stress indicators, tired expressions, depictions of sleeping students and the word 'stress' was noted on many of the drawings (63.15%, n=12). These symbols reflect the emotional and psychological toll that assessments can take on students, a concern reflected in the work of Lucas (2021) and von der Embse *et al.* (2018). The findings can also be triangulated with the McGarr *et al.* (2023, p. 15) JC study - they note that 'the stress experienced in managing everyday workloads, combined with the pervasiveness of academic pressure, induced most of the participating students to adopt mechanisms and strategies for coping'. This stress is not only a personal experience but also a cultural phenomenon influenced by the importance placed on grades and performance in society as illustrated by the following students towards the end of their JC assessment journey.

‘That's what people are saying, oh, my God, if you don't get your points, you're not going to get your job.’

Méabh, in Third Year Interview, Thursday 28th February 2023 @ 1.30pm

‘I think especially now with people all around you kind of getting high marks and you're kind of like, I need to be like them’

Deirdre, in Third Year Interview, Friday 3rd March 2023 @ 2.10pm

‘There's a lot of stress at home for some people because their parents are really strict on studying and exams.’

Mary, in Third Year Interview, Friday 10th March 2023 @ 1.30pm

Sociocultural theory emphasises that learning is a social process influenced by cultural norms and societal expectations. Assessments, particularly those that are perceived to be high-stakes, can create significant pressure. This can lead to stress and anxiety as students strive to meet those expectations (Lucas, 2021).

Thus, in line with the findings of McGarr *et al.*'s (2023) study, the research findings from this cohort of students corroborate that assessments, particularly those that are considered high-stakes, exert significant psychological stress on students. This stress is not just an individual experience but is shaped by societal and cultural pressures that emphasise academic performance and success.

➤ Comparison and Competition

There were also some images of students being compared (10.53%, n=2), the drawings of multiple students in testing situations coupled with phrases such as ‘*getting compared to others*’, ‘*report cards*’ and ‘*expectations*’ (47.36%, n=9). The theme of comparison and

competition underscores the competitive nature of educational environments (Curtin *et al.*, 2020). The words of the following students chimed with this thinking when they reflected on this at various junctures throughout the research: -

'Even when you get a test back and all your friends are asking you, like, what did you get, what did you get, I feel like they don't even want to know. It's just what everyone does.'

Jackie, in Third Year Interview, Thursday 9th March 2023 @ 9.25am

'I want to see where I am at in class.'

Lorna, in Second Year, Focus Group 2, Session 2, Thursday 4th November 2021 @ 8.45am

'It would have been different for my sister and then it would have been different for my brother and now it's different from me. So even at Christmas dinner, we were comparing results and we were like, oh, what did you get in your junior cert mocks and this and that.'

Elizabeth, in Third Year Interview, Monday 27th February 2023 @ 10.05am

'My extended family would be asking how she got on, what grades?'

Jackie, in Third Year Interview, Thursday 9th March 2023 @ 9.25am

'I know what everybody else got. And like I know I'm at the top of the class'.

Barbara, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 2.50pm

Sociocultural theory suggests that such competition is a product of cultural values that prioritise individual achievement and excellence (Curtin *et al.*, 2020). Articulated by a few of the students quoted above, individuals are assessed not only in isolation but in comparison to peers or family members. These comparisons can influence students' sense of identity and belonging within the educational system, affecting their motivation and self-worth (Reay and William, 1998). Furthermore, in societies that value individualism and competition, the act of comparing individuals to others can become a dominant method of assessment. This cultural

lens reinforces the notion that one's worth or ability is contingent upon being better or worse than others, leading to social pressures and emotional responses tied to comparison. Research conducted by Ames and Felker (1979) demonstrates that competition magnifies the positive affect related to success (pride) and the negative affect linked to failure (shame or guilt).

Hence, the findings drawn from this section of the data set include the following:

- Comparisons can impact motivation – Some individuals may feel driven to perform better when they are ranked and compared to peers, while others may feel de-motivated, particularly if they consistently perceive themselves as falling short (Ames and Felker, 1979).
- Cultural context shapes reactions to comparisons – The sociocultural context in which comparison takes place is important (Elwood and Murphy, 2015). In cultures that emphasise competition and individual achievement, comparisons are more likely to be perceived as high-stakes, potentially leading to more intense emotional and psychological responses (Lucas, 2021; von der Embse *et al.*, 2018).
- Comparisons reinforce social hierarchies – When people are consistently compared to others, it can reinforce social hierarchies, particularly in educational settings (Gipps, 1999). Those who consistently perform well may be offered more opportunities, resources or recognition, while those who perform poorly may be marginalised or overlooked, perpetuating inequities (Gipps, 1999).

➤ Grades and Results

Linked to comparison and competition, grades and results focus on summative outcomes. In their sketches, students wrote percentages, drew progress charts and referred to the term 'grade'

or ‘grades’ on several drawings (47.36%, n=9). The following students emphasised the importance of that grade during focus group discussions or interviews throughout the study: -

‘I just feel that I’ve left people down because I feel like that at home I feel that there is a percentage that you have to get over for your parents to say like, oh you did well. I suppose that if you don’t get over that, you do feel that you’ve left them down.’

Catherine, in Second Year Focus Group 1, Session 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.45am

‘It is nice to see a percentage, and sometimes it isn’t a great percentage, but when it is, it’s kind of rewarding.’

Anna, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 11am

‘It’s not about getting 100%. It’s getting a good score.’

Barbara, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 2.50pm

‘I must get the class average. Kind of all my friends are getting eighties and I was getting seventies and I’d be like, what am I doing wrong?’

Barbara, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 2.50pm

‘I think in first year, you know, I wanted academic validation, and I still do, but I think I’ve learned to just be a bit easier on myself and to not get all bothered over something small.’

Anna, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 11am

Students are highlighting the individual and societal value placed on quantifiable achievement (Elwood and Murphy, 2015) in their quotes above. Grades are a cultural tool used to measure and communicate academic success. They can influence students’ self-esteem, motivation and identity (Elwood and Murphy, 2015). Grades may act as a form of feedback that helps students understand their performance relative to societal standards and that of their peers. However, studies conducted by Chamberlin, Yasué and Chiang (2018) and Tannock (2015), indicate that

grading weakens the spirit of collective solidarity and shared responsibility among students, which democratic education aims to cultivate, and instead encourages a focus on competition and isolated individualism. Thus, findings from this section of the study indicate that: -

- Grades provide a source of validation - Grades provide a form of validation, with higher percentages offering a sense of reward, which underscores the idea that grades are not just academic markers but are tied to self-esteem and reward (Ames and Felker, 1979).
- Grades act as a sociocultural tool – The term ‘class average’ mentioned by Barbara reveals the social dynamics of grades confirming that they act as a sociocultural tool, influencing how students perceive themselves in relation to their peers and the larger academic community (Curtin *et al.*, 2020).
- Influence of external expectation – Students feel pressure to meet specific grade thresholds sometimes set by external sources (such as parents) which can result in feelings of disappointment or failure when these expectations are not met, revealing the emotional burden that grades can carry (Elwood and Murphy, 2015).

➤ Feedback and Teacher Interaction

Feedback from teachers was seen as a crucial affordance of the learning process, providing students with guidance on their progress and areas for improvement. In fact, feedback is among the most potent and meaningful interactions from teachers to support student learning (Hattie, 2023; Hattie and Timperley, 2007). At disparate junctures (focus group discussions or

individual interviews) during the study, students emphasised the importance of feedback and teacher interaction:

‘When you get feedback, you can focus on what you need to improve on and not what you did badly, but what you can do better on the next time’.

Jackie, in Third Year Interview, Thursday 9th March 2023 @ 9.25am

‘Like in some tests, like math, for example, you get your percentage and **then there’ll be a few notes on what you need to work on more, which I think is helpful, too.**

Anna, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 11am

‘The percentage will tell you how well you did overall but with **the feedback you know exactly where you did well and exactly what needs to be improved.**

Barbara, in Second Year, Focus Group 1, Session 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.45am

‘Feedback from the teacher for the next test can give you peace of mind, like you know that you’ve gone over the stuff that she said for me to go over. Like, I’ve gone over it really, really well so that can help you for the next test as well.’

Iseult, in Second Year, Focus Group 2, Session 1, Thursday 4th November 2021 @ 8.45am

Sociocultural theory emphasises the role of social interaction in learning (Elwood and Murphy, 2015), and teacher feedback is a key element of this interaction. Teacher feedback is essential for student learning as it provides the necessary support to help them progress within Vygotsky’s (1978) ZPD. By offering guidance, teachers enable students to move beyond what they can do independently towards independent mastery. Similarly, Rogoff’s (1995) three planes of analysis emphasise the role of social interaction in learning, with teacher feedback playing a crucial part in the interpersonal plane, where guided participation helps students develop their understanding within a supportive learning environment. It helps students understand their performance in relation to the curriculum and it can be a source of support and

encouragement as outlined by the students above. From the data, three key findings regarding students' perspectives on feedback and teacher interaction are identified:

- Feedback enhances focus on improvement: Students consistently value feedback as a tool for guiding their learning process (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Rather than focusing solely on mistakes or percentages, feedback shifts the focus to improvement and growth. Jackie and Barbara's comments, for example, highlight how teacher feedback provides specific insights into what areas need improvement, allowing them to focus on their next steps rather than dwelling on what they did poorly. This chimes with Hattie and Timperley's (2007) feedback framework, which conceptualises effective feedback as a process that answers three key questions - where am I going? (feed up), how am I going? (feed back), and where to next? (feed forward) - to enhance student learning by clarifying goals, providing progress information, and guiding future improvement.
- Feedback complements grades for holistic understanding: Students see feedback as essential in providing context to their grades or percentages. While grades offer a general sense of performance, feedback helps break down specific strengths and weaknesses (Black and Wiliam, 2012). Both Anna and Barbara's examples indicate that feedback provides more detailed insights that grades alone cannot, making it a crucial complement to numerical assessments. This chimes with the work of Hattie and Timperley (2007), who discuss feedback as a process and emphasise how effective feedback guides students through their learning journey by addressing progress and next steps.

- Feedback as a source of confidence and preparedness: Feedback from teachers is not only about correction but also provides reassurance and confidence for future assessments. Iseult's quote illustrates how knowing what to work on and being well prepared for upcoming tests through teacher feedback can offer students a sense of peace and readiness. A meta-analysis by Wisniewski, Zierer and Hattie (2020) found that feedback positively influences student learning outcomes, including motivation and behaviour, which are closely linked to confidence.

➤ Preparation and Study Habits

Many of the student sketches (68.42%, n=13) also included phrases like '*study*', '*revision*', '*planning*' and the drawing of notes and other study materials [Figure 5.4]. Preparation for assessments is a key aspect of the learning process, which can be deeply embedded in cultural practices.

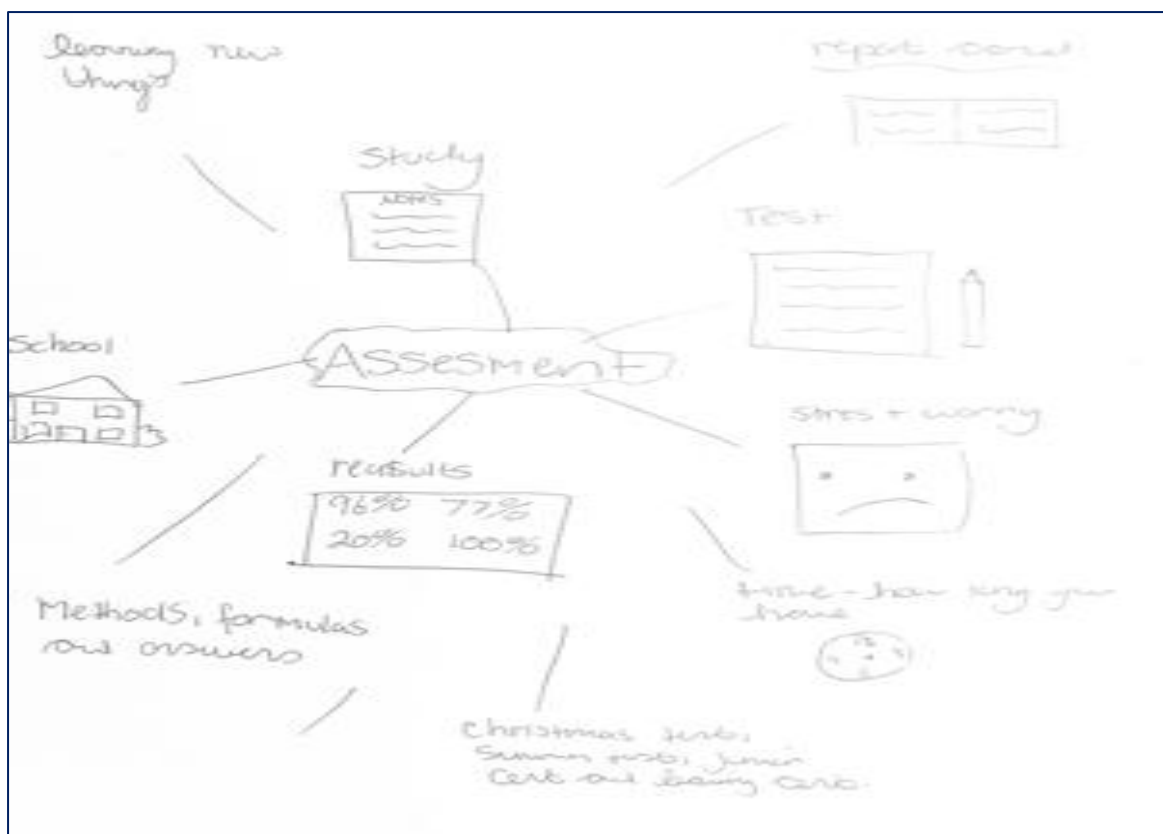


Figure 5.4 – Sketch Drawn by Deirdre, 2nd Year

Focus Group 2, Session 1, Thursday 4th November 2021

Martin (2016) argues that competent students, particularly girls, can perceive that agency means compliance in school environments which reward such agentic identities. These socially mediated interactions are beautifully explained by the students:

'Some of my older friends are kind of like here in 4th Year now. They kind of told me, you can relax, ... you don't need to study that. You don't need to be studying this amount of hours every single day just for this easy test that you're doing in first year. And I think, like my parents, maybe they were kind of like, oh, you can calm down a bit.'

Méabh, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 1.30pm

'I just find it crazy because I know girls in our year that didn't come into school, like, maybe coming up to the pre's, or like the Monday and the Tuesday before the pre, because they were studying till three in the morning. You should be asleep!'

Barbara, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 2.50pm

'In first year, I was just kind of reading the book and stuff and the notes and now I kind of just make my own notes and mind maps and stuff.'

Orlaith, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 14th March 2023 @ 11am

'How I best take in information, how I retain it best, and for different subjects, it's different as well. Some might be, like, learning off my back of a flashcard, whereas some might be kind of picturing it on a diagram or whatever, like being able to see them in my mind.'

Deirdre, in Third Year Interview, Friday 24th February 2023 @ 2.10pm

The importance attached to study habits by the students may reflect the cultural norm (in this particular school context) of hard work and diligent preparation as a pathway to success. Sociocultural theory frames these habits as socially mediated activities, where students learn how to study effectively through interactions with their peers, teachers and parents, all within the broader context of societal expectations for academic achievement (Curtin *et al.*, 2020). From the data, two key findings can be drawn:

- Study habits are socially and culturally mediated: The students' comments reflect how their study habits are shaped by social interactions, including advice from peers, family expectations, and cultural norms around hard work and academic diligence. For instance, Méabh's description of how her friends and parents encouraged her to 'calm down' in relation to her study hours reveals how social circles influence perceptions of how much preparation for assessments is necessary. Méabh's experience reflects Rogoff's (1995) three planes of analysis, as the guidance from her friends and parents

occurs within the interpersonal plane, where social interactions shape her understanding of appropriate study habits and preparation for assessments. Thus, learning behaviours are developed through interactions within one's social and cultural environment (Curtin *et al.*, 2020; Martin, 2016).

- Personalisation of study techniques over time: As students' progress through their academic journey, they appear to develop more personalised and effective study methods (Deslauriers *et al.*, 2019). Orlaith's transition from simply reading the book in first year to creating her own notes and mind maps, and Deirdre's adaptation of different strategies for different subjects, demonstrates that students refine their approaches to studying based on their individual learning needs and preferences (Makhambetova, Zhiyenbayeva and Ergesheva, 2021). This shift indicates growing agency and a more sophisticated understanding of how they learn best, a process that is influenced by both personal experience and social guidance.

The data set based on student sketches illustrating the word 'assessment' has provided a visual and conceptual foundation for understanding how students perceive assessments, emphasising themes like preparation, stress, and the role of feedback. These visual insights complement the upcoming section on students' oral descriptions of the term 'assessment', offering a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how they internalise and articulate their experiences with assessments. By linking both perspectives, the findings reveal that students' visual representations and verbal descriptions align, particularly around the cognitive and psychological impact of assessments and the importance of feedback, further highlighting the sociocultural influences shaping their understanding of academic evaluation.

5.2 Words in Focus: Comparing Student, Academic and Policy Definitions and Perceptions of Assessment

In this section of the chapter, the words the students used to explain the term assessment will be explored and discussed using a word cloud and Venn diagram. A comparison will then be made between the words that overlap between the student [Figure 5.5], the academic [Figures 5.6] and the policy documents [Figure 5.7]. Comparing word clouds originating from students, academics and policy documents allows for a visual analysis of differing priorities, values, and perspectives across these groups, helping to reveal alignments and anomalies in understanding and in expectations surrounding assessment practices, thus potentially realising the possibility of constructing a new theorisation of the experience of assessment for students at JC.

More importantly, the words that are at variance with each other will be brought more sharply into focus. Analysing the word clouds using Venn diagrams reveals both commonalities and disparities in the conceptualisations of assessment between disparate groups. While certain terms may overlap, such as ‘*test*’ or ‘*evaluation*’, disparities can emerge in the emphasis placed on certain aspects, potentially reflecting divergent perspectives shaped by academic literature versus the personal experience of the student within educational settings. These comparative insights may offer valuable contributions to understanding the complexity and variability inherent in the contemporary discourse surrounding assessment.

5.2.1 Visual Representation of the Student Word Cloud

The following word cloud [Figure 5.5] was generated using the wordclouds.com platform, from the definitions of assessment which students proffered as a result of raw data collected during the first focus group session at the outset of their JC journey. The words have been used to generate the word cloud below which gives prominence to the number of times the word is

preparation and evaluation (Lucas, 2021). Interestingly, positive terms such as ‘*feedback*’ and ‘*helpful*’ appear less prominently, suggesting that while students recognise the constructive and sociocultural aspects of assessments, these are overshadowed by the more immediate negative emotions. Had the students been exposed to CBAs at this juncture, the word clouds may have yielded different results. The presence of words such as ‘*nervous*’, ‘*anxious*’, and ‘*worry*’ highlight the psychological impact of assessment, reflecting the significant stress and anxiety students experience in relation to them (von der Embse *et al.*, 2018), which were explored in more detail during subsequent focus groups and interviews, as highlighted by the students in their quotes below:

‘I feel like there is a bit of pressure, just like, to do well, because when you get your results and whenever we get them, you don't want to open them in front of everyone and get like bad results. Yeah. You kind of want to do well just for yourself and for everybody else.’

Iseult, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 7th March 2023 @ 11.40am

‘Even in 6th class, when we did like Drumcondra tests, there was one test I remember and I didn't even get halfway and I went home and I cried to my mom about it.’

Anna, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 11am

‘I mean, when I was in first year, I suppose I wasn't really used to it, so I kind of thought it was, like, a massive big deal. I was really stressed in first year’.

Nuala, in Third Year Interview, Monday 13th March 2023 @ 2.50pm

Building on the illustrations explored in section one of this chapter, these quotes further illustrate the significant emotional and psychological pressures that students experience around assessment, revealing both personal and social dimensions of stress chiming with the work of von der Embse *et al.*’s (2018) research on test anxiety. Iseult’s reflection highlights the dual pressure to perform well, not only for personal satisfaction but also to meet external expectations from peers and others, indicating the impact of social comparison on self-esteem.

Anna's recollection of crying over test results as early as 6th class underscores how the stress of assessments can take root from a young age, suggesting long-term emotional responses tied to academic performance (von der Embse *et al.*, 2018). Nuala's admission of heightened stress during her first year of secondary school reflects the adjustment difficulties students face when transitioning to new academic environments, where assessments are perceived as overwhelming until they become normalised (Smith *et al.*, 2023).

Together, these insights reflect just how deeply embedded assessments are in students' emotional experiences, often fostering anxiety and a fear of failure, while also shaping their evolving relationship with academic evaluation. McGarr *et al.* (2023) also observed similar perspectives from students who articulated that from the beginning of their academic journey, they felt significant pressure regarding exams, an outlook which was prevalent across all schools involved in their study. Student conversations within the focus groups emphasised the intense importance placed on passing, creating a do-or-die atmosphere (McGarr, 2013), sentiments also expressed by students involved in this study.

So how do policy and academic definitions of assessment vary from that of students and why might that incongruence be important? Comparing all sets of definitions helps to identify differences and alignments between students', policy and academics' perceptions of assessment. In the following section, a reminder of the academic word cloud created for Chapter 2 of this thesis, together with a word cloud constructed from the *Junior Cycle Framework 2015* will be depicted, as a mechanism to highlight alignments and/or potential gaps in our understanding which could potentially impact how assessments are designed, implemented, and experienced. This type of analysis, allows for more effective and equitable educational practices that meet the needs of all stakeholders, but particularly our students who are central to this study.

5.2.2 Assessment Word Clouds in Focus: Student, Academic and Policy Alignment?

The following word cloud [Figure 5.6] was created by this researcher via wordcloud.com, using the words generated by Lucas (2021) to describe assessment and was discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. The policy word cloud [Figure 5.7] was generated via wordcloud.com by this researcher through a study of the *Junior Cycle Framework 2015*, picking out words in the document connected to assessment. The compilation of the word clouds serves as a conceptual framework to understand the discourse surrounding assessment in disparate educational contexts. The student word cloud [Figure 5.5] is included also for clarity.

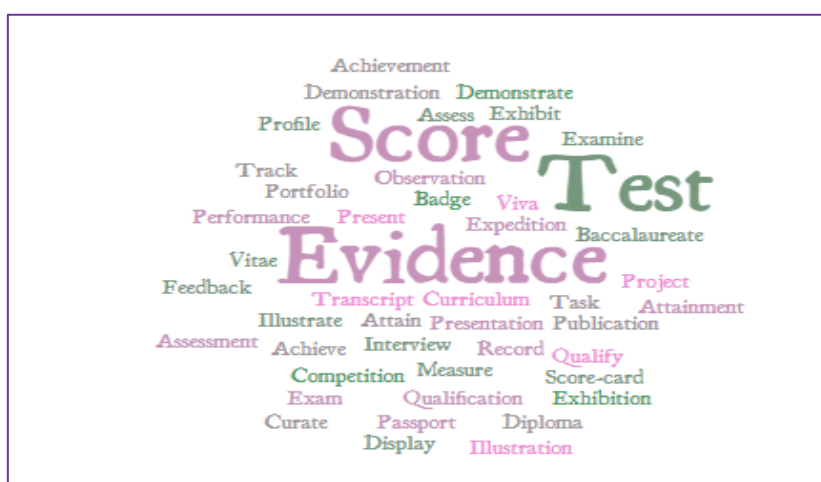


Figure 5.6 – Word cloud derived from Lucas, 2021

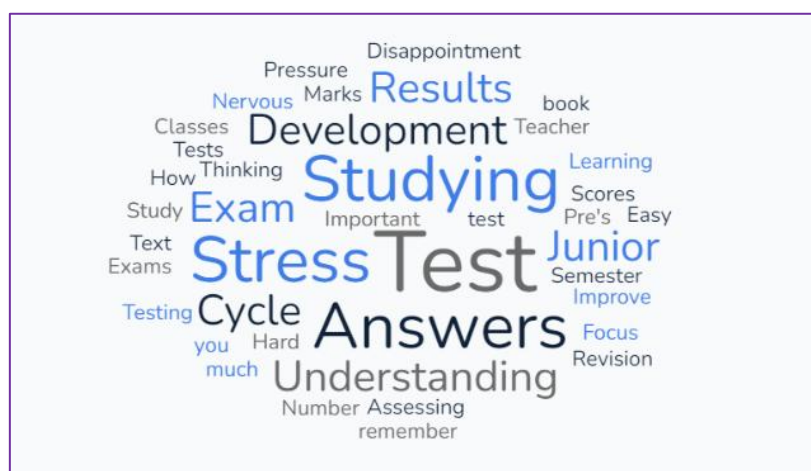


Figure 5.5 – Word Cloud (Student Definitions of Assessment)

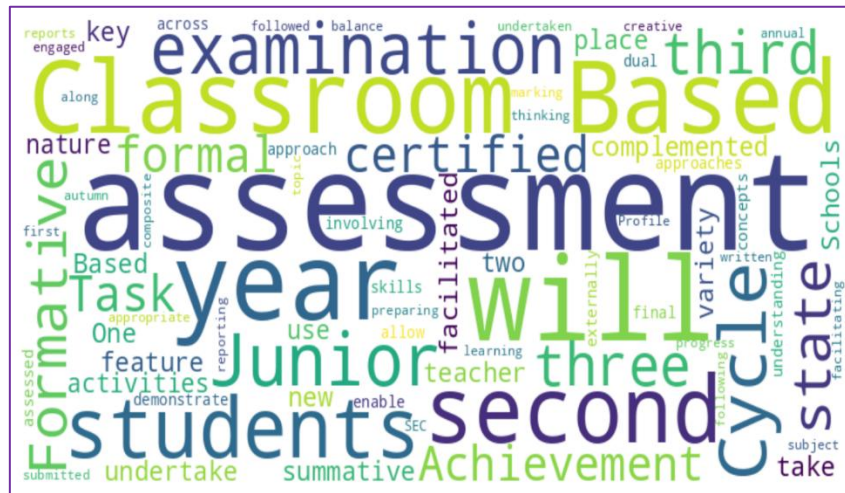


Figure 5.7 – Word cloud derived from the Junior Cycle Framework 2015

The Venn diagram [Figure 5.8] illustrates the overlap and differences between the words used by students, policymakers and academics to describe, refer to or treat assessment in the discourse. They can be examined by considering the common terms, student-specific terms and academic-specific terms relative to each set.



Figure 5.8 – Venn diagram of Student Vs Academic Vs Policymakers Definitions of Assessment

- Common Terms: The words '*exam/examine*' and '*assess/ing*' appear in the three circles, indicating a shared understanding of just one aspect of the term assessment, that it is used as a tool to measure, evaluate and rank.
- Student-specific terms: Terms such as '*grades*', '*stress*', '*important*', '*pressure*', '*study*', '*test*', '*exams*', '*nervous*', '*anxious*', and '*helpful*' are unique to students. These words highlight the emotional and experiential side of assessments from a student perspective (Rogers, 1994). Students focus on the immediate impacts of assessments, including the stress and pressure they feel (Lucas, 2021; McGarr *et al.*, 2023; von der Embse *et al.*, 2018), the significance of grades and their study practices (Tus, 2020). This reflects a personal and emotional connection to assessments, influenced by the high stakes and competitive nature of academic evaluations which Valva (2013, p. 264) refers to as 'dark moments'.
- Academic-specific terms: Words such as '*development*', '*formative*', '*evaluation*', '*summative*', '*outcomes*', '*rubric*', '*learning*', '*measurement*', and '*criteria*' are unique to the Lucas (2021) word cloud. These terms reflect a focus on the technical, methodological and pedagogical aspects of assessment. Lucas (2021) representing an academic view of assessments as structured processes aimed at measuring and fostering positive educational outcomes, emphasising the design and purpose of assessments in supporting learning and development.
- Policy-specific terms: The words from the policy section of the Venn diagram reflect how educational policy views assessment as a structured and formalised. Terms such as '*classroom*' and '*task*' suggest that assessments are deeply embedded in daily

educational practices, focusing on specific, measurable activities within the learning environment. The use of the word ‘*cycle*’ emphasises the recurring, systematic nature of assessments, ensuring continuous monitoring and evaluation of student progress over time. The words ‘*certified*’ and ‘*achievement*’ point to the formal validation of student success, where assessment results serve as official markers of competency, often tied to state or national standards. With over 90% of students now completing upper secondary education, Murchan (2018) posits that this raises questions about the necessity of high-stakes certification at JC level. Additionally, the word ‘*state*’ highlights the role of government and educational authorities in shaping and regulating assessment practices, ensuring that they align with broader educational goals or, as Opposs *et al.* (2020) contend, the assessment systems in Ireland represent an archetypal example of the most generic and conservative type, that of nationalised governance. Overall, these words indicate that policy still prioritises consistency, accountability, and measurable outcomes in assessment design, emphasising the formal, top-down nature of assessment in this country.

The Venn diagram reveals several findings regarding the differing perspectives on assessment emanating from students, academics, and policy:

- Divergence in Focus: Academics (Hutchings, 2015; Karayannis, 2013; Moore, 2018) tend to focus on tangible outcomes such as ‘scores’, ‘evidence’, and ‘projects’, indicating their focus on measurable achievements. Students, on the other hand, focus on the emotional and cognitive dimensions of assessment, such as ‘stress’, ‘understanding’, and ‘results’, reflecting a more holistic view of the learning process (von der Embse *et al.*, 2018). Policy is more concerned with formal structures, using

terms such as ‘classroom’, ‘certified’, and ‘cycle’, highlighting the procedural and bureaucratic nature of assessment (NCCA, 2015).

- **Minimal Overlap:** There is limited overlap between all three perspectives, with only the terms ‘exam/ining’ and ‘assess/ing’ being common across all three understandings. This suggests that while the concept of assessment is understood universally, the emphasis on its purpose and impact varies widely, potentially leading to misalignment between how assessments are designed, implemented, and experienced (Meylani, 2024).
- **Emotional disconnect in policy:** Assessment policy seems to lack the emotional and psychological terms present in the student perspective, such as stress or disappointment (von der Embse *et al.*, 2018), indicating a gap in how policy considers the emotional impact of assessment on students. This could imply that policy frameworks do not fully address the pressures students’ experience.
- **Outcome-oriented for academics and policy:** Both academic and policy perspectives share a focus on achievement (Hutchings, 2015; Karayannis, 2013; NCCA, 2015; Moore, 2018) suggesting that both view assessment as a tool for measuring success, although for academics, it is more personally driven, while for policy, it is formalised and standardised.
- **Students emphasise the emotional and cognitive impact of assessments** (Lucas, 2021; von der Embse *et al.*, 2018): The student perspective employs terms such as stress, results, and understanding, which point to a broader concern with how assessments influence not just performance but also learning, well-being, and development. This

highlights a more reflective and process-oriented view of assessment compared to some of the more outcome-driven perspectives of academia and policy.

Thus, these findings suggest that while students, policymakers and academics all recognise the importance of assessment, their priorities differ, and this disconnect may have implications for how assessments are perceived and implemented across educational contexts. This divergence in priorities highlights the need to examine how students' perceptions of assessment are shaped by their social and cultural environments, as well as the broader institutional frameworks that govern educational practices. This is an important area of this study given that their voices are frequently marginalised in assessment discourse. Therefore, building on the definitions provided here by the students regarding assessment, both visually and orally, it is possible to derive several sociocultural influences and environmental affordances students connect to assessment which will be explored in the next section of this chapter.

5.2.3 Cultural and Contextual Influences and Affordances

The students' sketches depict various aspects of assessment which are influenced by cultural and contextual factors at macro and meso level that shape students' experiences and perceptions. These factors also link to influences and affordances e.g. an influencing factor shapes how a student interacts with the affordance - the student's family or the student's expectations can be an influence on how they interact with the affordance of teacher feedback. The students have also articulated their perceptions and experiences of assessment at their focus groups and interviews, and these have been examined and analysed to produce the findings outlined [Table 5.2]. Further evidence to support each aspect identified on the sketches, during

focus group discussions and interviews, are framed by a sample direct quote from students involved in the study.

Table 5.2 - Aspects of Assessment Identified by Students' Sketches, Focus Groups and Interviews - Cultural and Contextual Influences and Affordances at Junior Cycle

Theme	Influences (Shaping Student Interaction)	Affordances (Opportunities in the System)	Constraints (Challenges in/for the System)	Student Experience/Perception
Cultural Influences and Affordances (Macro-Level: Societal Factors)				
High-stakes Testing Culture	Standardised exams and grading systems create societal pressure, reinforcing the idea that academic success is measured by test performance (von der Embse <i>et al.</i> , 2018). The culture of high-stakes testing and competition creates significant stress and anxiety for students, both academically and emotionally (Curtin <i>et al.</i> , 2020).		The emphasis on grades, percentages, and phrases like "if you fail, it matters" reflect a culture where high-stakes testing is prevalent. This cultural context places significant pressure on students to perform well in assessments, as their academic success is often measured by test scores and grades (von der Embse <i>et al.</i> , 2018).	<i>Well I think that assessments where your outcomes are formative are more enjoyable but I think summative assessments are more important. Like they are the ones that you have to do to like get into college and get places in life – they are like proper exams!</i> <i>Catherine, in Second Year, Focus Group 1, Session 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.45am</i>
Societal Value on Quantifiable Achievement	Cultural norms equate academic achievement with personal worth, fostering competition and stress around exam results. (Curtin <i>et al.</i> , Lucas, 2021; Reay & Wiliam, 1998; von der Embse <i>et al.</i> , 2018)	The focus on grades and test results indicates a societal value placed on quantifiable achievement (Curtin <i>et al.</i> , 2020). In many educational systems, success is measured by numerical scores, which are seen as objective indicators of a student's abilities and potential. This cultural norm influences how students perceive their self-worth and progress, often equating higher scores with greater personal value (Reay and Wiliam, 1998). <i>Could be perceived as an affordance or as a constraint.</i>	The focus on grades and test results indicates a societal value placed on quantifiable achievement (Curtin <i>et al.</i> , 2020). In many educational systems, success is measured by numerical scores, which are seen as objective indicators of a student's abilities and potential. This cultural norm influences how students perceive their self-worth and progress, often equating higher scores with greater personal value (Reay and Wiliam, 1998). <i>Could be perceived as an affordance or as a constraint.</i>	<i>You even see it with the leaving cert. Parents would be like, oh, my child, like got 500 in their Leaving Cert. Or like, my child got max points and all this kind of thing. And I think it's a big like, obviously your leaving cert is like your last assessment, so it's very important, but I think there's a lot of emphasis put on the number rather than the person or the skills they developed.</i> <i>Poppy, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 21st March 2023 @ 8.45am</i>

Emotional and Psychological Impact	Academic pressure contributes to stress, anxiety, and self-doubt, particularly in systems where student performance is heavily scrutinised. (Lucas, 2021; von der Embse <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Willis <i>et al.</i> , 2023).		The depictions of stress, anxiety, and emotional responses to assessments reflect the psychological impact exams can have. In a context where academic performance is heavily emphasised, students may experience significant emotional strain (Lucas, 2021, Willis <i>et al.</i> , 2023). This highlights the need for supportive measures to address the mental health and well-being of students within the educational system. Current research indicates challenges in translating well-being guidelines at JC into practice (O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin, 2024).	<i>I feel upset when I think I'm going to get this and then I end up getting that. You're thinking oh that's not great and then you don't really like want to go home and like tell them what you got cause it's not great.</i> <i>Holly, in Second Year, Focus Group 2, Session 1, Thursday 4th November 2021 @ 8.45am</i>
Contextual Influences and Affordances (Meso-Level: School Factors)				
Competitive Educational Environment	Schools reinforce a culture of competition through ranking systems, grading structures, and peer comparison. (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012). Students often equate success with numerical scores, which can overshadow other valuable aspects of learning, such as skill development or personal growth (Rickey <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	The comparisons between students and the depiction of competition highlight a competitive educational environment (Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2012). Cultural norms that prioritise individual excellence and competition can lead to a context where students are constantly measured against each other. This competitive atmosphere can impact students' motivation, stress levels, and social relationships (Curtin <i>et al.</i> 2020). <i>Could be perceived as an affordance or as a constraint.</i>	The comparisons between students and the depiction of competition highlight a competitive educational environment (Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2012). Cultural norms that prioritise individual excellence and competition can lead to a context where students are constantly measured against each other. This competitive atmosphere can impact students' motivation, stress levels, and social relationships (Curtin <i>et al.</i> 2020) <i>Could be perceived as an affordance or as a constraint.</i>	<i>I think especially now with people all around you kind of getting high marks and you're kind of like, I need to be like them and you're trying to.</i> <i>Deirdre, in Third Year Interview, Friday 3rd March, 2023 @ 2.10pm</i>

Role of Teachers and Feedback	The teacher-student relationship influences learning experiences, with constructive feedback playing a crucial role in student progress. (Elwood & Murphy, 2015). Teachers play an essential role in helping students manage stress and prepare for assessments, emphasising the need for supportive, formative feedback (Hattie and Timperley, 2007).	Sketches and student dialogue illustrate the importance of teacher feedback and interaction, suggesting a cultural affordance where teachers are seen as key figures in guiding and assessing student progress. The depiction of teachers providing feedback reflects a learning environment where continuous assessment and support are integral to the educational process (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). This aligns with sociocultural theory, which emphasises the role of social interaction in learning (Elwood and Murphy, 2015; Rogoff, 1995).		<i>I actually like how teachers have to write out like a whole explanation of, oh, this is where you went wrong, this is the good things.</i> <i>Elizabeth, in Third Year Interview, Monday 27th February 2023 @ 10.05am</i>
Study Habits and Preparation	Parental expectations, school policies, and cultural beliefs about discipline shape students' study routines. (Holland, 1998)	The emphasis on study habits, revision, and planning in the sketches indicates a cultural norm that values diligent preparation for assessments (Holland, 1998). This context encourages students to engage in structured study routines, often influenced by parental expectations, school policies, and societal beliefs about the importance of hard work and discipline in achieving academic success (Tuckman and Kennedy, 2010). <i>Could be perceived as an affordance or as a constraint.</i>	The emphasis on study habits, revision, and planning in the sketches indicates a cultural norm that values diligent preparation for assessments (Holland, 1998). This context encourages students to engage in structured study routines, often influenced by parental expectations, school policies, and societal beliefs about the importance of hard work and discipline in achieving academic success (Tuckman and Kennedy, 2010). <i>Could be perceived as an affordance or as a constraint.</i>	<i>Maybe just prepare your best. Because if you go up in front of the class and you know yourself you're not prepared, it's going to be so much worse because you're not confident in yourself and it's going to show up. If you learned it off and you put in the work, even though you're nervous, you have a sense of self control.</i> <i>Méabh, in Third Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 1.30pm</i>

Varied Assessment Types	Institutional policies dictate the use of diverse assessment formats, influencing students' engagement with different types of learning. (Willis <i>et al.</i>, 2023). Diverse assessment types, especially those that reduce individual pressure (such as quizzes or group activities), are favoured by students and may mitigate some of the negative impacts of high-stakes testing (Bearman <i>et al.</i>, 2021).	References to different types of assessments and various test formats, suggest a diverse assessment landscape. This contextual variety indicates that students are afforded multiple forms of evaluation, each with its own set of expectations and pressures (Bearman <i>et al.</i>, 2021). The cultural context of frequent and varied assessments can influence how students approach their studies and manage their time (Willis <i>et al.</i>, 2023).		<i>My favourites are quizzes, especially the Kahoots because no one can see your answers or if you are working in a group that's good too.</i> <i>Lorna, in Second Year, Focus Group 2, Session 1, Thursday 4th November 2021 @ 8.45am</i>
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The social and cultural contextual influences depicted in the sketches, supported by student voices throughout the study, reveal a complex dynamism connecting assessment to societal values, educational policy and practice, affordances and psychological impacts (Elwood and Murphy, 2015). These factors shape how students experience and perceive assessments, influencing their emotional wellbeing, study habits and overall approach to learning. The analysis reveals that while students recognise the importance of summative assessments for future opportunities, the emphasis on quantifiable achievement, competitive culture, and emotional toll significantly shapes their academic behaviour and well-being.

Thus, the student sketches and their oral definitions of assessment encapsulate the complex role of assessments in students' lives, illustrating how they are intertwined with emotional, psychological, cultural and historic dimensions (Lucas, 2021). The drawings and words also elucidate how assessments, as cultural tools, influence a student's emotional state, motivation and self-identity (Rogoff, 1995). Assessments are not simply tools for measuring knowledge, they are deeply embedded in the social fabric of education, impacting how they view themselves and their learning journey (Elwood and Murphy, 2015).

In the following section of this chapter, the focus moves from illustrations of the term assessment and the words used by students to describe the word assessment, to the students' first experience of assessment on their learning journey at secondary school, the entrance assessment. This experience not only identifies the students' first assessment moment in secondary school (on which they will have opinions), it was also a formative experience which informed their perceptions of the term assessment (including the student sketches) at secondary school. Additionally, it provides a rich data set on how students negotiate and understand this assessment experience, unlike anything they had been confronted with heretofore.

5.3 Initial Experiences of Assessment at Secondary School: Perceptions of the Entrance Assessment – Crossing the Road to Secondary School

The assessment landscape for JC students is intricately woven with various assessment moments that collectively shape their learning trajectory. Understanding this assessment journey provides valuable insights into the student's academic progression, strengths, and areas needing further development. The journey, in this school context, commences with the entrance assessment, a pivotal point that, for the school administering it, gauges a student's foundational skills and knowledge upon entry to post-primary education. This assessment serves as a baseline, informing educators about each student's starting point and aiding in the development of tailored learning plans, creating an identity for that student before they have even officially begun their post-primary journey (Curtin *et al.*, 2020).

Research indicates that while there is no official policy mandating entrance assessments in Ireland, many post-primary schools conduct their own assessments to inform student placement and support needs (National Council for Special Education, 2014). Similarly, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) found that schools frequently use assessment data from primary schools alongside their own entrance assessment tests to allocate students into appropriate ability groups, shaping their early post-primary experience (Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004).

The culmination of the JC assessment journey is the final terminal examination, perceived as a moderately high-stakes state certified evaluation that tests the students' mastery of the curriculum across all subjects. This examination serves as a rite of passage, marking the end of the JC and paving the way for further academic pursuit at SC or vocational training.

So, what are students' experiences of the initial step of their assessment journey in secondary school? The Entrance Assessment not only gauges the students' academic preparedness for the

next step in their education, it constructs an early educational profile that authors an identity for them but may also be used ‘to stream or track the students into ability-based classes for their first year in post-primary school’ (Curtin *et al.*, 2020, p. 94). The quotations which follow come from the first focus groups which were held when the students had moved into second year, and they were reflecting retrospectively on the entrance assessments they had undertaken in the February (February 2019) before they started secondary school.

*‘Well like Holly, there were some questions that I wasn’t sure of. But for me, **the big challenge was walking into the hall and seeing all of the seats and tables, it was a bit scary**’*

Lorna, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 2, Thursday 4th November 2020 @ 8.45am

Yeah, I was quite nervous too cause like I hadn’t done an exam like that before and like, I didn’t really know what to expect.

Orlaith, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 3, Tuesday 9th November 2020 @ 8.45am

*There were chairs like all over the hall and I had met some of my friends in the line and so **we just tried to find our seats and we hoped that we’d be sitting together so that we wouldn’t be too nervous!***

Jackie, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 3, Tuesday 9th November 2020 @ 8.45am

*Yeah, I remember thinking that, like our primary school teacher kept telling us like don’t be worried about it, but then **when we walked in, it was like, a proper exam hall and I think that that’s when I started to get very concerned.***

Elizabeth, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2020 @ 8.45am

The words of Lorna depict the entrance assessment exam hall perfectly, a big impersonal room with a large number of desks and chairs set up for the exam creating a space where the students would face an assessment that many of them had not experienced before. As Cahill (2012, cited in Curtin *et al.*, 2020, p. 94) observes ‘they were about to be ripped from the cocoon of the primary school and released into the blackboard jungle of the post-primary world’. The disconnect between the reassurance provided by Elizabeth’s primary school teacher and the

actual experience of walking into what she termed as a ‘proper exam hall’ triggers a sense of trepidation which links to Orlaith’s comment about never taking an exam like this one before. This underscores the idea that first-time exam experiences are particularly challenging for students and they may not have the coping strategies to manage the stress or uncertainty evoked in these settings. Some of the students (73.68%, n=14) felt that they had been prepared for the exam and were confident that they would give of their best in the assessment environment because of the affordances provided to them by their primary school teachers however others (26.32%, n=5) felt very differently about their experiences.

*In my primary school, **they kind of prepared us for it as well, every day or so we would sit and do puzzles to help us prepare** for the assessment.*

Anna, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2020 @ 8.45am

We did preparation for the maths puzzles

Robyn, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 3, Tuesday 9th November, 2020 @ 8.45am

I didn't really have any clue what I was doing when I went in, but I think someone told me, watch the time. Because you think, go slowly because that's what you do in primary school. You go slow and you read the question carefully, even though obviously you do that in secondary school. But you have to be a bit quicker!

Méabh, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2020 @ 8.45am

I just remember answering the most random questions and some weird paper-folding thing. We were told to bring paper and a pencil case and you were asked things about the paper like if you folded it three times to the left and once to the right, what type of shape would it make? It was just the oddest questions! Primary school tried to prepare you but like the teachers in primary school did not think that there would be paper-folding questions on the assessment!

Barbara, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2020 @ 8.45am

The students quoted above all mention their primary schools; firstly, the idea that primary school is an insulated environment where you go slow and you are careful, but that in secondary school, you have to be quick. Secondly, that teachers in primary school may be somewhat disconnected from what goes on in secondary school with regard to assessments.

It would be important to note at this juncture, that communication about the entrance exam from primary school teachers and primary schools in general, should align with the reality students will face. Over-reassurance without providing tools to deal with anxiety may inadvertently exacerbate stress. Hargreaves and Earl (1996) suggest that the challenges that students encounter when bridging primary and secondary school, are primarily associated with transitioning to a new school environment, adapting to curriculum adjustment in tandem with heightened academic expectations, and navigating social change.

Furthermore, they describe this phenomenon as a triple transition, encompassing the shift from a familiar school culture to a novel one, the transition from established friendships and peer groups to new social groupings, and the developmental progression from childhood to adolescence. Thus, it is important that a student's initial assessment experience is a positive one which might bolster confidence and wellbeing. The following quotes from Méabh and Anna underscore the uncertainty and unknown about the entrance exam.

Well I didn't expect the exam to be the way it was. My brother... did an entrance exam for another school obviously the year before me and he had done an entrance exam. But his entrance exam was like, do ya know our Christmas exam ... it was that kind of an exam, he had to write essays and things so like I wasn't prepared for the one I got! Then I realised my one was all about solving patterns and things so it really didn't go as I expected!

Méabh, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2020 @ 8.45am

I wasn't told much. They said in school that there was going to be a couple of questions but then when some of the primary school teachers heard how long the assessment was going to be they were like oh that's weird how long it is ... three hours or something ... and like when we came in we were only allowed to do certain questions within a certain time, I think after you felt that you were stressed so much about the time that afterwards I thought maybe I could have done a bit better.

Anna, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2020 @ 8.45am

The students' reflections here indicate that the entrance exam is an important milestone to them and one that does cause them some stress and anxiety. The perceived high-stakes nature of the exam contributed to their emotional response and feelings of being able to do better in hindsight. Cahill (2012, cited in Curtin *et al.*, 2020, p. 95) describes this beautifully when he observed 'some were being screened in this moment as bodies of potential, others were being indelibly marked with a fatalistic scrawl of underachievement that would sit with them in the school years ahead'.

A small minority of the students felt that their primary school treated some pupils differently depending on which secondary school the students were hoping to attend as outlined in the following quotations:

Well, the people who went to X got more of an opportunity, cause they get scholarships but for us, well you kinda got handed a booklet and it was like, see ya later, do ya know. We didn't really get like practices or anything. The girls who were going to X, well they and the teachers stayed back at lunchtime to do new sums and stuff while we were having our lunch.

Holly, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 2, Thursday 4th November 2020 @ 8.45am

We got handed out the booklets so we knew what kinds of things were coming up on the test but the girls going to X got more time

Lorna, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 2, Thursday 4th November 2020 @ 8.45am

This type of inclusivism/exclusivism depending on which post-primary school you will attend clearly hit a nerve with some of the students involved in this study. Curtin *et al.* (2020, p. 96) make the point that this ‘serves to emphasise how schools are agents of both inclusion and exclusion and the assessment game is central to who gets included and who gets excluded at various junctures along the way’. Thus, entrance assessments for post-primary schools present a varied and sometimes inequitable landscape for the students in terms of the preparatory affordances offered by primary schools. Some primary schools engage extensively in preparing all students for these assessments, ensuring a broad-based readiness across their cohort.

Conversely, other primary schools provided no preparatory assistance, potentially leaving students underprepared, overwhelmed and possibly at an academic disadvantage. Additionally, some schools selectively afforded more resources to those students aiming for admittance to private schools, specifically to secure entrance scholarships. The idea of selective preparation did foster feelings of inequity and exclusion among other students in the cohort, who voiced a lack of support, affordance and opportunity compared to their peers.

Such disparities in preparatory practices highlight noteworthy issues in educational equity and the varying levels of access to resources and support within the primary education system, and would, in my opinion, warrant further research to ensure that all students are afforded the same opportunities when it comes to preparing for entrance assessments. Studies such as those conducted by Brown *et al.* (2021) and Guildea (2020) are instructive, however there exists a gap in the research in this area, and in this jurisdiction.

From this particular data set, it was possible to extract the following findings:

- Emotional responses to the exam setting - Students (78.94%, n=15) expressed anxiety and nervousness, particularly in response to the formal and intimidating exam environment (von der Embse *et al.*, 2018), especially as a first-time experience.
- Social support and peer influence - Some students (36.94%, n=7) coped with exam-related stress through the presence of friends, indicating the importance of peer support in reducing anxiety (Education Scotland, n/d).
- The physical environment as a stressor - The layout and scale of the exam hall (e.g., number of seats and tables) heightened feelings of intimidation and unpreparedness for many students (Kapil *et al.*, 2021).
- Preparation discrepancies - There were significant differences in the level of preparation across schools, with some offering targeted support (e.g., specific practice) and others providing minimal guidance. Brown *et al.* (2021) aver that disparate access to resources for test preparation perpetuates inequality.
- Cognitive and temporal challenges – Students (15.78%, n=3) experienced difficulty transitioning from the slower, more deliberate pace of primary school exams to the quicker response time required for the entrance exam. The idea of increased academic demands and new academic formats for students making the transition from primary to secondary school chimes with the work of Mackenzie, McMaugh and O’Sullivan, 2012.
- Unexpected nature of exam content - Students (36.84%, n=7) were surprised by the format and content of the exam, particularly when it differed from what they had

expected based on prior knowledge or family experiences and this caused stress (Mackenzie, McMaugh and O'Sullivan, 2012).

- Time Pressure and Stress - Strict time limits during the exam contributed to high levels of stress, and some students (26.31%, n=5) felt that they could have performed better without the pressure of time constraints (von der Embse *et al.*, 2018).
- Perceived inequality in preparation - Some students perceived disparities in preparation (10.52%, n=2), with some students receiving more practice or support than others, leading to feelings of inequality (Brown *et al.*, 2021).
- Misalignment between teacher guidance and reality - The preparation afforded by primary schools often did not match the actual demands of the entrance exam, leaving students (31.57%, n=6) feeling unprepared for unexpected question types or formats (Mackenzie, McMaugh and O'Sullivan, 2012).

Despite the perceived challenges of the entrance examination, students in this study have managed to navigate their assessment journeys and adapt to the difficulties they initially experienced, moving along their assessment continuum and providing this researcher with rich data along the longitudinal study. As the students in this cohort progressed through JC, they left their entrance assessment behind and embarked on a complex assessment journey that further shaped their educational experiences, identities, and impacted their agency.

This journey is not comprised merely of a series of tasks or evaluations but rather is a complex intersection of experiences that students navigate daily, influencing their engagement, motivation, and self-perceptions as learners. It is imperative that the significance of students'

voices along this journey are recognised, valuing their expert perspectives (Flynn, 2018) on the assessment practices and experiences that shape their educational pathways (Fielding, 2011). Students are dynamic participants in their educational journey, each with unique backgrounds, experiences and developmental trajectories. As they progress through their education, students engage with various subjects, navigating the content, acquiring skills, and applying knowledge in diverse contexts. These interconnected learning experiences are shaped by a multitude of factors, including teaching methods, resources, peer interactions, personal interests and a myriad of other sociocultural factors and affordances outlined the literature review of this thesis and will be explored in the next section of this chapter.

5.3.1 Visualising the Assessment Journey from a Student Perspective

As was discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, JCT (2019) illustrated the student's assessment journey from the perspective of one *subject* (Figure 5.9):

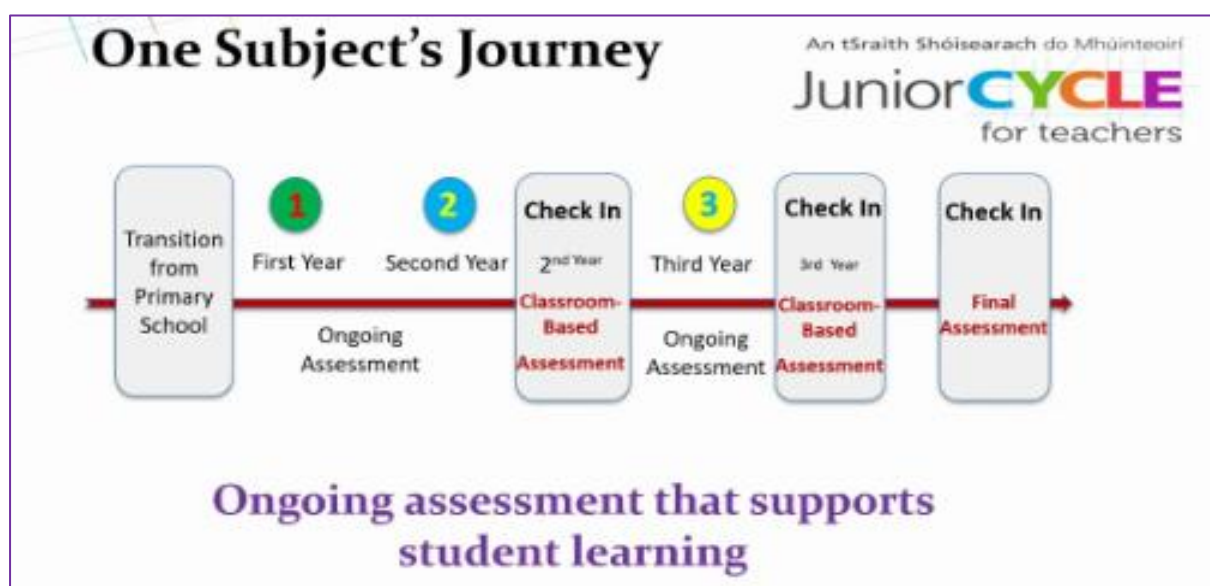


Figure 5.9 – JCT (2019) Ongoing Assessment that Supports Student Learning

I would contend that policymakers and educators should endeavour to always view these journeys from *the student's perspective* if we truly aspire to place the student at the centre of all that we do, as expressed in the *Junior Cycle Framework 2015*. In this particular school context, students will complete 10 such journeys for every subject they undertake at JC. Throughout the JC assessment journey, it is crucial to underscore the *interconnectedness* of these various assessment moments. Each one, whether entrance, formative, summative, practical, aural, oral or practical based, contributes to a multifaceted and complex understanding of the student's learning experiences, perceptions and interpretations of their assessment journey. These experiences, once documented, illuminated, shared and reviewed with the students may collectively inform educational practices, shape curriculum design, and drive continuous improvement efforts aimed at enhancing student outcomes.

Thus, the assessment journey is not merely about evaluating student performance; it is my belief that it is also about fostering a growth mind-set, resilience, and a lifelong love for learning. By providing students with regular feedback, personalised support, and opportunities for reflection and self-assessment, educators can empower them to take ownership of their learning journey and strive for excellence. Consequently, a key finding of this section of the chapter is that a JC student's assessment journey is a complex one that encompasses a wide range of interconnected assessment moments, each with a unique purpose and significance. By understanding and appreciating this journey in its entirety, educators, policymakers, and stakeholders can work collaboratively to create an inclusive, supportive, and enriching educational environment that nurtures every student's potential and prepares them for success in the future.

The assessment journey for our JC students has, in my opinion, become more challenging for students to navigate, as it is a labyrinthine path of concurrent and consecutive assessments. With a myriad of tests to complete over a three-and-a-half year period, beginning with an

entrance assessment for many students, they are often faced with a constant stream of evaluations that demand diverse skill sets and competencies. This, despite the Department of Education's (DoE) desire to reduce the number of assessments students undertake at JC (Circular 0028/2023), where they confirm that schools have been advised that CBAs should replace in-house exams to avoid over assessing students. This is also mentioned in the recommendation section of many subject inspections currently being uploaded to www.gov.ie/en/school-reports as of February of 2025.

Unfortunately, the reality is that JC exams continue to be perceived as relatively high-stakes (Murchan, 2018), with students and their parents using their results to inform their subject choices for the LC. Teachers, aware that student performance is closely monitored by senior school management (via platforms such as Athena Tracker), parents (via school reports and at parent-teacher meetings) and other stakeholders (the inspectorate via JC assessment results), prioritise preparing students for these exams, further reinforcing their significance within the school system (McGarr *et al.*, 2023). This can create stress and anxiety, especially when students feel the pressure to perform well across multiple subjects and assessment types with the pressure of the points race (even at JC) looming on the horizon as described by some of the students in this cohort:

But then also you look at all the points you're trying to achieve and you don't want to just be like, oh, it doesn't matter, it's fine. You want to be able to achieve all those points.'

Deirdre, Third Year Interview, Friday 24th February 2023 @ 2.10pm

So I do say I put myself under a lot of pressure or there's nothing worse when you study so hard, you don't do well' ... I know the stuff, I think to myself, I just messed up. I view it differently now, but the pressure is still there. It's still there'.

Lorna, Third Year Interview, Friday 10th March 2023 @ 12.20pm

*'First year was grand but then the projects are kind of like you have a longer time to do them in second year and you're a bit stressed out, **but then in third year you're just a bit more stressed about the Junior Cert**'.*

Fiona, Third Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 11am

*'Because like in first year anyway, **I thought it was like life or death, like I was studying, so I was stressing out. I was getting really stressed out.**'*

Méabh, Third Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 1.30pm

*I think **coming up to assessments ... is a problem because we have lives outside of school as well. You can't expect us to do homework and do assessments and study for the assessments on top of it. I train 9 hours a week, so I don't have time to be doing homework and then assessments.***

Catherine, Third Year Interview, Friday 24th February 2023 @ 1.00pm

Thus, the emphasis on standardised testing and promulgating a high-stakes exam culture can become overwhelming and overshadow holistic learning experiences, leading to a narrow focus on exam preparation at the expense of creativity, sport or personal growth. As a result, students may find themselves grappling with conflicting priorities, trying to balance academic demands with their own well-being and extracurricular interests.

To try to understand what assessments students have to navigate as they transition from primary school to secondary school and onward to complete their JC journey, I decided to create a map to illustrate their unique assessment pathway [Figure 5.10]. It is clearly a complex journey with many component parts, and findings by McGarr *et al.* (2023) suggest that students experience stress because of the number of assessment moments they have to undertake. Findings from this research supports that view and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 of this thesis. In the penultimate section of this chapter however, the experiences of how students navigate the assessment bridge of transition between primary and secondary school will be explored.

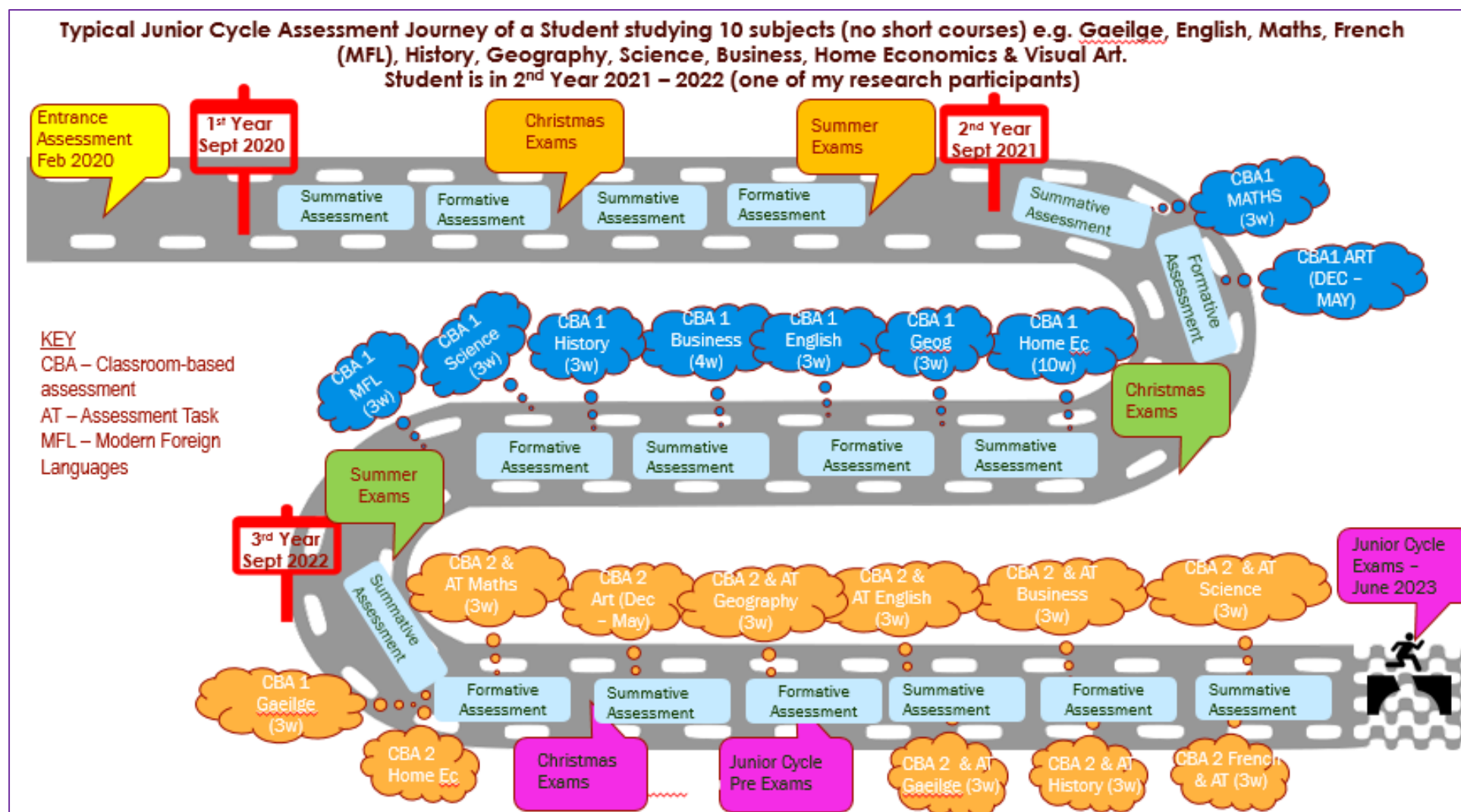


Figure 5.10 - Junior Cycle Student Assessment Journey Visual

5.3.2 Adapting to Challenges: Overcoming assessment hurdles in post-primary school

At the beginning of their assessment journey in secondary school, students must negotiate new subjects and new assessment methods [Figure 5.10]. Whilst the curriculum transition may have been more aligned by the NCCA to make the transition from primary school to post-primary school appear more connected, in terms of frameworks and key competencies, O'Connor and Flynn (2021, p. 7) observed that 'while the new Junior Cycle had increased references to primary settings it lacked explicit connections between the final year in primary school and first-year second-level education.' This is certainly the case when it comes to assessment. Student perspectives from this study unearthed the following assessment experiences which speaks to a bridge between primary and secondary school whose links are tenuous in the eyes of our students.

*Maybe it's because of the entrance exam and the idea of starting having secondary exams, having them regularly and stuff. And the idea of Christmas exams, probably the word exam scared me. Cause like, **in primary school, it's just like class tests, just like a Friday test.***

Méabh, Third Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 1.30pm

*I think it was more I just didn't know like what to expect because I'd never done something like them before. **It was a big step up from primary school.***

Jackie, Third Year Interview, Thursday 9th March 2023 @ 9.25am

*You know, at the start, like, we didn't really have them in when we were younger, **like, in primary school, we didn't have exams, so then it was like a new thing.***

Nuala, Third Year Interview, Monday 13th March 2023 @ 2.50pm

You never really took proper tests in primary school.

Robyn, Third Year Interview, Tuesday 21st March 2023 @ 11am

'We didn't really have assessments in primary school, so I didn't really know what it was going to be like, how to prepare for it and stuff.'

Orlaith, Third Year Interview, Tuesday 14th March 2023 @ 11am

There was no stress, really, in primary school. Like, there was no, like, exams or anything.

Mary, Third Year Interview, Friday 10th March 2023 @ 1.30pm

I don't remember doing that many math tests in primary school!

Robyn, Third Year Interview, Tuesday 21st March 2023 @ 11am

The volume of tests in first year of post-primary school is clearly an area which many students (73.68%, n=14) in this study found difficult. Not knowing how to study for assessments in secondary school was another area that students commented on in this study. This sentiment was also highlighted in the O'Connor and Flynn (2021) study where it was observed that students in first year had difficulties with metacognitive skills, in understanding how they learn and how to study. Findings in this section of the chapter include:

- Increased assessment load and resulting stress (von der Embse *et al.*, 2018) - JC presents students with a complex and continuous stream of assessments, which include both concurrent and consecutive evaluations over a three year period. Despite efforts by the Department of Education to reduce the volume of assessments (Circular 0028/2023), students still perceive JC exams as high-stakes, leading to stress and anxiety. This is exacerbated by the pressure to perform well across multiple subjects and assessment types, creating an overwhelming academic environment.
- Transition from primary to secondary school assessment - Students struggle with the transition from primary to secondary school, particularly in adjusting to the increased

number and formalisation of assessments (Mackenzie, McMaugh and O’Sullivan, 2012). In primary school, tests were generally perceived as low-stakes and infrequent, while secondary school introduced regular assessments that students perceived as high-stakes, intimidating and unfamiliar. The lack of explicit connections between primary and secondary school assessments compounds this challenge, as students are unprepared for the step up in both assessment format and expectations.

- Conflicting priorities and impact on holistic development - The perceived high-stakes exam culture fosters a narrow focus on academic achievement, often at the expense of students’ personal growth, extracurricular activities, and well-being. Students report feeling overwhelmed by the demands of balancing schoolwork, assessments, and other responsibilities, such as sports or hobbies. This pressure to prioritise academic success, driven by societal and institutional expectations, undermines holistic learning experiences and adds to the students' overall stress, a finding crystallised by McGarr *et al.* (2023).

Perhaps the Galton, Grey and Rudduck (1999) Five Pillars of Transition framework [Figure 5.11] could be employed to smooth the transition process for students as they cross the bridge from primary to secondary school. Despite the challenges, the continuity and the discontinuity between primary and post-primary school, the students involved in this research study revealed that they felt they had developed as learners over time, coming to a more mature understanding of the term assessment over time. These revelations will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

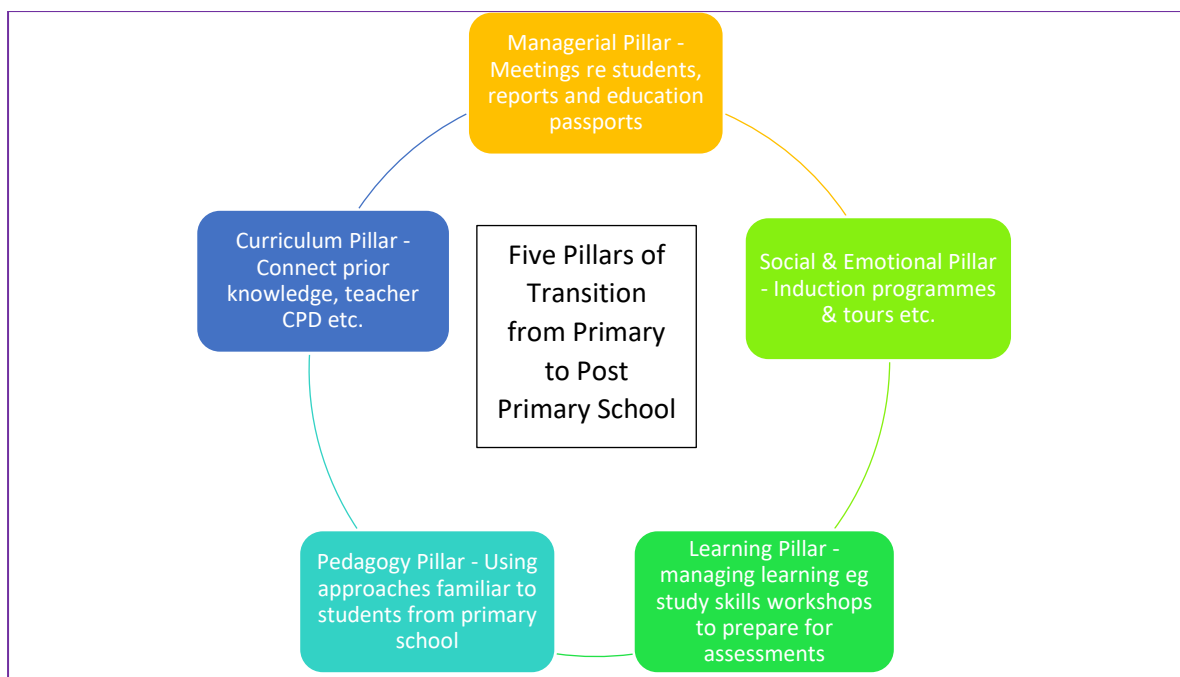


Figure 5.11 – Five Pillars of Transition
Adapted from Galton, Gray and Rudduck. (1999)

5.3.3 Evolution of Assessment Perspectives over Time

As JC students' progress, they demonstrate increasing maturity in their understanding of the purpose of assessment, shifting from viewing it as a mere measure of academic performance to recognising its role in fostering deeper learning and self-reflection. This evolving perspective reflects their development as learners, as they gradually appreciate the value of assessment in guiding their growth, identifying strengths and areas for improvement, and shaping their educational journey over time:

But in second year and near the end of second year, I think I developed way more because I was practicing and I knew how to answer questions properly. And I think now, especially in third year, I realised after the Pres that I can actually answer questions. I know how to approach it.

Méabh, Third Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 1.30pm

In first year, I didn't really know how to go about preparing for tests or like studying, but then say, we have a history test today, so I know exactly what I need to study for the test and how long to start studying before it, so I feel better prepared, like going into that now.

Jackie, Third Year Interview, Thursday 9th March 2023 @ 9.25am

In Méabh's observation, she feels her identity as a learner has developed through the process of engaging with assessments over time. Her increasing ability to answer questions reflects a growing sense of competence and confidence, which are key aspects of her developing identity as a successful student. The change in her approach to learning and assessment highlights the temporal aspect of identity development and the influence of repeated practice within a sociocultural framework (Rogoff, 1995). This is also echoed in Jackie's reflection. Her experience illustrates the shift from uncertainty to a more strategic and confident approach to assessment. This shift reflects her negotiation of the learning space over time, where she has developed an understanding of what is valued in assessments (Elwood and Murphy, 2015) and how to effectively prepare for them. Her improved preparedness is a sign of her developing competence and self-regulation, which are integral to her evolving learner identity (Rogoff, 1995).

As students' undertake further assessments throughout their JC path, their reflections demonstrate an evolving understanding and practice of engaging with assessment, translated into more positive emotional states, compared to their earlier experiences:

Probably just with doing like a lot of them, over time, it kind of just got easier to study for them. I'd be doing the same kind of things, but it would get like easier.

Nuala, Third Year Interview, Monday 13th March 2023 @ 2.50pm

I am a big kind of person who learns from my mistakes. Like, I like to go back and see what I did wrong, like especially for maths. Like I love scribbling stuff out in maths and just keeping on trying to get the answer and just keeping going and scribbling stuff out and crossing and tearing up paper and all sorts. So I really like learning, like seeing what the answer is and trying to figure that out. I don't know, it's like learning from assessments and just figuring out the answer and why they got the answer and how I can make my answer into that one.

Poppy, Third Year Interview, Monday 20th March 2023 @ 10.05am

I think in first year, kind of assessment was like the be all and end all. It was all going to be like the leaving cert! Like even the small class tests were massive, but now it's like kind of the teachers aren't there to ... they're not trying to make you fail, they're there to help you. And they're not going to put like, ridiculously hard stuff on the test, they're going to put stuff there that you should know. And if you don't know, then that's kind of on you.

Deirdre, Third Year Interview, Friday 24th February 2023 @ 2.10pm

In first year or when I was first doing exams, I was just, like, only thought about the results ... and then I had a teacher say to me, oh, school is about actually learning. You're not just doing the exam. And I was like, I realised that I actually do learn a lot from school. It sounds like, obvious, but you actually do learn a lot.

Méabh, Third Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 1.30pm

Nuala's reflection points to the importance of repetition and experience in the development of assessment-related skills. The ease that comes with time reflects her growing familiarity with the processes involved, indicating a shift in her identity as she becomes more comfortable and proficient with the demands of assessment (Rogoff, 1995). This development is a clear example of how repeated engagement in socioculturally situated practices leads to the internalisation of skills and confidence (Elwood and Murphy, 2015). Poppy's approach to learning through assessment highlights the iterative nature of identity development. Her active

engagement in learning from mistakes and her persistence in problem solving reflect a deepening of her learner identity. This process of trial and error, and the value she places on understanding the 'why' behind answers, aligns with sociocultural theories that emphasise learning as a socially and culturally mediated process of development (Elwood and Murphy, 2015).

Deirdre's changing perception of assessments from something daunting to something more manageable reflects a significant shift in her understanding of the educational environment. This change in perspective is indicative of her evolving identity as a student who is now more confident and understands the supportive role of teachers. It demonstrates how her view of assessments has been shaped by her ongoing experiences and interactions within the learning environment (Bennett, 2018).

In the final quote from Méabh, she notes her shift from a results-oriented mind-set to a more holistic understanding of learning. The realisation that school is about learning, not just performing in exams, marks a significant moment of identity negotiation where she begins to value the process of learning itself (Rogoff, 1995). This shift reflects the broader sociocultural understanding that learning is not just about achieving outcomes but also about the development of knowledge, skills, and identity over time (Rogoff, 1995), which is also a clear expectation at policy level in the JC Framework's Key Skills and Principles (NCCA, 2015). Thus, student reflections on their individual and unique learning journeys resonate with the sociocultural theorisation of assessment as spaces 'where individuals negotiate identity, space and value in temporally linked moments of change and development' (Curtin *et al.*, 2020, p. 18).

The final section of this chapter will summarise the findings gleaned from the students in this, the first of the findings chapters, which considers Research Question 1 - *What does a*

first/second/third year student understand the term 'assessment' to mean, and does that understanding shift as they move through their first three years of post-primary schooling?

5.4 Conclusion

The chapter explored students' understanding of the term 'assessment' and how this understanding evolves throughout their first three years of post-primary schooling, focusing on their definitions, perceptions, early experiences and retrospective discussion on how they felt they progressed through JC. The research is structured around several key themes, including students' conceptualisations of assessment, their perceptions of assessment objectives, the emotional and psychological impact of assessments, and the progression of the self as learners. The chapter also explored the sociocultural influences and environmental affordances revealed through students' descriptions and oral definitions of assessment. By analysing the language and emotive descriptions used by students, it is possible to gain insights into the broader societal and institutional contexts that shape their perceptions and experiences. These findings illuminate the complex dynamics between individual stressors, cultural expectations, and the structured educational environments in which assessments are conducted.

The findings also suggest that students' understanding of assessment evolves significantly over their first three years of post-primary schooling, shifting from a narrow focus on grades and performance to a more holistic appreciation of assessments as tools for learning and self-improvement. This evolution is influenced by various cultural, social, and psychological factors, including the high-stakes nature of testing, the competitive educational environment, and the critical role of teacher feedback. Understanding these dynamics can help educators

design assessment practices that better align with students' experiences and support their development as learners.

In the subsequent findings chapter, the focus will shift to an in-depth exploration of students' experiences and perceptions of various assessment types within the Junior Cycle. The chapter will examine the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as perceived by students, the factors that influence their preferences for summative or formative assessment approaches, and the skills, values, knowledge, and understanding they believe they develop through classroom-based assessments. Through these findings, a deeper understanding of how students' navigate and respond to different assessment modalities in their educational journey will be achieved.

Chapter Six – Findings and Discussion

Exploring Students' Perspectives on Assessment Approaches in Junior Cycle

Exploring Research Questions 2 & 3

6.0 Introduction

The previous findings chapter explored the sociocultural factors and environmental influences related to the students' descriptions and definitions of assessment. In analysing the language and emotional expressions used by students, it was possible to discern the broader societal and institutional frameworks that shape their perceptions and experiences of assessment. The findings reveal the complex relationship between individual stressors, cultural expectations, and the structured educational settings in which assessments occur.

Moreover, the findings indicate that students' conceptualisation of assessment undergoes significant transformation during their first three years of post-primary education. Initially centred on grades and performance, their understanding evolves towards a broader view of assessment as a tool for learning and self-improvement. This shift is shaped by a range of cultural, social, and psychological influences, including the competitive nature of the educational environment, the afforded pressures of high-stakes testing, and the critical role of teacher feedback. Gaining insight into these disparate influences can help educators to develop assessment practices that are cognisant of students' experiences and that support their growth as learners.

The focus of this chapter is an exploration of students' experiences and perceptions of different assessment types within Junior Cycle which specifically addresses the following research questions:-

- RQ 2 (a) What factors shape students' preferences for summative or formative assessment and do these experiences alter as they move through their Junior Cycle assessment journey?
- RQ 2 (b) What are the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as perceived and enacted by students at Junior Cycle and how do these assessments influence their educational experience?
- RQ 3 - What skills, values, knowledge, and understanding do students perceive they acquire or develop specifically as a result of classroom-based assessments undertaken in second and third year?

Building upon the insights gleaned from Chapters 2 and 3 of the literature review, this chapter integrates the theoretical and empirical dimensions of assessment in sociocultural and affordance contexts to frame the findings discussed earlier. The findings underscore the complex influences of sociocultural and institutional frameworks, along with affordances and constraints, on students' perceptions and experiences of assessment. As Chapters 2 and 3 elucidate, assessment is a deeply embedded sociocultural practice, shaped by evolving identities, agency, and environmental affordances. These frameworks proffer a lens to understand the dynamic connections between the competitive pressures of summative assessment, the transformative power of feedback, and the role of formative and summative assessments in shaping student agency and growth.

Thus, exploring the elements that shape students' preferences for summative or formative assessment methods together with the eliciting the benefits and limitations of both summative and formative assessments as they perceive it are findings that are explored in this chapter. In

addition, students' interpretations as to the competencies, values, knowledge, and insights they report gaining through CBAs together with their views on how they experience these assessments in the classroom are also curated.

To connect the two key ideas - activating student voice and agency in assessment and understanding students' beliefs and practices regarding classroom assessment - it is essential to consider how sociocultural influences shape both areas. The concept of activating student voice and agency emphasises the importance of empowering learners to engage critically and collaboratively with assessment processes, which aligns with the sociocultural notion of learning as a shared and interactive experience. Similarly, understanding students' beliefs and practices highlights how factors such as fear of failure or incongruences between teacher and student perspectives can inhibit or enable meaningful participation. Together, these ideas reveal a relationship between student autonomy and the contextual constraints of assessment environments, providing a foundation for exploring how tailored assessment practices can foster agency while respecting students' lived experiences. This connection sets the stage for the subsequent sections, where these findings are examined in relation to broader educational goals and policy implications.

They also reveal the nuanced ways students navigate the intersection between formative and summative assessment types, balancing comfort and familiarity, engagement, and academic growth. Student responses indicate that preferences for assessment types are influenced by a combination of familiarity, perceived fairness, stress levels, and the opportunity for continuous feedback. While written assessments remain a staple due to their familiarity, many students appreciate the engaging and low-pressure nature of formative assessments such as quizzes and Kahoots. The findings also suggest that a balanced approach by educators, incorporating both summative and formative assessments, may best cater to the diverse needs and preferences of students, supporting their overall learning and development throughout JC.

The results outlined here align with and expand upon several other theoretical and empirical perspectives discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 of the literature review. For instance, the role of familiarity and prior experiences in shaping students' preferences for traditional summative assessments reflects Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which highlights how cognitive development is deeply intertwined with cultural tools and practices. The students' comfort with written tests illustrates how these assessment formats have become cultural scripts, as described by Bruner (1993), through which students navigate and make sense of their educational experiences.

Similarly, Rogoff's (1995) three planes of analysis - personal, interpersonal, and community - can help frame the dynamics at play, as the students' interactions with both traditional and formative assessments are informed by personal history, peer influences, institutional and cultural expectations. This points to the broader cultural and structural forces shaping assessment preferences, echoing Elwood and Murphy's (2015) contention that assessment is a sociocultural practice that extends beyond the individual to societal and institutional systems.

The findings also connect to the importance of interactive and engaging assessment formats, which align with Milligan *et al.*'s (2020) advocacy for authentic, performance-based assessments that prepare students for real-world competencies. Students' appreciation for quizzes and classroom-based assessments resonates with McDermott's (2001) argument that learning is socially constructed and thrives in dialogic and collaborative environments. Additionally, Curtin *et al.* (2020) emphasise the value of active participation in assessment practices, which is reflected in students' positive responses to low-pressure, formative tasks that allow them to share knowledge and receive immediate feedback.

However, the tension students express between summative and formative assessments reflects Bennett's (2011) critique of the disjointed implementation of these practices in schools,

underscoring the need for a coherent approach to balance the benefits of both. These findings further reinforce the necessity of a learner-centered assessment system, as discussed by Darling-Hammond (2017), which fosters engagement and deep learning while addressing the socioemotional aspects of assessment experiences.

Table 6.1 illustrates how these key ideas, grounded in the relevant literature, are reflected in the findings, demonstrating the interconnected themes of student agency, sociocultural influences, and the evolving role of assessments in fostering meaningful and equitable learning experiences.

Table 6.1 – Themes, Relevant Literature, Critical Concepts from the Literature, Findings in Context and Summarised Explanations pertaining to Research Question 2 (a) and (b)

Themes	Relevant Literature	Critical concepts from the Literature	Findings in Context: Sub-Themes	Summarised Explanation
The role of traditional summative assessments on student self-regulation of emotions and academic progress (including student comfort and academic milestones).	Andersen (2020), Bennett (2018), Bui (2023), Douglas Smith <i>et al.</i> , (2011), Elwood and Murphy (2015).	Andersen (2020): Familiarity and Comfort - students are more comfortable with assessment formats they have encountered regularly. Bennett (2018): Privacy in Assessment - summative assessments are perceived as private between student and teacher, reducing social pressure. Douglas Smith <i>et al.</i> (2011): Assessment Literacy - understanding the purpose and format of summative assessments contributes to confidence and self-regulation. Elwood & Murphy (2015): Summative Assessments as milestones – traditional assessments mark key academic achievements and transitions within education systems. Elwood & Murphy (2015): Societal role of summative assessments - these assessments are positioned as indicators of future academic and professional pathways.	Student preference for summative assessments. Summative assessments seen as private and being low social risk. Summative assessments as academic milestones Mixed feelings about summative assessment. Potential shift toward self-regulated learning.	Traditional summative assessments remain a preferred method for many students due to their familiarity and perceived role in academic progression. Students appreciate their structured, private nature, which reduces social anxiety, aligning with Bennett’s (2018) discussion of assessment as a socioemotional experience. Elwood & Murphy (2015) emphasise that summative assessments serve as formal academic milestones, reinforcing their importance in students’ educational journeys. While these assessments offer a sense of structure and predictability, they can also contribute to stress. However, some traditional assessments are beginning to integrate self-reflective elements, suggesting a potential shift towards a more self-regulated learning approach.

Role of formative assessment on supporting student learning and enjoyment (low-pressure, interactive and enjoyable).	Bennett (2018), Bui (2023), Curtin <i>et al.</i>, (2020), McDermott (2001), Milligan <i>et al.</i>, (2020), Rogoff (1995).	Bennett (2018): Privacy in assessment -Some students appreciate that quizzes allow for anonymous participation, reducing stress and social pressure. Bui (2023): Learner-centred assessment - Formative assessments focus on individual progress and growth rather than high-stakes final outcomes. Curtin <i>et al.</i>, (2020): Active engagement - Students benefit from assessments that reinforce learning through classroom interaction and participation. McDermott (2001): Socially constructed learning – Group and interactive assessments foster collaboration, discussion, and deeper understanding. Milligan <i>et al.</i>, (2020) Limitations of traditional assessment – Conventional summative exams often reinforce rote learning and dependency on direct instruction. Rogoff (1995): Sociocultural activity on three planes - Formative assessments often engage students in learning through interactive experiences with their peers, teachers and community.	Some of students preferred interactive assessments highlighting their engaging and enjoyable nature. Some students valued these assessments because they allowed participation without public exposure of mistakes, reducing stress. Interactive and formative assessments were perceived as less stressful and more student friendly. Students recognised that while they enjoyed these assessments, the educational system still prioritises traditional summative methods. There is an underlying tension between student enjoyment of formative assessment and the reality of high-stakes summative testing, which can determine academic progression.	Students expressed a strong preference for interactive and formative assessments, such as quizzes and Kahoots, as they found these methods engaging, low-pressure, and supportive of continuous learning. Rogoff’s (1995) theory of learning on personal, interpersonal, and community levels aligns with students’ appreciation for collaborative and interactive assessments. However, some students, as Bennett (2018) notes, value the privacy these methods afford, as they can participate without fear of public failure. Bui (2023) advocates for a shift towards more learner-centred assessments, but as Milligan et al. (2020) highlight, traditional summative assessments still dominate educational structures, creating tension between enjoyable, formative approaches and the reality of high-stakes final exams. While interactive assessments foster engagement and participation, students remain acutely aware that their academic progress will ultimately be measured by traditional summative assessments.
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Students' divergent perceptions of formative and summative assessments	Andersen (2020), Bennett (2018), Black and Wiliam (1998), Black and Wiliam (2012), Bui (2023), Douglas Smith <i>et al.</i>, (2011), Elwood (2006), Elwood and Murphy (2015), Hattie (2009), Rogoff (1995).	Andersen (2020): Assessment literacy - Understanding assessment purposes and processes increases student confidence. Bennett (2018): Reporting methods - Innovations in assessment reporting are needed to provide better, more interactive, and tailored feedback. Black and Wiliam (1998): Formative assessment and motivation - Formative assessments encourage regular feedback and adaptation of learning strategies. Black and Wiliam (2012): Role of feedback - Formative assessment improves learning when the feedback is meaningful and actionable. Bui (2023): Sociocultural influences -The fear of making mistakes in assessments can impact student engagement and participation. Douglas Smith <i>et al.</i>, (2011): Assessment literacy - Students must grasp assessment purpose and develop skills to self-evaluate their performance. Elwood (2006): Contextual limitations - Formative assessment can lead to learning gains but has limitations in different contexts. Elwood and Murphy (2015):	Students held divergent views on summative and formative assessments, with some valuing summative assessments for their role in formal academic progression and others preferring formative assessments for their reduced pressure and regular feedback. Some students felt pressure to perform well in summative assessments, linking them to academic milestones and future opportunities such as college admission. Formative assessments were perceived as more enjoyable and engaging, helping students track progress without the stress of a high-stakes exam. Some students highlighted that summative assessments could lead to over-preparation and anxiety, while formative assessments encouraged steady engagement without the fear of failure. The sociocultural role of assessment influences student perceptions, with high-stakes exams often prioritised due to their significance in the education system.	Students expressed mixed feelings about summative and formative assessments, highlighting the tension between the high-stakes nature of summative exams and the engagement benefits of formative assessments. Summative assessments were seen as essential for academic progression, reinforcing the perspective that they serve a formal role in student achievement (Elwood and Murphy, 2015). However, formative assessments were preferred by some students for their low-pressure, feedback-driven approach, which aligns with Black and Wiliam's (1998) argument that formative assessment encourages motivation and learning adaptation. Rogoff's (1995) sociocultural theory provides insight into how student experiences with assessment are shaped by the broader educational environment, with high-stakes exams maintaining dominance despite the benefits of formative practices. Ultimately, while formative assessments promote continuous learning, the educational system
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		Summative assessment in society - Summative assessments serve as benchmarks within educational and social frameworks. Hattie (2009): Summative vs formative assessment - Summative assessments evaluate final learning, while formative assessments provide ongoing feedback. Rogoff (1995): Sociocultural theory - Learning occurs at personal, interpersonal, and community levels, impacting how students experience assessment.		still prioritises summative assessments as key markers of student success.
Positive influences from feedback as formative assessment	Andersen (2020), Arnold (2022), Bennett (2011), Black and Wiliam (1998), Curtin <i>et al.</i>, (2020), Hattie (2023), Hattie and Timperley (2007), NCCA (n/d), Rogoff (1995).	Andersen (2020): Co-designed assessment - Teachers should work alongside students to develop assessment processes that support metacognition. Arnold (2022): Self-efficacy - Formative feedback promotes confidence and a learner-centred environment by balancing strengths and areas for improvement. Bennett (2011): Purpose of assessment - Feedback should serve as an instrument of deep comprehension rather than simply evaluating performance.	Formative assessments linked to feedback. Feedback as a tool for specific improvement and future learning. Feedback enhancing confidence and reducing negative feelings from summative marks. Modelling feedback as a scaffold for understanding assessment criteria. Feedback as a motivational tool that focuses on growth rather than mistakes	Students consistently highlighted the importance of feedback in shaping their learning experiences. They viewed it as a tool for improvement, helping them identify mistakes, refine strategies, and track progress. Black and Wiliam (1998) support this perspective, noting that formative feedback enhances motivation and engagement when provided effectively. Hattie and Timperley (2007) introduce the concepts of feed-forward and feed-up, which help students understand both their current performance and their trajectory for future learning.

		Black and Wiliam (1998): Formative feedback - Timely and specific feedback enhances motivation, encourages student engagement, and improves learning outcomes. Curtin <i>et al.</i>, (2020): Active engagement - Teachers who model assessment practices foster participation and understanding in the learning process. Hattie (2023): Importance of feedback - Emphasises that feedback remains central to improving student outcomes and learning strategies. Hattie and Timperley (2007): Feed-forward and feed-up - Feedback should help students understand both how to improve and how their learning progresses to further levels. NCCA (n/d): Formative assessment - Assessment for learning should involve gathering evidence to adapt teaching and enhance student progress. Rogoff (1995): Guided participation – Learning is shaped by participation in structured activities, with guidance playing a key role in knowledge internalisation.	Feedback as essential to the purpose of assessment for learning.	Rogoff’s (1995) framework on guided participation underscores the importance of structured, interactive feedback in helping students internalise knowledge. While feedback was valued for promoting confidence and reducing anxiety, some students expressed that without it, assessments felt meaningless. Bennett (2011) echoes this view, asserting that assessments should function as tools for deep comprehension rather than mere evaluation. Ultimately, feedback was seen as essential in creating a supportive, learner-centred environment where students feel motivated to grow and improve.
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Negative influences from feedback as formative assessment	Andersen (2020), Black and Wiliam (1998), Black and Wiliam (2012), Bui (2023), Elwood (2006).	Andersen (2020): Clarity in feedback - When feedback lacks clarity, students may feel less confident in their ability to improve, undermining its supportive function. Black and Wiliam (1998): Effective feedback - Feedback must be specific and constructive to support learning and motivation. Black and Wiliam (2012): Actionable feedback - General or vague feedback fails to provide students with the insights needed for meaningful improvement. Bui (2023): Self-regulation and engagement - Effective feedback should promote student autonomy and active learning by providing clear and targeted guidance. Elwood (2006): Individualised learning - Assessment should facilitate individual learning, but unclear feedback prevents students from identifying how to improve.	Overly general feedback reducing effectiveness and impact. Unclear feedback leading to miscommunication and student frustration.	Students reported that unclear or overly general feedback limited its usefulness, as it did not provide the specific guidance needed for improvement. Black and Wiliam (2012) emphasise that feedback must be actionable and tailored, or it risks causing frustration and disengagement. Similarly, Elwood (2006) argues that assessment should support individual learning, but vague comments fail to achieve this. Anderson (2020) highlights how a lack of clarity in feedback can reduce student confidence, making it harder for them to self-regulate their learning. Bui (2023) supports the idea that effective feedback should promote self-regulation and active engagement, which requires detailed, constructive comments. Overall, students viewed specific and meaningful feedback as essential for their progress, while unclear or repetitive feedback was seen as a barrier to learning.
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Constructive alignment between summative and formative assessment	Andersen (2020), Bui (2023), Black and Wiliam (2012), Elwood and Murphy (2015).	Andersen (2020): Clarity in assessment - Clear assessment criteria help students adjust their learning strategies and improve performance. Bui (2023): Learner-centred assessment - Grades serve as motivators, providing structure and recognition of student effort. Black and Wiliam (2012): Feedback and motivation - Feedback guides specific improvements and, when combined with grades, enhances student motivation. Elwood and Murphy (2015): Summative assessments and societal roles - Summative assessments act as benchmarks, positioning students within broader educational structures.	Summative assessment as a tool for progress tracking and goal setting. Grades as essential indicators of achievement and validation. Grades coupled with feedback as comprehensive tools for improvement.	Students perceive summative assessments as important milestones in their educational journey, helping them review material and track progress. Elwood and Murphy (2015) highlight that summative assessments play a societal role, positioning students within formal educational structures. Additionally, grades are valued for their clarity and recognition, with Bui (2023) noting their motivational impact. However, students also stress that feedback alone lacks sufficient context, aligning with Black and Wiliam's (2012) argument that grades and feedback together provide the most effective guidance for improvement. Anderson (2020) further supports this by emphasising the importance of clear assessment criteria, which allow students to refine their learning strategies. Ultimately, while students appreciate grades for their definitive nature, they also recognise the role of feedback in enhancing understanding and fostering growth when delivered alongside numerical scores.
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6.1 Factors shaping students' preferences for formative or summative assessments, and influence on their educational experience?

This section reveals the factors students' perceive influence their preferences for summative or formative assessment, together with the perceived affordances and constraints of these assessment types as experienced by the JC students participating in this study. In exploring these considerations, the findings offer an understanding of how contemporary assessment practices shape student learning and engagement.

Research Question 2 comprises of two parts:

- (a) What factors shape students' preferences for summative or formative assessment and how do these assessments influence their educational experience?
- (b) What are the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as perceived and enacted by students at Junior Cycle?

The questions may seem similar, but they differ significantly in their focus, scope, and depth of inquiry.

The first part of the question centres on the factors influencing student preferences between summative and formative assessments. It is primarily concerned with understanding the reasons behind students' inclinations towards one type of assessment over the other. The question seeks to explore the personal, educational and social factors that lead students to favour summative assessments or formative assessments. Factors could include internal factors such as students' perceptions of effectiveness, their comfort levels with different assessment types, their understanding of how each type of assessment impacts their learning, and external influences such as parental expectations, peer pressure and cultural context.

In contrast, the second part of the question takes a broader and more analytical approach, focusing on the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as

perceived and enacted by students at the JC. Here, the term affordances refers to the opportunities and advantages the process of undertaking each assessment type offers, while constraints refers to the limitations and challenges they present. This question invites a deeper investigation into how students at JC experience these assessments in practice - not just their preferences but also how they interact with and navigate these assessment types throughout the JC assessment continuum.

In terms of scope, part (a) of the question is more narrow, focusing on the specific factors behind student preferences and how they influence their educational experience, whereas question (b) is broader and more complex, examining both the perceived and actual impacts of assessment types on students, covering both their benefits and limitations. In terms of focus, part (a) is student-centred, looking primarily at personal preferences, the reasons behind them and their subsequent influence on the students' educational experience. Conversely, part (b) is more context-centred, focusing on how the assessments function within the educational environment and how students perceive and respond to these functions. Finally, each part of the question also differs in terms of outcome. The outcome of part (a) was more of a list or analysis of factors that influence preferences and influences, while the outcome of part (b) was a more nuanced understanding of the practical implications of assessment types, providing insights into how they shape students' educational experiences. The findings for both parts of the questions will be considered in the following section of this chapter.

6.1.1 Students' evolving preferences for formative or summative assessments

The analysis of student responses reveals diverse preferences and perceptions regarding summative and formative assessments. These findings shed light on the factors influencing students' preferences for different types of assessments, as well as the perceived influences associated with each. This section will focus on (a) the role of traditional summative assessments on student self-regulation of emotions and academic progress (including student comfort and academic milestones), (b) the role of formative assessment on supporting student learning and enjoyment (assessments which students' perceive as low-pressure, interactive and enjoyable), and (c) students' divergent perceptions of formative and summative assessments.

- Student comfort and familiarity with traditional summative assessments and as indicators of academic milestones

47.35% (n=9) of students expressed a preference for traditional written tests during their first focus group sessions, attributing a sense of comfort and familiarity with this assessment format as the primary reason for choosing this. However, there was also a reference made to the idea of these types of tests being private, between student and teacher, hinting at the socioemotional nature of assessment as discussed by Bennett (2018). These findings align with Elwood and Murphy (2015), who argue that summative assessments are deeply embedded within educational and societal structures. Summative assessments provide a measure within broader social contexts, positioning students within academic and professional trajectories. Similarly, Andersen (2020) emphasises that when students understand the purpose and processes of assessment, confidence increases, suggesting that familiarity with summative formats may play a role in perceived comfort linking to the tenet of assessment literacy (Douglas Smith *et al.*, 2011).

I think probably written because that's my strongest skill when it comes to tests because that's what I'm most used to.

Anna, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.45am

A written one because then your answers are just between you and your teacher. Then no one else can see what you've written and maybe where you went wrong!

Catherine, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.45am

I find it helpful when there is a test at the end of every chapter and then like I can look over them for the Christmas and summer exams.

Orlaith, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 3, Tuesday 9th November 2021 @ 8.45am

The students' observations above highlight the role of familiarity and previous experience in shaping student preferences for written assessments, which they perceive as more straightforward and within their comfort zone. Traditional assessments such as end of unit or chapter exams, end of term/year exams and standardised tests (outlined by Anna and Orlaith above) are deeply embedded in sociocultural scripts and are often used as benchmarks for student performance within social structures and frameworks.

Elwood and Murphy (2015) argue that these assessments serve a broader societal role, positioning students within educational and professional trajectories, a milieu and influence which these students seem to find appealing. This lens allows us to contextualise the place of traditional assessments within a more expansive system of contemporary educational evaluation which Bui (2023) advocates should be more learner centred. However, many traditional exams or written tasks within school assessment systems now integrate self-reflective components or prompts for students to evaluate their learning, very slowly nudging more traditional formats closer to a self-regulated learning model.

10.52% (n=2) of the students (during the first focus groups) mentioned that they preferred CBAs as an assessment preference. Only one CBA had started at the time of the focus groups (Home Economics) and so this might explain why so few students mentioned this type of assessment as their preferred option.

*Probably **the CBAs** because you don't have to study much for them! And you don't have to do much preparation for them either. Like, they are an assessment but you can't really study for them so they are a bit more enjoyable really.*

Fiona, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.25am

*Well like, usually for a test you have a book and like you are told what pages you have to study. You do that but **there might be one page that you are struggling on and the whole test could be mainly on that one page but with the CBA, you know what you have to do, you do it and you could possibly get a high mark.***

Barbara, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.25am

Students such as Barbara quoted above, appreciate the deeper type of assessment that a CBA affords (NCCA, 2015, p.37 & 38). Darling-Hammond (2017) describes CBAs as an extended task of one to four weeks, involving formulation/carrying out of inquiries and presentation of findings. While students such as Barbara appreciate the more engaging aspect of these types of assessment, there is still tension apparent in her response when she refers to her desire to achieve a high mark. Tension is also evident in Lorna's remarks concerning anonymity or privacy in respect of contributions they make when completing an online quiz or working within a group.

My favourites are quizzes, especially the Kahoots because no one can see your answers or if you are working in a group that's good too.

Lorna, Second Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 2, Thursday 4th November @ 8.45am

These experiences and perspectives can be linked to a powerful and influential cultural burden to achieve (Elwood and Murphy, 2015) and to a fear of failure or an anxiety about not achieving in the eyes of those around them (von der Embse *et al.*, 2018).

Due to concerns about failing publicly and the stress associated with this perspective, some students, like Lorna, will always express a preference for the privacy that more traditional written tests offer, minimising the potential embarrassment of making mistakes in a more public forum (Bui, 2023) and linking to Bennett's (2018) contention that assessments have a socioemotional aspect. Milligan *et al.* (2020, p. 14) remind us that 'without a focus on mastery of generic capabilities, assessment and teaching practices tend to privilege memorisation, essay writing, individual mastery of set content and solving of problems with formulaic solutions'. Milligan *et al.* (2020) also aver that students who are demotivated because of assessment may not remain in school and, consequently, may not find employment.

I think summative assessments are more important. Like they are the ones that you have to do to like get into college and get places in life – they are like proper exams!

Catherine, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.45am

I said summative because it's like the Christmas, summer and Pre Exams and everything and it's through those exams that you are preparing for your Leaving Cert and your Junior Cert and they are like the most important ones and so you have to do other similar types of ones so that you know what to expect.

Nuala, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 3, Tuesday 9th November 2021 @ 8.45am

Catherine and Nuala identified summative assessments as critical for academic progress, particularly for significant exams that determine educational pathways (e.g. college entry). These exams represent formal achievements, underscoring their perceived importance despite the associated stress. Elwood and Murphy (2015) recognise the societal function of summative

assessments, positioning them as benchmarks within the larger educational and social framework.

- Formative Assessments Perceived as Low-Pressure and Encouraging Continuous Engagement

26.31% (n=5) of the students' (during the first focus group sessions) expressed a preference for other assessment methods, such as quizzes and Kahoots. These methods were appreciated for their interactive and enjoyable nature aligning with Rogoff's (1995) tenet that development occurs via personal, interpersonal and community planes.

I kind of prefer quizzes or Kahoots over the written test – something that's a bit of fun.

Deirdre, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 2, Thursday 4th November 2021 @ 8.45am

Anything, but not a test! Maybe like drawing a poster or something. Or brainstorming with other people. Like writing down everything that you remember on a show-me board.

Iseult, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 2, Thursday 4th November 2021 @ 8.45am

These responses suggest that students appreciate the engagement and reduced pressure associated with these assessment formats, which allow for collaborative learning and a more relaxed atmosphere. These students found formative assessments less stressful and more student-friendly, possibly as they promote a continuous learning journey rather than high-stakes outcomes. The frequent nature of formative assessments supports day-to-day learning, helping students feel engaged and less anxious. This resonates with Bui (2023) who advocates for learner-centred and formative approaches that focus on growth rather than final outcomes. By providing continuous feedback, formative assessments foster a supportive learning

environment where students can track their own progress without the pressure of a high-stakes exam.

Some students such as Deirdre, Lorna and Iseult preferred interactive and informal assessments, such as quizzes or Kahoots, because they are engaging and allow students to share knowledge without public exposure of individual mistakes. Curtin *et al.* (2020) support the value of active engagement in learning, with assessments that leverage classroom resources for learning reinforcement. McDermott (2001) avers that learning is socially constructed, meaning that group and interactive formative assessments can provide valuable dialogue and promote understanding within a relaxed atmosphere. This atmosphere, in turn, fosters more authentic engagement and aligns with Bui (2023)'s learner-centred approach, supporting self-regulation and participation.

Thus, while it is heartening to listen to students speak of their enjoyment in completing a variety of disparate assessments, it is also an unpalatable truth to have to accept that 'schools create students dependent on direct instruction, cramming, drilling and coaching, reliant on expert instruction by teachers who are expected to guide learners through a carefully prescribed body of knowledge, assessed in predictable ways' (Milligan *et al.*, 2020, p. 14). Students at JC level want to engage in what they perceive are more enjoyable assessment approaches. However, they are very much aware of the fact that their achievements will be measured and reported on via a series of assessment moments along the JC assessment continuum, inevitably concluding with a state certified exam, and these assessment moments are, for the most part, traditional (summative) in nature.

- Divergent students' perceptions on formative and summative assessments

Students expressed mixed feelings toward summative and formative assessments. During the focus groups, students were given flash cards with general descriptions of the terms summative and formative assessment based on the work of Hattie (2009), who avers that while formative assessments are integrated into the learning process to provide ongoing feedback, summative assessments are conducted after instruction to evaluate student learning outcomes. A discussion then ensued (during the first focus group sessions) regarding what the students' thought about each and a sample of their views are outlined in the text box below.

*I know summative is important with regard to big exams as it shows how much you've learned but I know a lot of people who study, they might even over-study and they like don't do as well which is difficult. **So formative assessment is a little bit less hyped up and more student friendly I think. Less formal maybe!***

Barbara, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.45am

I said formative because you can see how you are doing in each small bit and the improvement and it's more regular and so like I think it helps you more.

Orlaith, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 3, Tuesday 9th November 2021 @ 8.45am

Barbara and Orlaith highlight that formative assessments allow for steady engagement and reduce the pressure associated with high-stakes exams. This mirrors Andersen's (2020) idea that understanding assessment purposes and processes increases confidence and builds towards connecting with the term 'assessment literacy' (Douglas Smith *et al.*, 2011) where students firstly grasp the purpose of assessment and its connection to their learning trajectory. Then they develop awareness of assessment processes involved along the assessment continuum and finally be given opportunities to practice evaluating their own responses to identify strengths and areas for improvement (Douglas Smith *et al.*, 2011). Barbara for example, noted that

summative assessments were seen as markers of overall achievement, with Orlaith asserted that formative assessments were valued for tracking improvement over time and supporting learning in a relaxed setting. Black and Wiliam (1998) support the idea that formative assessments motivate students through regular feedback, helping them adapt their learning strategies while contending that this depends on the quality of the interactions between teachers and their students. Elwood's (2006) argument that formative assessment can lead to significant educational gains but has limitations when applied across different contexts also resonates in this context. Additionally, Bennett (2018) underscores the importance of reporting methods which need innovation to provide better, more interactive and tailored feedback.

It also aligns with Elwood's (2006) view of formative assessment as a means of evaluating individual progress in a less pressured, social setting. Thus, formative assessments, according to the students participating in this research study, foster a more supportive, learner-friendly environment, but Bui (2023) reminds us that sociocultural factors such as the fear of losing face, can influence students' willingness to participate in assessment activities.

Further views regarding summative assessment were captured during the initial focus groups also.

I said summative because it's like the Christmas, summer and Pre Exams and everything and it's through those exams that you are preparing for your Leaving Cert and your Junior Cert and they are like the most important ones and so you have to do other similar types of ones so that you know what to expect.

Nuala, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 3, Tuesday 9th November 2021 @ 8.45am

Well I think that assessments where your outcomes are formative are more enjoyable but I think summative assessments are more important. Like they are the ones that you have to do to like get into college and get places in life – they are like proper exams!

Catherine, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.45am

I think that they are both important. As Catherine says, you need those summative assessments to get to college but I feel like that with the formative assessments you can also show like how much you know. Like in formative [sic] tests, you can be so stressed out that you can like forget stuff but when you are doing homework or having discussions in class, its more relaxed and you feel that you can really get into how you feel or express what you want to say cause you aren't stressed!

Fiona, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.45am

Nuala, Catherine and Fiona posit that summative assessments have a high-stakes nature, which aligns with the social and cultural role of assessment discussed by Elwood and Murphy (2015). Summative exams often serve as formal indicators of learning that hold weight in educational and societal structures, such as college admissions. This supports Bennett's (2018) view of assessments as tools for deep learning that mark significant stages of comprehension within educational pathways. Rogoff's (1995) sociocultural activity on three planes certainly chimes here, as Fiona's description of formative assessments that allow for dialogue and interaction (involving the personal, interpersonal and community) in a lower-pressure setting, ultimately facilitates a more authentic learning experience.

Other students reflected on the challenges and benefits of both types of assessment, again captured across the first of the focus group sessions.

I said the formative cause like if you've a big exam you might stress about it and like not do so well in the exams whereas formative is like day by day and so you can do well in class without necessarily doing well in the formal exam.

Jackie, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 3, Tuesday 9th November 2021 @ 8.45am

*Summative because it kind of gets you to learn it so like when you are coming up to the chapter tests when you are coming up to the end of a chapter it gets you to learn it so that **when it comes up to the Christmas and Summer Exams you kind of only really need to go over them not really study, you just need to revise them** and those exams will show your progress and what you need to improve on maybe for your Summer exams.*

Tara, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 3, Tuesday 9th November 2021 @ 8.45am

*I think that they are both important but I think that summative kind of shows your overall learning whereas well, sorry, **formative shows your improvement throughout the year but then the summative just shows the overall amount you've learned and what you've learned on paper in an exam.***

Anna, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.45am

Both Jackie and Anna note the importance of formative assessments for tracking ongoing improvement, and they position summative assessments as those that encapsulate overall learning. This reflects Black and Wiliam's (2012) argument that formative assessments, with regular feedback, motivates students and help them adjust their learning strategies, while summative assessments capture final outcomes. Elwood (2006) posits that tension arises because formative assessments emphasise feedback and growth, allowing students to refine their understanding, while summative assessments focus on performance outcomes, often carrying significant consequences such as grades, certifications, or progression decisions. This conflict makes it difficult to fully integrate formative practices in contextual educational settings where summative assessments dominate, as educators may feel pressured to 'teach to the test' rather than fostering deeper learning through formative approaches.

Developing these perspectives, in the next section of this chapter, part (b) of Question 2 will be considered; what are the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as perceived and enacted by students at JC.

6.1.2 Affordances and Constraints of Formative and Summative assessments

In this section of the chapter, findings concerning the experiences and perspectives of JC students with respect to the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments will be presented and discussed. The findings are structured around three sub-themes, the first of which is - positive influences from feedback as formative assessment and includes (a) Formative assessments linked to feedback; (b) Feedback as a tool for specific improvement and future learning; (c) Feedback enhancing confidence and reducing negative feelings from summative marks; (d) Modelling feedback as a scaffold for understanding assessment criteria; (e) Feedback as a motivational tool that focuses on growth rather than mistakes and (f) Feedback as essential to the purpose of assessment for learning. The second sub-theme presents the negative influences from feedback as formative assessment including (g) Overly general feedback reducing effectiveness and impact and (h) Unclear feedback leading to miscommunication and student frustration. Finally, the third theme curates the constructive alignment between summative and formative assessment and includes (i) Summative assessment as a tool for progress tracking and goal setting; (j) Grades as essential indicators of achievement and validation and (k) Grades coupled with feedback as comprehensive tools for improvement.

➤ Formative assessments linked to feedback

Effective feedback is crucial in enhancing secondary school students' learning outcomes. Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasise that feedback significantly influences student achievement by clarifying goals, guiding progress, and fostering self-regulation. Black and Wiliam's (1998) research further supports this, highlighting that formative feedback promotes deeper understanding and engagement. In his 2023 study, Hattie revisits these insights,

underscoring the sustained importance of feedback in educational settings. Additionally, Rogoff's (1995) framework on participatory appropriation suggests that feedback, when integrated into collaborative learning environments, enables students to internalise knowledge through active participation, thereby enhancing their cognitive development. Collectively, these perspectives affirm that well-structured feedback not only improves academic performance but also cultivates essential self-assessment and critical thinking skills among students. The NCCA (n/d) *JC Assessment and Reporting Glossary* notes that formative assessment involves gathering evidence of learning during the learning process to adapt teaching and support student progress. While it informs both teachers and students about necessary adjustments, they posit that assessment for learning specifically emphasises the student's active role in shaping their own learning journey.

Formative assessments were highlighted for their low-stakes nature and for the continuous feedback they provide. The insights which follow from a couple of students (during their third year interviews) underline the value they place on ongoing assessment processes that allow them to monitor their progress and receive constructive feedback without the pressure of major exams.

The more feedback is better because sometimes you think you know where you went wrong or like, you look back where you don't know exactly how to stop it from happening in the future.

Fiona, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 11am

But when you get feedback, you can focus on what you need to improve on and not what you did badly, but what you can do better on the next time.

Jackie, 3rd Year Interview, Thursday 9th March 2023 @ 9.25am

It is evident that students appreciate feedback from their teachers and thus one can extract the following findings from these perspectives and experiences. The same students view feedback as a tool for specific improvement and future learning.

➤ Feedback as a Tool for Specific Improvement and Future Learning

Students see feedback as crucial for identifying specific areas for improvement and preventing repeated mistakes. Fiona and Jackie both emphasised that without feedback, learning is incomplete, as it prevents them from understanding what went wrong and how to correct it in the future. This aligns with the work of Black and Wiliam (1998), who argue that timely and specific feedback enhances motivation by providing students with clear direction for improvement, enabling them to adjust their strategies and progress. Hattie and Timperley (2007) refer to this forward thinking perspective as feed-forward (what and how to improve) and feed-up (looking up at further levels of learning). Moreover, Andersen (2020) takes this a step further by noting that teachers need to work alongside students to co-design assessment processes that better address student needs and enhance metacognition.

➤ Feedback Enhancing Confidence and Reducing Negative Feelings from Summative Marks

The percentage will tell you how well you did overall but with the feedback you know exactly where you did well and exactly what needs to be improved. Sometimes you can feel bad with just the percentage whereas the feedback will show you the bits that you did well in too and that can make you feel better about the test overall.

Barbara, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.45am

Barbara noted that feedback provides a balanced perspective by highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement, which can counteract the discouragement sometimes felt from a low grade or percentage score alone. This resonates with Black and Wiliam (1998) who highlight that formative feedback can lead to significant learning gains when used effectively. Feedback that emphasises improvement supports a learner-centred environment, promoting self-efficacy (Arnold, 2022).

➤ Modelling Feedback as a Scaffold for Understanding Assessment Criteria

I like when teachers fill it out. Like, Ms X, when she's doing it with us, she fills it out as she goes so we can see what has to be in it, and then we can write in any bits she has that we don't. You know in, like, red pen.

Catherine, 3rd Year Interview, Wednesday 22nd February 2023 @ 1pm

Catherine appreciated teachers who actively modelled the feedback process, filling out assessment criteria as they went, which she found clarifying and motivating. This modelling helped students understand expectations and identify gaps in their work more effectively and aligns perfectly with Rogoff's (1995) notion of guided participation. Curtin *et al.* (2020) discuss the role of active engagement and participation in learning, which is fostered by teachers who model assessment practices. This practice also connects with the work of Black and Wiliam (1998), who contend that effective formative feedback is critically aligned with the quality of the interactions between students and their teachers.

➤ Feedback as a Motivational Tool that Focuses on Growth Rather Than Mistakes

I think that just getting the feedback might be more beneficial, maybe even for just like, your mental health, just so that you can focus on what you need to improve on.

Jackie, 3rd Year Interview, Thursday 9th March 2023 @ 9.25am

I feel that if you don't get feedback it sort of defeats the purpose of the test. I mean if you've gone wrong but you don't know where you've gone wrong, you are only going to go wrong again! You really won't learn without the feedback.

Fiona, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 1, Tuesday 2nd November 2021 @ 8.45am

Jackie and Fiona's comments suggest that feedback focused on improvement rather than on highlighting mistakes provides a more constructive, growth-oriented approach. Jackie specifically noted that feedback should emphasise areas for growth rather than just pinpointing failures. Black and Wiliam (1998) endorse this view and argue that feedback which guides future learning strategies encourages strategic growth and engagement, as students are more likely to view learning as a continuous improvement process. Rogoff (1995), also argues that development through guided participation involves mutual involvement in structured activities which guidance encompassing both tacit and explicit aspects chiming with the ideas of the students mentioned above.

➤ Feedback as Essential to the Purpose of Assessment for Learning

Fiona's comment above also underscores that assessments without feedback feel incomplete or purposeless, as feedback provides the necessary reflection and direction for learning. Students view feedback as an integral part of assessment, essential to achieving meaningful learning. Similarly, Bennett (2011) emphasises that assessments should be instruments of deep comprehension, which feedback enables by supporting students in internalising lessons and advancing their knowledge. These findings highlight that students' value feedback for its role

in enhancing motivation, supporting a learner-centred environment, fostering growth, and giving assessments purpose. Feedback is essential in helping students feel they are progressing and understanding where they excel and need improvement, ultimately reinforcing a positive and growth-oriented learning experience.

➤ **Overly General Feedback Reducing Effectiveness and Impact**

However, not all observations regarding formative feedback were positive. Two students made insightful comments in this regard, pointing out that feedback can sometimes be too general or not wanted.

Written notes can be really vague sometimes. I'm not picking on the x teacher now, but the x exam ones can be really vague. And then s/he might write, 'talk to me' or 'I want to talk to you about this' – and then s/he never does!

Catherine, 3rd Year Interview, Wednesday 22nd February 2023 @ 1pm

Sometimes if the feedback is a bit general and I've heard it before, then I won't because I'm doing that already, or I'm trying to!

Poppy, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 20th March 2023 @ 10.05am

Catherine and Poppy both found that if feedback from their teachers was too generic or repetitive, it limited its usefulness. General comments or repeated suggestions that students feel they are already addressing can lead to frustration and disengagement, as students may not see a clear pathway for improvement. Black and Wiliam (2012) contend that feedback must be specific and actionable to effectively support student motivation and learning. Vague feedback fails to fulfil this role, as it does not provide the individualised insights needed for improvement. Andersen (2020) similarly notes that when feedback lacks clarity, students may feel less confident in their ability to improve, undermining the supportive function feedback is intended to serve.

➤ Unclear Feedback Leading to Miscommunication and Student Frustration

Again, Holly expresses her frustration with minimalistic feedback, such as symbols or unclear comments (e.g., a question mark), which she found confusing and discouraging. A lack of clarity can leave students' unsure of the feedback's intended message, making it difficult for them to adjust their learning strategies.

You get, like, a comment on it. It's like yeah, I know. I can see that I failed, or I can see that I did wrong there. You don't need to point it out to me. I can see that!

Holly, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 2.50pm

I mean, if it's a really full class, obviously the teacher can't give the feedback that you actually need on a test. So sometimes all you get is, like, a question mark and you're like, I don't know either. Like, it is what it is. I really don't know. The passive aggressive little question mark. Like I don't know either. Okay? It's kind of like, what does that mean? I'm not sure, or what are you trying to say here? I don't know. I just tried to answer the question!

Holly, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 2.50pm

Elwood (2006) emphasises that assessment should facilitate individual learning, and, without clear communication, feedback fails to fulfil its instructional role. Similarly, Bui (2023) supports feedback that promotes self-regulation and active engagement, both of which require specific, constructive comments. Ambiguous symbols or comments can diminish motivation by causing confusion, rather than providing the guidance needed for students to take meaningful steps toward improvement. These findings highlight that feedback must be specific, constructive, and clearly communicated to be effective (Black and Wiliam, 1998). When feedback lacks these qualities, it can reduce student confidence, increase frustration, and hinder the formative role of assessment by creating barriers to understanding and improvement.

➤ Summative Assessment as a Tool for Progress Tracking and Goal Setting

Students view summative assessment as that which is ‘used to evaluate student learning at the end of the instructional process or of a period of learning’ (NCCA, JC Assessment and Reporting Glossary, n/d).

*It kind of gets you to learn it, so like when you are coming up to the chapter tests, when you are coming up to the end of a chapter, it gets you to learn it, so that when it comes up to the Christmas and Summer Exams you kind of only really need to go over them not really study, you just need to revise them and **those exams will show your progress and what you need to improve on maybe for your Summer exams.***

Tara, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 1, Group 3, Tuesday 9th November 2021 @ 8.45am

Students (78.94%, n=15) view summative assessment moments as significant milestones that help them consolidate knowledge over time. Tara highlighted that chapter tests and major exams provide her with opportunities to review and reinforce her learning, making it easier to gauge progress and identify areas needing improvement for future assessments. Summative assessments serve as checkpoints where students can evaluate cumulative learning, reinforcing foundational knowledge and setting goals. Elwood and Murphy (2015) argue that summative assessments fulfil societal and institutional roles, helping students situate their progress within broader educational structures, such as end-of-term exams.

➤ Grades as Essential Indicators of Achievement and Validation

*Like, even in primary school, there wasn't much feedback. We had a spelling test at the end of the week and you either got like 50 out of 50 or you got, you know like, it depends. **It is nice to see a percentage, and sometimes it isn't a great percentage, but when it is, it's kind of rewarding.***

Anna, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 11am

I think definitely, like the grade where you have a number. Because even with CBAs, even if you got exceptional, I'd bring home my results and be like, oh, I got an exceptional. My dad and my mom would be like, what does that mean?

Elizabeth, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 27th February 2023 @ 10.05am

Anna and Elizabeth emphasised that grades provide validation and clarity for themselves and others (e.g., parents), making their performance more tangible than qualitative feedback alone. Elwood and Murphy (2015) discuss how summative assessments serve societal roles, with grades acting as standardised indicators that carry value and recognition. Grades are socially meaningful and widely understood markers of achievement, providing external validation of learning. Bui (2023) also emphasises learner-centred assessment, where grades can serve as motivators that acknowledge students' efforts within structured academic pathways.

➤ Grades Coupled with Feedback as Comprehensive Tools for Improvement

Students noted that grades alone are insufficient, but they view feedback paired with a grade as most effective for understanding and improving performance. 89.47% (n=17) of the students expressed a preference for grades *alongside* feedback, viewing grades as concrete, rewarding indicators of achievement but acknowledging the importance of feedback for their learning.

Like I think the feedback is good but without a grade, you don't know how deep they're going in that feedback. They could say, write more detail. If you don't know if you got a 50 or an 80, you don't know how much more detail you have to write.

Barbara, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 2.50pm

I want the grade. I want to know how I did, but I need the feedback with it. But then again, it's like, I don't want feedback without a grade.

Catherine, 3rd Year Interview, Wednesday 22nd February 2023 @ 1.00pm

Catherine and Barbara highlighted that feedback, when given alongside a numerical grade, provides actionable insights while the grade offers context on the feedback's depth and relevance. Black and Wiliam (2012) posit that feedback motivates students when it guides them on specific improvements, yet students in this research aver that pairing it with a grade can further enhance motivation. This approach supports self-regulation, as students can use feedback to focus on growth while also formulating an understanding of the level of detail required.

Andersen (2020) also highlights that when assessment criteria are clear (as with graded feedback), students gain confidence in how to adjust their strategies for improvement. These findings highlight students' insightful views on summative assessments, indicating that while they appreciate grades for their clarity and societal recognition, they value feedback as a tool for improvement when it is contextualised by a grade. Summative assessments are seen not only as indicators of progress by the students involved in this study but also as opportunities for reflection and goal-setting when grades and feedback are combined effectively.

6.1.3 Conclusion

The students' perspectives on both formative and summative assessments, as well as their views on feedback, reveal a complex understanding of how various assessment practices shape their educational experiences. In summary, students' experiences with formative and summative assessments, as well as their perspectives on feedback, shape a dynamic and multifaceted educational journey. Summative assessments fulfil an important societal role by offering standardised markers of achievement, while formative assessments support low-stakes engagement, fostering confidence and ongoing self-regulation. Feedback acts as the bridge between these assessment types, providing context and direction that helps students navigate their strengths and areas for improvement. Together, these elements impact students' motivation, self-efficacy, and learning strategies, revealing that a balanced approach to assessment - where clear, specific feedback and learner-centred practices are prioritised - can better support their educational experience. This balance may ultimately cultivate a learning environment where students can engage deeply with content, track their growth meaningfully, and develop as confident, self-aware learners within the larger educational and societal framework.

6.2 Exploring Research Question 3

This section of the chapter considers research question three and thus explores students' perceptions of the skills, values, knowledge, and understanding they develop specifically through CBAs during their second and third year of JC. This section builds on the previous discussion by focusing specifically on the impact of CBAs, highlighting the skills, values,

knowledge, and understanding that students perceive they develop. It extends the analysis of assessment practices by examining how these educational experiences contribute to their overall educational growth in second and third year of their JC assessment journey.

By focusing on their experiences and perceptions of CBAs, it is possible to illuminate how these assessments shape their academic and personal growth, offering insight into the key skills and competencies they believe are directly fostered through these types of assessment activities. This analysis can explain how students interpret the role of CBAs in enhancing their critical thinking, problem-solving, and subject-specific skills, as well as the values and attitudes they form towards learning, collaboration and assessment. All of the students had completed CBAs in second-year and had completed (or were in the process of completing) between one and four CBAs (in third-year) in Art, Gaeilge, Home Economics and Music. This was entirely dependent on the subjects the students were taking for their JC terminal exams and because the NCCA (NCCA, 2022) had made some assessment adjustments in 2022/2023 due to the continuing impact of Covid19.

Through these findings, a clearer picture emerges of the educational impact of CBAs beyond grade descriptors, highlighting the depth and variety of developmental outcomes that students attribute to these key components of their academic journey. To curate the findings for this research question in a systematic manner, the Key Skills framework for JC will be employed as the primary framework that the students speak to. The skills are embedded in the *Junior Cycle Framework 2015* (NCCA, 2015) and connect to the wellbeing indicators (NCCA, 2021) and statements of learning (NCCA, 2015) [Appendix 21] which are depicted in Figure 6.1. These findings will be considered in the next section more deeply, particularly as they pertain to (i) students' perceived skills developed through CBAs; (ii) challenges of the CBAs; and (iii) students' suggestions to improve their CBA experience.



Figure 6.1 – Key Skills & Wellbeing Guidelines (NCCA, 2021)

6.2.1 Skills which students' perceived they developed and acquired through CBAs

Figure 6.2 is a word cloud generated (via wordcloud.com) using the words or phrases the students articulated to describe the skills they believe they learned and/or developed while participating in the CBAs. These were discussed during their final interviews in February and March of 2023.



Figure 6.2 - Word Cloud depicting Skills gleaned from participating in CBAs using Student Descriptions

Overall, students (89.47%, n=17) felt that they had learned some very valuable skills while completing their CBAs. These findings were mirrored in the McGarr *et al.* (2023, p. 112) study where it was noted that ‘most students were positive about the learning opportunities afforded by the CBAs.’ While it is clear within this cohort of young people that they could identify skills they had learned from engaging with the CBAs they also identified other benefits of learning, teaching and assessment practices that were facilitated through the CBAs.

- Key Skill - Working with others

Students felt that they were afforded the opportunity to work with others in their class which they enjoyed.

We did them in a group and I think that worked because it was like there were just different opinions to make it better.

Fiona, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 11.00am

I think they're like a valuable thing because some of them like you do on your own, but some of them you do, like, in pairs. So it's like developing people skills as well.

Sarah, 3rd Year Interview, Wednesday 22nd March 2023 @ 9.25am

The Junior Cycle key skill *Working with Others* emphasises collaboration, communication, and the development of interpersonal skills, all of which are reflected in the student quotes. Fiona highlights the value of diverse perspectives in group work, recognising how collaboration enhances learning outcomes. Sarah reinforces this by acknowledging that working in pairs or groups contributes to the development of essential ‘people skills.’ This aligns with Statement of Learning (SOL) 23 [Appendix 21], where students work to bring an idea from conception to realisation, which often requires teamwork. Collaborative tasks also helped the students to develop interpersonal skills, such as teamwork and communication skills as outlined by Sarah and Tara above. Andersen (2020) posits that assessments that involve clear processes and expectations can build confidence, while McDermott (2001) supports the idea of socially constructed learning, which fosters interpersonal skills and collaboration. Furthermore, this key skill connects with the wellbeing indicator *Connected*, as students build positive relationships, experience a sense of belonging, and engage in meaningful interactions with their peers.

From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that students learn best through social interaction with peers who provide scaffolding, helping them progress beyond what they could achieve independently. Similarly, Rogoff’s (1995) participatory appropriation framework emphasises learning as a process of active engagement within social and cultural contexts, reinforcing the idea that collaboration

enhances cognitive and social development. Therefore, working with others is a key skill afforded by CBAs, which supports both academic and personal growth, fostering key competencies that have the potential to extend beyond the classroom. The findings also chime with the work of McGarr *et al.* (2023, p.112 – p. 113) where students stated that the CBAs enabled ‘more active learning’, ‘enabled them to work in groups more often’, ‘introduced them to new topics’ and ‘independent learning’.

- Communication

Other students enjoyed the presentation aspect of the CBAs through voicing their opinion on a topic in class.

The presentations you have to present, I find I've improved so much since the start of them! I would have been like, I don't want to do this, but now I can!

Elizabeth, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 27th February 2023 @ 10.05am

Some of them I did really enjoy, like the English one for example. It's probably an unpopular opinion, but I actually do like doing presentations and standing up in front of class!

Anna, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 11.00am

Well, it's like you have to present a project in front of the class and you have to speak for three minutes in Irish. And I feel like in Irish class, it's not like German where we speak in German, where you learn it more orally. It's more about writing and reading and listening. So I think it will help our speaking in Irish because we don't do much of it.

Catherine, 3rd Year Interview, Wednesday 22nd February 2023 @ 1.00pm

The Junior Cycle key skill *Communicating* is fundamental to student learning and confidence-building, as reflected in these student quotes. Elizabeth highlights personal growth in public speaking, moving from reluctance to increased confidence through repeated practice. Anna's

enthusiasm for presenting further reinforces the importance of fostering positive attitudes towards self-expression, even in traditionally challenging tasks. Catherine, meanwhile, connects communication skills with language acquisition, recognising that presenting in Irish supports oral proficiency, an aspect sometimes underdeveloped in classroom settings. This aligns with SOL 1, where students communicate effectively using a variety of means in different contexts. Furthermore, this key skill aligns with the *Connected* wellbeing indicator, as students develop their ability to express themselves and engage meaningfully with their peers. Andersen (2020) highlights the role of communication in building self-efficacy, arguing that structured opportunities to present and articulate ideas contribute to greater student agency and resilience. Similarly, Milligan *et al.* (2020) emphasise the importance of oracy in education, noting that developing speaking and listening skills enhances both academic success and social integration. Thus, *Communicating* as a key skill not only strengthens students' ability to convey ideas effectively but also supports their confidence, relationships, and engagement in learning.

- Managing Information and Thinking

The Junior Cycle key skill *Managing Information and Thinking* is central to developing students' ability to research, evaluate, and use information effectively, as reflected in these student quotes.

I thought that they were going to be pointless, but no, they made me like, I got to learn how to use PowerPoint and the Word document and Excel sheet and everything.

Méabh, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 1.30pm

Like how to attach video links or something like that or reference my sources and put the links down.

Jackie, 3rd Year Interview, Thursday 9th March 2023 @ 9.25am

I suppose like researching, I've definitely improved on because I like, can find different sources, I suppose you can see what's good and what's not good. And I learned not to use Wikipedia!

Nuala, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 13th March 2023 @ 2.50pm

Because sometimes with the CBA, you have to cover things that aren't really on the course. So it's interesting to learn things like that.

Sarah, 3rd Year Interview, Wednesday 22nd March 2023 @ 9.25am

Méabh highlights the practical benefits of digital literacy, gaining proficiency in essential tools such as PowerPoint, Word, and Excel. Jackie and Nuala emphasise the importance of organising and referencing information correctly, as well as critically assessing the credibility of sources - an essential skill in the digital age. Sarah points to the value of independent research beyond the curriculum, demonstrating intellectual curiosity and the ability to make meaningful connections between learning and real-world applications. These insights align with SOL 13, which focuses on making informed decisions based on analysis and critical thinking. 78.94% (n=15) of students reported learning valuable IT skills through CBAs, such as using PowerPoint, Word, and Excel, as well as conducting online research and referencing sources. They saw these skills as practical, with direct applications beyond the classroom. Furthermore, this key skill connects with the *Aware* wellbeing indicator, as students develop an understanding of how to navigate and interpret information critically, fostering intellectual independence and self-awareness.

From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky (1978b) suggests that learning is a mediated process, where tools - both cognitive (e.g., research strategies) and technological (e.g., digital platforms) - play a crucial role in knowledge construction. Similarly, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning highlights how students acquire skills through meaningful engagement in real-world tasks, such as conducting independent research for their CBAs. In

this way, *Managing Information and Thinking* not only supports academic success but also prepares students for lifelong learning in an increasingly information-rich society.

- Being Literate

The Junior Cycle key skill *Being Literate* is fundamental to students' ability to research, communicate, and construct meaning across different contexts, as reflected in these student quotes.

Well, you can develop your research skills and gather information and put it all together in your own words.

Orlaith, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 14th March 2023 @ 11.00am

Like, I had no clue how to use Power Point or anything before the CBAs and now I have a laptop for school, so that does kind of help me now!

Iseult, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 7th March 2023 @ 11.40am

I'm not really sure if it's a skill, but I got a bit more like confident in speaking in front of more people.

Tara, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 20th March 2023 @ 9.25am

Like, you learn new things, and if you learned about what you're researching, even if there's something that you're already interested in, there's still kind of new things to learn and new skills.

Lorna, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 2A, Group 2, Tuesday 26th April 2022 @ 2.50pm

Orlaith emphasises the ability to synthesise information and express it in her own words, a core aspect of literacy development. Iseult highlights the role of digital literacy in modern learning, articulating how increased access to technology enhances literacy skills. Tara connects literacy with oral communication, demonstrating how reading and writing skills support confidence in

speaking. Lorna's reflection reinforces the dynamic nature of literacy, where engaging in research not only builds knowledge but also develops new skills and perspectives. These insights align with SOL 3, which emphasises the ability to create, appreciate, and critically interpret a wide range of texts, and SOL 24, which focuses on using digital tools to learn and communicate effectively. Furthermore, this key skill aligns with the *Responsible* wellbeing indicator, as developing literacy skills enables students to take ownership of their learning, develop critical thinking skills, and communicate effectively in a way that demonstrates accountability and engagement with the world.

From a sociocultural perspective, Curtin *et al.*, (2020) contend that assessment as a sociocultural practice supports student engagement and connects them with tools and resources (affordances) in their communities. Similarly, Gee's (1996) concept of *literacies* suggests that literacy extends beyond reading and writing, encompassing the ability to navigate and participate in different discourses, including digital and oral communication. Thus, *Being Literate* is not just about acquiring technical skills but about fostering curiosity, confidence, and engagement in a socially interconnected world.

- Being Creative

The Junior Cycle key skill *Being Creative* encourages students to think independently, explore new ideas, and apply their imagination in meaningful ways, as reflected in these student quotes.

Maybe like creativity for some, cause like you had to think about what you were going to do?

Kayla, Second Year Focus Group, Session 2, Group 2, Tuesday 26th April, 2022 @ 2.50pm

I got to kind of be creative and like kind of research things that aren't in the book. So it kind of increases your knowledge and for the business when you got to create your own business. So that was creative.

Tara, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 20th March 2023 @ 9.25am

Kayla highlights the need for creative thinking in planning and decision-making, recognising that creativity involves making intentional choices about how to approach a task. Tara expands on this by describing how creative opportunities extend beyond traditional learning, such as researching beyond the textbook and developing a business idea, which fosters innovation and problem solving. This aligns with SOL 22, where students take the initiative, demonstrate innovation, and develop entrepreneurial skills. Bennett (2011) emphasises assessment for deep learning and understanding, which aligns with students' experiences of CBAs as tools for applying knowledge practically. Furthermore, this key skill connects with the *Responsible* wellbeing indicator, as creativity requires students to take ownership of their ideas, make thoughtful decisions, and apply their learning in innovative ways.

From a sociocultural perspective, this speaks to the work of Bruner (1996) who emphasises the importance of discovery learning, where students construct new knowledge through exploration and creativity, and Rogoff (1995) who avers that learning occurs on three planes, through interactive experiences with their peers, teachers and community, in this instance, leading to creativity amongst students. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978b) theory of imaginative play highlights how creativity is developed through social and cultural interactions, enabling students to experiment with new ways of thinking and expressing themselves. Thus, *Being Creative* supports students in becoming independent thinkers, problem solvers, and active contributors to their learning.

- Managing Myself

The Junior Cycle key skill *Managing Myself* is essential for fostering independence, responsibility, and self-motivation in learning, as reflected in these student quotes.

When I had to pick, like, a weather event like myself, I thought it was really interesting.

Robyn, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 21st March 2023 @ 11.00am

I feel like I'm in control when I'm working on it and it's like 100% my work and if it's bad, it's on me and if it's good, it's on me!

Catherine, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 2, Group 1, Tuesday 26th April 2022 @ 8.45am

Robyn highlights the value of personal choice in learning, showing how selecting her own topic increased her engagement and interest. Catherine emphasises ownership of her work, recognising that her effort and decisions determine the outcome, whether positive or negative. These reflections demonstrate key aspects of self-management, including decision-making, accountability, and self-direction. Furthermore, this key skill connects with the *Responsible* wellbeing indicator, as students take ownership of their actions, set goals, and develop a sense of accountability for their learning.

From a sociocultural perspective, Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory highlights the importance of autonomy in fostering intrinsic motivation, demonstrating that students engage more deeply when they have control over their learning. Similarly, Rogoff's (1995) tenet of guided participation emphasises how learners gradually take on more responsibility in their educational journey, developing independence through meaningful choices. Thus, *Managing Myself* plays a crucial role in helping students build self-awareness, resilience, and a proactive approach to their learning and personal development.

- Being numerate

The Junior Cycle key skill *Being Numerate* supports students in applying mathematical knowledge to real-world situations, enhancing problem-solving and logical reasoning, as demonstrated in these student quotes.

Well for maths, I felt that I kind of learned something because I was learning about, like I was, like, building a house, so I kind of learned, like, the prices and stuff and all of the costs involved.

Kayla, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 2A, Group 2, Tuesday 26th April 2022 @ 2.50pm

Because in maths, you'd be practicing the formulas and stuff for your CBA, so it would help you understand like why you're pushing numbers there or why you're dividing, because there's no point in knowing the formula, but not knowing why you're doing it.

Barbara, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 2.50pm

Kayla highlights how working with real-life financial concepts, such as budgeting for a house, made mathematical learning more relevant and practical. Barbara emphasises the importance of understanding mathematical processes rather than just memorising formulae, reinforcing the need for conceptual learning and critical thinking in numeracy. This aligns with SOL 15, which states that students recognise the potential uses of mathematical knowledge, skills, and understanding in all areas of learning. Furthermore, this key skill connects with the *Responsible* wellbeing indicator, as numeracy enables students to make informed decisions, think critically, and apply mathematical reasoning in a thoughtful and accountable way.

From a sociocultural perspective, Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory suggests that learning is most effective when embedded in authentic contexts, such as applied problem solving and real-world examples such as the one outlined by Kayla in relation to building a house. Thus, *Being Numerate* extends beyond classroom exercises, fostering confidence,

practical skills, and the ability to engage with the world mathematically on a relational and experiential level.

Interestingly, the key skill *Staying Well* did not explicitly feature in the CBAs, perhaps highlighting a gap in the integration of wellbeing-focused learning within these assessments. While other key skills such as *Managing Myself* and *Working with Others* were developed, there is potential to incorporate *Staying Well* more specifically, by encouraging further reflection on resilience, balance, and self-care in the learning process.

6.2.2 Challenges of the CBAs

Resonating with the findings of Mc Garr *et al.* (2023, p. 114), students participating in this research study articulated their opinions on the negative aspects of the CBAs and ‘the negatives dominated conversations in most focus group discussions’, interviews and questionnaire. 84.21% (n=16) of the students spoke of the difficulties of having too many CBAs timetabled over the same periods, 68.42% (n=13) mentioned the repetitive nature of the CBAs and the time needed to complete each CBA. 15.78% (n=3) of students spoke about the challenge of working with others who have a disparate work ethic, 57.89% (n=11) mentioned the disconnect between the CBAs and the JC terminal exam and the work put into completing the CBAs and then receiving just a grade descriptor for their effort.

89.47% (n=17) of the students mentioned the relief they felt at not having to do too many CBAs in third year due to continuing assessment adjustments given by the State Examinations Commission due to the ongoing effects of the Covid19 pandemic. Some of their views pertaining to the timing and frequency of the CBAs and the perceived disconnect between the CBAs and the JC terminal exam are highlighted in this section of the chapter.

The relevant sub-themes in this section of findings are discussed below as: (a) CBA overload impacting on student wellbeing and (b) the disconnect between CBAs and terminal JC exams.

➤ CBA overload impacting on student wellbeing

Students reported (throughout the data collection process) feeling overwhelmed by the scheduling of multiple CBAs within the same period, making it difficult to balance their workload and contributing to high levels of stress. They mentioned the need for better planning to prevent burnout and a more manageable assessment schedule.

*Well, I mean, I suppose having one, I think is good, but **maybe having two could be a bit unnecessary for some people and maybe to make sure that they're all spread out so that you're not doing, cause I remember at one point I had like five or six that I was doing at the same time, so it's probably better to have them all at different times.***

Nuala, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 13th March 2023 @ 2.50pm

I found that the CBA's were poorly planned by teachers. We didn't have any at the start of the year and then we had five on at the same time while we were expected to be studying for exams. I personally didn't have time for everything and it resulted in burn out and I was physically sick for a while. Our 3rd Year CBAs were cancelled but I'm not sure how future JC students would be expected to complete CBAs and study for June exams at the same time.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after JC results were published

I don't think they should all be put together in the same month.

Catherine, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 2, Group 1, Tuesday 26th April 2022 @ 8.45am

These findings can again be triangulated with the McGarr *et al.* (2023) study where students discussed the challenges of having too many CBAs scheduled at the same time. Bui's (2023) research noted the significant incongruences that exist between teachers' and students' beliefs, particularly around summative and formative assessment and this research speaks clearly to

the voices of these students regarding the scheduling of the CBAs. Assessment scheduling should be carefully planned by teachers, heads of subject departments and senior school leaders as this would go some way to mitigating the stress experienced by students completing their CBAs. Elwood and Murphy (2015) discuss the societal and institutional pressures inherent in assessments, which, when poorly managed, can exacerbate student stress and anxiety. Findings show that students feel overwhelmed with multiple CBAs leading to stress and burnout, undermining the clear benefits of these assessments.

I find that the CBAs have no benefit to the student. The idea behind them I'm sure are good. To boost confidence etc. But the CBAs are essentially ... are crowded into one week of five projects. It come a point where there's no school/life balance and the student ends up burning out. I myself ended up crying many nights, panicking over them and how I couldn't do it and how the teachers didn't understand the stress of them, because they didn't.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after JC results were published

The lack of balance and consideration for student well-being negatively impacts their motivation, academic performance, and overall mental health. A poorly planned assessment schedule detracts from students' ability to learn effectively and may undermine their confidence in the assessment system. Mary described the difficulty of juggling CBAs with homework in other subjects and how the CBAs negatively impacted on her wellbeing below.

Because in some subjects we were just doing them at home, and we're still doing class work, so we got homework from the subject as well, and then we have to try to also do the CBA, and it was just kind of just stressful.

Mary, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 2A, Group 2, Tuesday 26th April 2022 @ 2.50pm

Students' described the stress and anxiety caused by CBAs, which extended beyond the classroom into their personal lives. Completing CBAs at home or during breaks disrupted their school-life balance and negatively affected their well-being, with 15.78% (n=3) of students experiencing burnout or physical illness.

There were multiple times where I was really stressed and you came home because, like, CBAs are classroom-based assessment but there was multiple times I'd come home and do them at home. So that was like really stressful. I'd be doing them over breaks and like weekends trying to get them done. So it just added to the stress.

Lorna, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 2A, Group 2, Tuesday 26th April 2022 @ 2.50pm

I think while you're in the middle of them, it's not great on your wellbeing because I ended up doing finishing a lot of them off at home and I didn't have time to go for walks or just have a bit of downtime. So it was quite stressful.

Jackie, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 4, Group 3, Tuesday 3rd May 2022 @ 8.45am

I feel there was no point in doing them. I didn't learn anything and all it did was put unnecessary stress and pressure over students and take up valuable class learning time.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after JC results were published

Bui (2023) advocates for a learner-centred approach that takes into account students' well-being. The intense stress reported by some students contradicts this ideal, as they perceive CBAs in their current form do not support a balanced, learner-friendly environment. McDermott (2001)'s emphasis on learning being embedded within a supportive social context is also contradicted, as students can feel isolated and unsupported in managing the stress associated with CBAs. Again, this finding is corroborated in the McGarr *et al.* (2023) study where students reported feeling stressed and frequently overwhelmed due to the demands of their day to day workload. The stress and disruption to students' well-being caused by CBAs

significantly impact their educational experience, leading to negative emotions, reduced engagement, and potential long-term effects on mental and physical health. Jackie noted that the pressure to complete CBAs both at school and at home detracted from her ability to engage in extracurricular activities and maintain a healthy school-life balance, making the overall learning environment less supportive and effective.

➤ Disconnect Between CBAs and Junior Cycle Terminal Exams

31.57% (n=6) of the students felt that the CBAs did not always align with the content and skills required for the Junior Cycle terminal exams. This disconnect led to feelings of wasted effort, as students were uncertain how the skills developed through CBAs would benefit them in their upcoming high-stakes summative exams and this was articulated beautifully by Deirdre in the text box below.

No time to do anything except like the CBAs. Like also, thinking about like the Junior Cert next year and you want to start studying but you know there is going to be more CBAs next year and like that's stressful. Also you might study a topic in Geography, and that topic might not even be on the entire course so it's not like I'm going to be using it for my Junior Cert and like I want to research and focus and get a good grade but I also want to do well in my Junior Cert.

Deirdre, 2nd Year Focus Group, Session 2, Group 3, Thursday 28th April 2022 @ 8.45am

Insightfully, Bennett (2011) discusses the fact that formative assessment lacks a well-defined set of practices, often leading to varied implementation and inconsistent results. If the value of completing a CBA is not conveyed to a student in a positive manner, their worth diminishes very quickly. When students perceive a disconnect between CBAs and their broader academic goals, the value of these assessments is weakened. Elwood and Murphy (2015) highlight the

societal expectations tied to high-stakes exams; this can create tension when assessments are not seen as directly beneficial or connected to these high-stakes outcomes.

This again chimed with the McGarr *et al.* (2023, p.116) study which reported that ‘across the schools, students struggled to identify a connection between their work in CBAs and the summative examination’. The perceived misalignment between CBAs and the JC terminal exams undermines students' motivation and engagement with CBAs. This disconnect affords students an opportunity to question the purpose and value of these assessments, leading to feelings of frustration and decreased investment in the learning process as voiced by the students responding to the anonymous questionnaire. It may also intensify the stress surrounding the JC exam, as students may feel unprepared as a consequence of the effort they have invested in CBAs.

26.31% (n=5) of students felt that the effort they put into CBAs was not adequately recognised, as they received only a grade descriptor for their efforts. The perceived lack of meaningful outcomes for the work invested led to frustration and a sense that CBAs did not contribute to their learning.

I didn't really find them that helpful. I thought they were kind of just stress inducing, honestly.

Holly, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 2.50pm

We were told they weren't sure about maths at the start of the year if there's going to be a CBA, we were told it's like a statistics investigation or something like that. But like I feel like that's a bit pointless because we'd already done something kind of similar stuff at CBA one.

Poppy, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 20th March 2023 @ 10.05am

Students who contributed to the McGarr *et al.* (2023, p. 117) study voiced the same ‘dissatisfaction with the grading and feedback system associated with CBAs’. The perceived

lack of recognition and meaningful feedback undermines students' sense of achievement and the perceived value of CBAs. Clearly, when students invest significant time and effort into an assessment, but feel that it is not sufficiently rewarded, it can lead to a decrease in motivation and engagement, making the assessment experience feel more like a burdensome requirement than a valuable learning opportunity.

These findings suggest that while CBAs have the potential to develop important skills and provide meaningful learning experiences, their current implementation sometimes falls short. The overwhelming scheduling which impacts on student wellbeing and perceived lack of alignment with terminal exams, can significantly diminish the benefits of these assessments. Furthermore, the perceived lack of meaningful outcomes and recognition for effort frustrates students, reducing their motivation and engagement with these assessments. Addressing these issues could lead to a more balanced and effective assessment experience that better supports students' academic growth and well-being.

6.2.3 Student suggestions to improve their CBA experience

In light of the challenges students have articulated regarding CBAs, it is essential to consider their perspectives on potential solutions to improve these assessment practices. Drawing from their first-hand experiences, students have proposed practical and thoughtful recommendations aimed at reducing stress, enhancing the alignment between CBAs and broader academic goals, and fostering a more balanced and supportive learning environment. This section presents these student-driven solutions, highlighting their insights on reducing the number of CBAs overall, increasing the percentage from the Assessment Task (ATsk) going towards the

terminal exam from 10% to 20%, considering removing CBAs from third-year and having a central timetable issuing from the Department of Education for CBAs for every school.

By understanding, considering and addressing these suggestions where possible, educators and policymakers can work towards creating assessment practices that better meet students' needs, promote meaningful learning, and support overall well-being.

- Reduce the number of CBAs

If you only had to do one CBA so that it won't be as stressful and you're like, oh, not that maths CBA again that I have to do! You could get it over and done with once and then you could see where that brings you

Elizabeth, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 27th February 2024 @ 10.05am

The less amount of CBAs the better for third year. Okay, like second year, obviously you're doing a lot of the course, but you have a little bit more time to do the CBAs, whereas in third year, you're racing through the last chapters. So I feel like if you're doing CBAs, it takes up most of like, three weeks. That could be the time to get like, two chapters done, let's say in maths. I feel like you can't afford the time.

Poppy, Third Year Interview, Monday 20th March 2023 @ 10.05am

- Ensure that there is a percentage awarded for CBA coursework or the assessment task

I'd get rid of the ones that are in second year currently, and I'd move the ones from third year to second year and they'd be worth 20% of the grade.

Catherine, 3rd Year Interview, Wednesday 22nd February 2023 @ 1.00pm

I feel like the Irish one, obviously it develops your skills, but if it's not worth the 10% you're giving up I think we spent like, three weeks on it, like another while presenting. So like we could be doing our coursework then. So if it's not worth like 10%, then it's kind of pointless, do you know what I mean?

Poppy, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 20th March 2023 @ 10.05am

- No CBAs in third-year

I don't think having them in third year is beneficial to anyone!

Holly, Third Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 2.50pm

I'd get rid of the ones that are in your second year currently, and I'd move the ones from third year to second year and they'd be worth 20% of the grade.

Catherine, 3rd Year Interview, Wednesday 22nd February 2023 @ 1.00pm

I probably wouldn't do them in first year just because I think that'd be a little daunting. You know, new school having to do this whole project, new people. I think that would be a little scary. I think I would just do them in second year just because third year I think I would want to leave that just for all the paperwork, all the stuff for junior cert and just leave the CBAs for second year.

Lorna, 3rd Year Interview, Friday 10th March 2023 @ 12.20pm

- Centralise the scheduling of CBAs nationally

Maybe have tell all the schools in this month they do math and in this month they do. So all the schools will be doing the CBAs at the same time. But that just means that everyone is broken up and there's no overlapping because there was a lot of overlapping last year

Deirdre, Third Year Interview, Friday 24th February 2023 @ 2.10pm

These student-driven recommendations highlight the need for thoughtful and strategic changes to the CBA framework, emphasising workload balance, relevance, effective scheduling, and the importance of considering student well-being in assessment practices. While not all suggestions align directly with the literature cited, they underscore a consistent theme - assessment practices should be designed to support, rather than hinder, student learning and wellbeing.

6.3 Conclusion

This findings chapter has provided a comprehensive exploration of students' perspectives on the various assessment practices they encounter during the JC, specifically focusing on the factors influencing their preferences for summative and formative assessments, the affordances and constraints of these assessment types, and the skills, values, knowledge, and understanding they develop through CBAs. Students articulated their deep understanding of how these assessment practices impact their academic experiences, offering insightful suggestions for improvement and highlighting both the benefits and challenges they face. The analysis of Research Question 2 revealed a clear dichotomy in students' preferences; while summative assessments are valued for their structured and familiar nature, they are also sources of significant stress and pressure. Conversely, formative assessments are appreciated for their ability to reduce anxiety, support continuous learning, and foster a more reflective and student-centred approach. However, the effectiveness of formative assessments is often contingent on the quality and clarity of feedback received, with students expressing a need for more specific, actionable guidance to make meaningful improvements.

Research Question 3 highlighted the transformative potential of CBAs in developing essential academic and personal skills. Students described how these assessments enhance their research capabilities, digital literacy, communication, collaborative and critical thinking skills, while also fostering collaboration and creativity. Nevertheless, challenges remain, particularly in the scheduling and integration of CBAs into the broader curriculum, which can sometimes lead to feelings of stress and a perceived lack of relevance. Overall, the findings highlight the complexity of assessment practices experienced by students at JC and underscore the need for a balanced, well-structured approach that considers student wellbeing and fosters meaningful, skills-based learning.

Moving toward Chapter Seven, the final research questions will be examined – Q4 *How do students perceive the correlation between the assessments they complete and their overall learning experiences?* and Q5, *How do students' assessment experiences evolve throughout their Junior Cycle, and in what ways do these experiences contribute to their growth, development and learning?* The responses to the question will provide a rich understanding of how assessments shape students' educational journeys, tying together the insights gathered from previous findings chapters and offering a holistic view of the impact of assessment practices on their learning and development.

Chapter Seven – Findings and Discussion

Tests, Tasks and Takeaways:

How Students’ Perceive their Assessment Experiences

Exploring Research Questions 4 & 5

7.0 Introduction

This final chapter of findings explores how students perceive their assessment experiences within the Junior Cycle (JC) framework, focusing on the connections the students formulate between assessments and their overall learning and development. Findings from the previous chapter confirm that assessments, both formative and summative, play a significant role in shaping students' educational journeys. In this chapter, students proffer their perspectives on a variety of topics linked to JC assessment. By exploring these students' perspectives as they begin their Senior Cycle (SC) journey, this chapter seeks to uncover how their experiences of assessment at JC contributed to or detracted from their learning experiences, growth, and self-awareness.

Section 7.1 addresses Research Question 4: *How do students perceive the correlation between the assessments they complete and their overall learning experiences?* This section presents students' views on the relevance of JC assessment as an integral component of the secondary school assessment journey and then illuminates how these experiences has shaped their engagement and motivation.

Focus shifts to Research Question 5 in Section 7.2: *How do students’ assessment experiences evolve throughout their Junior Cycle, and in what ways do these experiences contribute to their growth, development and learning?* Evidence of both academic and personal growth are documented in this section, presenting a rich, and highly personalised tapestry of experiences

and critical reflection. Additionally, this section uncovers how these assessment experiences have influenced student learning attitudes, shaping their present approach to education and personal development.

Section 7.3 provides student reflections and analysis on the JC terminal exam. Insights gathered after completing the Junior Cycle and receiving their results, reveal how students feel about their assessment experiences as a whole as they reflect on the assessment moments that had brought them to this juncture of their schooling, which connects both research question four and five in this section of the chapter. The students also share some interesting final reflections on CBAs in this section. Additionally, this section renders students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the JC assessment framework as an adequate and accurate assessment tool employed to measure knowledge and skills accurately.

Finally, Section 7.4 presents the opinions of these students as to whether they feel that the JC has adequately prepared them for future educational challenges, asking them to consider whether their assessment pathway to date has been a launch pad for academic success or a steep learning curve. The chapter concludes in Section 7.5 with a summary of the findings, capturing the students' voice in this final reflective treatise.

This chapter provides a set of perspectives and opinions from this cohort of students together with an analysis of those perceptions, using their voices and experiences to shed light on the effectiveness and impact of JC assessments. In doing so, it highlights the complexities of balancing educational assessment with meaningful student development and preparation for the future.

7.1 Students' perceived correlations between assessments and learning experience

Understanding how students perceive the correlation between the assessments they complete and their overall learning experiences is crucial for shaping meaningful and effective educational practices. Research Question 4 '*How do students perceive the correlation between the assessments they complete and their overall learning experiences?*' explores students' perspectives on whether assessments genuinely support their learning or simply serve as a measure of performance. By prioritising student voice, who are subsumed by the assessment process, it is possible to gain important, expert insights (Flynn, 2018) into how assessment methods influence engagement, knowledge retention, and skill development. Amplifying these voices and taking seriously what students have to say can allow educators and policy makers to better align assessment strategies with the goal of fostering deep, lasting learning rather than superficial achievement.

Chapters 2 and 3 of the literature review have again shaped my understanding of how the longitudinal nature of the JC assessment journey impacts on whether students perceive assessment to be relevant and worthwhile, whether they grow academically and personally as a consequence and if it impacts on their attitude to learning over time. These refined perspectives have been shaped by the research and contributions of scholars in the field of assessment and are summarised in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 – Themes, Relevant Literature, Critical Concepts from the Literature, Findings in Context and Summarised Explanations pertaining to Research Question 1

Theme	Relevant Literature	Critical Concepts from the Literature	Findings in Context: Sub-Themes	Summarised Explanation
Relevance of Assessment to Students	Andersen (2020), Bui (2023), Flynn (2018).	Andersen (2020): Emphasises the importance of assessment clarity to boost student confidence. Bui (2023): Discusses the benefits of integrating student perspectives to create meaningful assessments. Flynn (2018): Highlights the significance of students feeling heard and valued within the educational context.	Students value clear, purposeful assessments that align with their academic and personal goals. Summative Assessment and Mock Examinations are valuable preparation tools. Concerns about the perceived value and impact of CBAs on final exam outcomes.	Students find assessments most relevant when they align with their academic goals and skill development. They value pre-Junior Cycle exams as essential for preparation, helping them develop time management skills and reduce anxiety. However, frustration arises when CBAs feel disconnected from the curriculum or do not contribute to final exam results, often being treated as isolated assessments rather than integral learning experiences. Despite these concerns, students recognise the importance of assessment feedback in improving their learning strategies. To enhance engagement, CBAs should be better integrated into the overall assessment framework to increase their relevance and impact.
Assessment as a Mechanism which Engages Students	Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020), Flynn (2018), McDermott (2001), Rogoff (1995).	Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020): Posit the value of active participation in learning, emphasising that engagement is heightened when students are actively involved. Flynn (2018): Genuine opportunities to share ideas enhance students' engagement and participation. McDermott (2001): Research on socially constructed learning echoes the need for dialogue and interaction. Rogoff (1995):	Students value experiential and diverse assessment approaches. Students felt that repeated engagement with assessment has helped them over time to become more mature and confident learners.	Students' reflections on their Junior Cycle journey highlight how diverse assessment experiences have significantly contributed to their academic growth, equipping them with essential study skills and discipline. Engaging with structured and repetitive assessments has helped them refine revision strategies, improve time management, and develop resilience in managing academic challenges. While assessments can be stressful, students acknowledge their value in reinforcing knowledge, identifying gaps in understanding, and fostering a deeper grasp of subject content. Additionally, assessments have enhanced their ability to

		Development occurs across personal, interpersonal and community planes.		work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and feel more confident within the classroom environment. Overall, these experiences not only support long-term academic success but also prepare students for future high-stakes assessments and professional challenges.
Assessment as a Mechanism which helps Students to Grow Academically	Bennett (2018), Black and Wiliam (2012), Elwood (2006).	Bennett (2018): Emphasises that well designed assessments can foster deep understanding and content mastery. Black and Wiliam (2012): Highlight the role of timely feedback in guiding academic growth. Elwood (2006): Her research suggests that formative assessments contribute to a student's understanding when they are perceived as an intrinsic part of the learning journey.	Students understand that assessments can lead to academic growth and improvement. Students can identify areas of academic strength and areas for improvement.	Students recognise that assessments provide valuable insights into their strengths and areas for improvement, allowing them to focus their efforts more strategically. This self-awareness enhances their ability to direct their studies efficiently, leading to more productive and targeted learning. Assessments also help students make informed decisions about subject choices for the Leaving Certificate and familiarise them with the structure and expectations of state exams. Beyond academic benefits, these experiences contribute to personal growth by fostering resilience, discipline, and a proactive approach to learning. Overall, assessments serve as both a diagnostic and preparatory tool, equipping students with the skills and confidence needed for future academic and professional challenges.
Personal Development through Assessment	Lucas (2021), Rogoff (1995).	Lucas (2021): Discusses the role of assessments in building resilience and self-awareness. Rogoff (1995): Underscores the personalisation of learning as key to self-identity development.	Students developed increased resilience and emotional maturity. Students developed academic discipline and have more of an understanding of the value of hard work.	Students reflected on their Junior Cycle journey, highlighting significant personal growth in resilience, emotional maturity, discipline, and the value of hard work. Many developed a healthier perspective on assessments, recognising them as opportunities for growth rather than solely measures of success, which reduced stress and increased confidence. They also reported improved self-discipline, learning to manage academic responsibilities alongside extracurricular activities,

				fostering a strong work ethic. Research supports these findings, emphasising that structured assessments promote self-regulation, perseverance, and a growth mind-set, equipping students with lifelong skills. Beyond academic achievements, these experiences have shaped their character and attitudes towards learning.
Impact of Assessment on Learning Attitudes	Flynn (2018), Rogoff (1995) Banks and Smyth (2021).	Flynn (2018): Connects feeling heard and respected to an improved sense of belonging. Rogoff (1995): The personalisation of learning via participatory appropriation as key to learner development. Smyth and Banks (2021): Link positive student-teacher interactions to more engaged attitudes toward learning.	Students' enjoyment and interest in a subject/s are key drivers of academic endeavour. Students note the positive impact of student-teacher relationships on their perception of academic success.	Students' reflections highlight that enjoyment of a subject and strong teacher-student relationships significantly impact their academic success and engagement. When students find a subject interesting or relevant, they are more motivated, confident, and likely to perform well. Likewise, teachers who offer clear explanations, personalised support, and encouragement help create a positive learning environment that fosters student growth. These findings emphasise the importance of engaging curricula and meaningful student-teacher interactions in maximising academic potential. In the next section, students reflect on the impact of the Junior Cycle terminal exam, offering further insights into their overall academic journey.
Perception of fairness of State Examinations	Elwood and Murphy (2015), Flynn (2018).	Elwood and Murphy (2015): Address the broader societal context of high-stakes exams, highlighting their role in shaping educational trajectories. Flynn (2018): Students are experts as they can speak to their experiences.	The majority of students were happy with their JC results. Some students spoke to a perceived lack of academic value and misalignment with high-stakes outcomes. Students spoke to the skills acquired as a result of completing CBAs but also spoke of the perceived disconnect with the JC terminal exam.	Most students were satisfied with their Junior Cycle results, though maths and languages were commonly seen as the most challenging subjects. Some struggled with fast-paced curricula and teaching methods, relying on self-directed learning. While CBAs helped develop practical skills, many felt they lacked academic value and took time away from exam preparation. Concerns were also raised about fairness, with some students receiving external assistance, creating potential inequities. Opinions on the JV exams were divided,

			Students articulated why they might get external help with CBAs.	with some finding them a fair measure of knowledge while others criticised their high-stakes nature.
Preparation for High-Stakes Assessments	Curtin <i>et al.</i> (2020), Lucas (2021), Milligan <i>et al.</i> , (2020),	Curtin <i>et al.</i> , (2020): Focus on building readiness through active, practice-based learning. Lucas (2021): Suggests that experiences with structured, high-stakes assessments impact students' preparedness for future educational challenges, emphasising the importance of supportive structures. Milligan <i>et al.</i> , (2020): Highlights the need to prepare students for complex assessments through mastery and problem-solving skills.	Students spoke to their overall perceptions of being prepared for the next steps in their educational journey as a result of their JC assessment experiences. The majority of students were happy or very happy with their JC results.	The majority of students felt that their JC assessments prepared them for future educational challenges by improving their study skills, familiarising them with exam formats, and reducing stress about high-stakes exams. However, a small group of students highlighted gaps between Junior and Senior Cycle expectations, with some wishing they had received more feedback on their exams. These findings suggest that while JC assessments provide a solid foundation for future learning, further refinements - such as enhanced feedback and better alignment with Senior Cycle demands - could improve their effectiveness.

7.1.1 Perceptions of the Relevance of Assessment

In exploring how relevant students perceive assessments to be, over the course of the research they highlighted the relevance of assessments that are directly tied to their academic goals and practical skill development. They found the pre-JC exams helpful in that they were able to practice a full exam paper and build an understanding about timings in the various sections of the different papers for their subjects thereby indicating they perceive summative assessments and mock exams as valuable preparation tools. They expressed frustration when CBAs or assessments seemed disconnected from the curriculum or did not prepare them for terminal exams thus highlighting their concerns about the perceived value and impact of CBAs on final exam outcomes.

- Relevance of assessments that are directly tied to their academic goals

Wigfield and Eccles (2000) in their research on expectancy-value theory, suggest that students are more motivated to engage in academic tasks when they perceive them as valuable and instrumental to their goals. When assessments are aligned with their academic and career aspirations, students are more likely to see the purpose in completing them, thereby increasing their effort and persistence.

I think in second year I kind of added a base to all my skills and then in third year I've kind of really improved them. Like I know my research in second year was just shocking to be quite honest. But then it got better by the end of it and I've improved on it more again. So everything is just kind of improving bit by bit, and everything overall has just gone better.

Elizabeth, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 27th February 2023 @ 10.05am

I guess the more you learn, the more understanding you have and the better you can do.

Anna, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 11am

I think that you should treat every assessment as important because you want to keep a good score and you always want to do your best.

Deirdre, Group 2, Session 1, Thursday 4th November 2021 @ 8.45am

Deci and Ryan (1985) argue that relevance enhances autonomy, competence, and intrinsic motivation in students. They note that when assessments align with their self-determined academic goals, students feel a greater sense of control over their learning, which boosts engagement and performance, a sentiment evidenced by students (68.42%, n=13) in this study.

➤ **Summative Assessments and Mock Exams are Valuable Preparation Tools**

Drawing on the students' perspectives, it is possible to contend that, for this cohort of students, despite some negative perceptions initially, students (100%, n=19) recognise the value of mock exams and summative assessment experiences in preparing them for JC terminal exams. The experience of practicing under exam conditions helps reduce anxiety and provides clarity on what to expect, leading to increased confidence and a more strategic approach to exam preparation. Elizabeth and Iseult noted that experiencing mock exams helped them understand the exam format and timing, reducing stress by providing a preview of what to expect. Lorna echoed this sentiment, acknowledging that, although mock exams were stressful, they ultimately proved beneficial in identifying areas for improvement and boosting confidence for the actual exam.

I wouldn't be so stressed out now that I've seen something similar to the junior cert. I'm like, okay, that's why I know what to expect and that's what's going to come up. But without it, they're completely different. Even your Christmas assessments.

Elizabeth, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 27th February 2023 @ 10.05am

I feel like the pres, they kind of prepare us for, like, we know kind of what's happening, even though they're going to be completely different, but they kind of were good help, just, like, know what we're going to go through.

Iseult, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 7th March 2023 @ 11.40am

I remember at the start thinking these are absolutely useless. I guess I really didn't enjoy the mocks. I thought they were pretty awful. Like I just remember when the week was done, I just felt so happy. It was just it was depressing, to be honest. But they are really beneficial. I didn't think that the start, but at the end, I'm like, I'm so glad I did them, because you get to see where you need to improve, and also they can give you if you do work well in certain subjects, it just gives you so much less stress because you know what? I did this. I did good. And only in three months time, I'll have a similar exam, and I'll probably do good.

Lorna, 3rd Year Interview, Friday 10th March 2023 @ 12.20pm

This finding chimes with the work of Bennett (2011), who emphasises the role of summative assessments in building familiarity and preparedness for high-stakes exams. Test anxiety has been found to have a significant negative relationship with various educational performance metrics, including standardised tests, university entrance exams, and grade point averages (von der Embse *et al.*, 2018). They found that the detrimental effects were particularly pronounced among middle school students. The literature also supports the idea that well-structured summative assessments can reduce anxiety and help students develop effective study strategies (Bennett, 2011). Furthermore, Bennett (2021) emphasises that familiarising students with exam formats and expectations can lead to increased confidence and reduced anxiety - a consideration which the students involved in this study can certainly relate to.

Students value the feedback and insights gained from completing CBAs and the pre-JC exams. These assessments encourage reflective learning, helping students identify strengths and areas for improvement, and promoting adaptive strategies to enhance their performance across subjects.

I think the main thing for the pre, the reason that we're doing them is so that we know what we need to work on and what we know what to do better on. I suppose.

Nuala, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 13th March, 2023 @ 2.50pm

Probably just the timing in the actual exam and the timing of the study plans and stuff like that. Like, which topics take longer to cover and which I find harder and stuff like that.

Deirdre, 3rd Year Interview, Friday 24th February 2023 @ 2.10pm

I think they're all important, but in their different ways. The presentations you have to present, I find I've improved so much since the start of them! I would have been like, I don't want to do this, but now I can! Like, oh, you know what you learned or you did wrong in your French one, do this differently for the Irish one, and might work out better.

Elizabeth, 3rd Year Interview, Monday 27th February 2024 @ 10.05am

Nuala mentioned that the pre-exams highlighted areas that needed further work, thus enabling focused improvement. Elizabeth pointed out that the communication skills developed by presenting her research in one CBA, combined with the feedback she received, helped her to improve across her other language subjects. Lorna reflected on how the mock exams motivated her to adjust her approach where needed and provided her with reassurance on her exam performance. Black and Wiliam (2012) emphasise the importance of feedback in formative assessment to support self-regulated learning and continuous improvement chiming with Lorna's thinking. Furthermore, Bui (2023) highlights the role of formative assessments in encouraging students to be reflective and adaptive, using feedback to guide their academic strategies.

- Concerns about the perceived value and impact of CBAs on final exam outcomes

While students (56.25%, n=9) recognised the skill development element of the CBAs (via anonymous questionnaire in 4th year (n=16)), there was also significant frustration regarding their perceived lack of impact on final exam results or on their learning as a whole. A couple (12.50%, n=2) of students felt that the effort they invested in their CBAs was not adequately recognised or rewarded, with others (31.25%, n=5) articulating the view that their time would have been better spent building subject knowledge.

I am not against CBAs but they have to go towards something on the Junior Cert final exam, even just 20% of the test.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

It was weeks of work put into a project simply for a word on a page that didn't even affect my result.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

One student suggested that CBAs should account for a portion of their final Junior Cycle grade to validate the effort put into these assessments. Ordinarily, the Assessment Task (AT) attached to the second CBA students would usually complete accounts for 10% of their overall subject mark, but because Covid19 assessment adjustments were still in place and the AT not running, students were awarded a grade descriptor only for their CBAs. Curtin *et al.* (2020) aver that assessments must be perceived as meaningful to foster engagement. Elwood (2006) discusses the importance of assessments feeling intrinsically valuable to students; unfortunately, 68.75% (n=11) of the students (n=16) who responded to the anonymous questionnaire stated that they did not find the CBAs to be a valuable learning experience, which also aligns with the findings in the McGarr *et al.* (2023) report. However, this may have more to do with the CBAs not being curated in schools as originally conceived by the NCCA. McGarr *et al.* (2022, p. 65) found that ‘the CBAs were not realised as planned, particularly in

relation to how they were being interpreted at a school level as a significant assessment instrument rather than as integrated into the fabric of the learning experience of the students’.

Furthermore, McGarr *et al.* (2022, p. 65) reported that ‘locking the CBAs into the architecture of examinations was seen as a problem’ and is ‘something that required a fair bit of work still’. Aligning with those findings, this research highlights the disconnect students’ discern between the effort invested in their CBAs and their perceived significance, suggesting a need for better integration into the overall assessment framework. The connection between assessment and engagement will be presented in the following findings section of this chapter.

7.1.2 Assessment and Student Engagement

Students appreciated formative and experiential assessments, such as CBAs, for making learning more engaging and interactive. Group projects and presentations were noted as enjoyable and valuable for active participation, however stress and poor scheduling of CBAs counteracted this benefit, making assessments feel burdensome rather than engaging for these students. Curtin *et al.* (2020) highlight the value of active, community-based learning, where students engage with tools and resources while McDermott (2021) emphasises the importance of social interaction in learning, which assessments such as CBAs promote through collaboration, creativity and communication. Assessments designed to be interactive and participatory can significantly increase student engagement and make learning more enjoyable, however poor implementation or excessive assessment loads can detract from this engagement, shifting focus from meaningful learning to mere completion of tasks. Again, the voices of the students involved in this research, which connect with the tenets promulgated by Curtin *et al.* (2020) and McDermott (2021) are chronicled in the textboxes on the following pages.

➤ The value of experiential assessment approaches

Without question, students recognised the benefits of experiential assessment, such as group-based CBAs, noting that working collaboratively allows for the integration of diverse opinions and ideas, which can enhance the overall quality of their work.

For our business ones, we did them in a group and I think that worked because it was like there were just different opinions to make it better.

Fiona, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 11am

I think that some of them, they're a good idea and that you get to learn different ways and do research and do group work.

Jackie, 3rd Year Interview, Thursday 9th March 2023 @ 9.25am

This collaborative approach also facilitates the development of important interpersonal skills, such as effective communication and teamwork, as evidenced by Fiona above who highlighted that working in a group brought together different perspectives that improved the outcome of the project. Jackie echoed this sentiment, mentioning that group work and research helped her learn in a variety of ways. This finding connects with the ideas of McDermott (2001), who emphasises the socially constructed nature of learning, suggesting that group interactions and shared dialogues enrich the learning process. Curtin *et al.* (2020) also support the value of active, community-based learning, where students engage collaboratively to deepen their understanding. The findings also connect deeply with the work of Rogoff (1995) who avers that development occurs across personal, interpersonal and community planes.

CBAs that require students to present or perform in front of others contribute significantly to personal growth and confidence in public speaking thus highlighting the value of experiential assessment approaches.

I suppose other people probably would have developed, like, talking skills in front of people, but I was never really that not okay, talking in front of people. Like, I could talk to the walls. Do you know what I mean?

Holly, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 28th February 2023 @ 2.50pm

I did learn a lot from the French CBA. It was very humiliating, I will say that. But I learned so much because I just remember I felt so happy about walking off, like, where I was standing from English CBA. I was like, I did it. And I didn't freak out.

Lorna, 3rd Year Interview, Friday 10th March 2023 @ 12.20pm

Even when students found the experiential experience stressful or embarrassing, they often felt a sense of accomplishment afterward, which builds resilience and self-assurance. Holly observed that although she was naturally comfortable speaking in front of others, she observed that these CBAs helped some of her peers develop these skills. Lorna described how, despite initially feeling humiliated during her French CBA, she felt a strong sense of pride and relief after completing it successfully. This relates to the work of Rogoff (1995), who highlights the role of learning experiences in fostering personal growth and identity development. Lucas (2021) also discusses how assessments can help build resilience and self-awareness amongst students. The emotional journey from anxiety to accomplishment underscores the transformative potential of CBAs as experiential assessments for skills development and building grit.

These findings demonstrate how students' perceive the CBAs influence both academic and personal outcomes, highlighting the need for an approach in schools that maximises the educational benefits of these experiential, collaborative and skill-building experiences. In the next section of this chapter, the concept of outcomes will be explored in more detail, with students articulating their perspectives on their academic and personal growth and the impacts assessments have had on their attitudes to learning.

7.2 The Evolution of Students' Assessment Experiences in the Junior Cycle: Contributions to Growth, Development, and Learning

The assessment journey at JC represents a critical period of academic and personal growth for young people, shaped by a diverse range of assessment practices, including both formative and summative methods. Throughout this journey, students engage with various subject curriculum specifications, developing academic skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving, and research competencies that are foundational for future learning. Simultaneously, the varied nature of JC assessments, from CBAs and the usual assessments at the end of a unit of learning, to what students' perceive as a high-stakes terminal exam, can foster personal development, enhancing confidence, resilience, and effective communication skills. The integration of collaborative and independent tasks provides students with opportunities to refine their interpersonal abilities, build self-regulation, and cultivate a stronger sense of ownership over their learning.

In the context of secondary education, personal growth is increasingly understood as a dynamic process involving self-discovery, emotional resilience, and the development of a growth mindset. Dweck (2006) posits that students who believe their abilities can improve through effort are more likely to embrace challenges and persist in the face of setbacks, fostering personal development. Development during adolescence encompasses a range of changes, including cognitive, emotional, and social transformations. Steinberg (2014) emphasises that this period is marked by significant brain development, influencing decision-making and risk assessment. Academic learning is not solely about content acquisition but also involves developing critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and the ability to apply knowledge in various contexts. Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) highlight that effective learning environments encourage students to connect new information with prior knowledge, promoting deeper understanding. Moreover, recent educational frameworks such as the *Junior Cycle Framework*

2015 (NCCA, 2015) advocate for holistic approaches that integrate personal and academic development, recognising that students' well-being and sense of purpose significantly impact their academic success.

However, the structure and implementation of these assessments also play a pivotal role in shaping student experiences, influencing both their engagement and emotional well-being. Understanding how these elements interact is essential for optimising assessment practices to support holistic student development throughout the JC framework. In this section of the chapter, the students speak to their lived realities in articulating evidence of their academic growth. They do this by connecting their learning to their socio-cultural realities, offering unique perspectives shaped by lived experiences. These contexts inform how they engaged with academic concepts associated with assessments, whether by drawing on their socio-cultural heritage to analyse complex demands or addressing systemic challenges through personal insight.

7.2.1 Evidence of Academic Growth

Students' reflections on their academic growth over the JC journey highlight how their assessment experiences have deepened their understanding and equipped them with practical skills. The data from the students illuminates the transformative impact of engaging with diverse assessment formats throughout their JC assessment journey, each a unique inscriptive moment accruing over time, to form perspectives which are expertly informed (Flynn, 2018) and beautifully articulated. The following sub-themes have been drawn: (a) development of academic growth and improvement; and (b) identification of academic strengths and areas for improvement.

➤ Development of academic growth and improvement

Students credit their academic growth to the structured and repetitive nature of assessments throughout JC, which compelled them to refine their study techniques and develop efficient revision habits. The necessity of preparing for various assessments has instilled discipline and strategic planning in their academic routines.

They have positively impacted my learning because after each one I have revised more and I am more used to them and more prepared.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

Assessments have taught me how to study properly and CBA's made me a lot better at handing in projects and things in on time.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I think it benefitted my learning because I had to revise and study a lot for them.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

The consistent demands of assessments, such as in-class tests and CBAs, serve as a catalyst for developing strong study skills. These experiences provide a foundation for more effective learning and prepare students for future high-stakes assessments, such as the LC, by promoting habits that lead to long-term academic success. Bennett (2018) emphasises that well-designed assessments foster deep academic understanding and reinforce effective learning practices while Andersen (2020) supports the idea that repeated assessment engagement helps students become more academically resilient and better equipped to manage future challenges.

Students reported that assessments, while stressful, are instrumental in reinforcing their knowledge and clarifying gaps in their understanding. The need to prepare thoroughly for

assessments has helped them internalise the content more deeply and has ensured a better grasp of subject matter.

Assessments are painful when going through them, but they really help me learn and I can clearly see and understand the information I know and the information I still do not know/ don't understand. In class tests are good because I was able to learn off the information for the purpose of the exam and this would help me in the long run.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

Taught me how to communicate in teams with new people, which is great for college and future careers.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

Our learning growth has improved because we're more familiar and comfortable with our classmates and teachers.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

The process of studying for assessments helps solidify learning by requiring students to engage actively with the material. This deep engagement ensures that students not only retain information for exams but also achieve a more comprehensive understanding of academic content, which is beneficial for cumulative and progressive learning. Black and Wiliam (2012) highlight the role of assessment in reinforcing content knowledge through feedback and reflection, while Bui (2023) emphasises the value of formative assessments in promoting sustained academic engagement and comprehension.

➤ Identification of academic strengths and areas for improvement

Students appreciate that assessments provide clear indications of areas where they excel and areas that require further study. This self-awareness allows them to direct their efforts more

efficiently and strategically, making their learning more focused and productive. Thus, assessments act as a diagnostic tool that informs students about their academic progress, helping them to concentrate on areas needing improvement.

Some assessments have helped my learning as they help to indicate what I need to spend more time on.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

They definitely helped me sort which subjects to pick for the leaving cert, and I'm glad I experienced what a state exam is like with the examiners and all the rules in the exam room.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I think the junior cert has set me up for the leaving cert exams. Now that I have done state exams I know how the process works and understand the work that needs to be put in in order to achieve the results you want.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

This targeted approach to learning fosters a more efficient and effective academic growth trajectory. Black and Wiliam (2012) emphasise the importance of feedback in helping students identify areas for growth and adapt their learning strategies accordingly and Bui (2023) supports the notion that formative assessment empowers students to become more self-regulated and proactive in addressing their academic needs.

These findings underscore the essential role of assessments in promoting academic growth and improvement. They not only encourage students to adopt effective study habits but also deepen their understanding of subject matter and provide valuable feedback for continuous academic improvement. While students articulated the fact that they felt assessments had impacted their

learning growth positively, they also contended that assessments had augmented their personal growth also and this will be illustrated in the next section of this findings chapter.

7.2.2 Evidence of personal growth

Students' communicated the evidence of their personal growth in some very poignant observations since they began their JC journey. These are given voice pointing to; (a) increased resilience and emotional maturity, and to the (b) development of academic discipline and the value of hard work.

Having considered the thoughts and perceptions of the students who articulated their personal growth, via focus groups, interviews and via anonymous questionnaire, it is evident that the students' reveal a deepened sense of resilience, emotional maturity and discipline, towards the end of their JC assessment journey, showcasing how these experiences have shaped their character and prepared them for future academic and life challenges. The following findings were extracted from this component of the data.

➤ Increased resilience and emotional maturity

Students' demonstrated a resilience and emotional maturity towards the end of their JC journey. They learned to cope with the pressure of exams and adopt a more balanced perspective, recognising that while assessments are important, they are not the ultimate measure of their worth. This shift in mind-set helped reduce stress and instilled a sense of inner peace and acceptance.

If you think about it, nothing matters as long as you're happy.

Barbara, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 2.50pm

I think I've learned that exams are not the end of the world. I like to look at it this way, even though these are the most important exams I've done so far in my life they are not the most important exams I will ever do in my life.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I think I've just learned that at the end of the day, a test score isn't everything, and it's okay to make mistakes sometimes.

Anna, 3rd Year Interview, Tuesday 21st February 2023 @ 11.00am

The JC assessment journey has helped students develop the emotional strength to handle challenges and setbacks, teaching them to prioritise well-being over perfection. This emotional growth has important implications for how students approach future academic and personal challenges, equipping them with a healthier outlook on achievement and failure. This aligns with the research of Andrade and Brookhart (2016) who discuss the role of assessment in fostering self-awareness. Rogoff (1995) also highlights the impact of learning experiences on personal development, emphasising that the process of overcoming obstacles contributes to a stronger, more balanced self-identity.

➤ Development of discipline and the value of hard work

A few students (15.78%, n=3) reported a marked increase in discipline and a stronger appreciation for the value of hard work. Through repeated assessments and the need to manage academic and extracurricular commitments, over time and in general they see themselves as becoming more organised, goal-oriented, and driven to achieve their best.

Yes, that's the thing with hard work. Like, even I know I keep bringing up training, but like I progressed quickly. And then people are like, oh, you just have great talent. And it's like, no, I worked hard to get here, so I think things like activities outside of school, that's why it's so important to do them. I apply that to school activities as well. It teaches you that you need to work hard. And then, me working hard in that, showed me that I can achieve stuff. And then I started working even harder with my exams and everything.

Catherine, Third Year Interview, Wednesday 22nd February 2023 @ 1.00pm

The personal growth I have gained from this is that I am now very disciplined with the task at hand and have the skill of being able to thoroughly revise.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

They put more emphasis on discipline and effort, rather than on innate ability, leading to a greater sense of accomplishment, self-efficacy and the sense of a growth mind-set aligning with the work of Yeager and Dweck, (2020).

The structured demands of the JC assessment journey have instilled a sense of discipline in some of the students, teaching them to set goals, work diligently, and take pride in their achievements. This personal growth fosters a strong work ethic that will benefit students in their future academic and career pursuits. Curtin *et al.* (2020) emphasise the role of active and practice-based learning experiences in developing self-regulation and discipline. In turn, Rogoff (1995) highlights how learning through participation in diverse sociocultural contexts - including both academic and extracurricular activities - supports personal growth and the internalisation of culturally valued practices, such as perseverance and responsibility. Finally, Elwood (2006) argues that formative assessment can play a significant role in fostering learner autonomy and engagement, thereby contributing to students' broader educational development beyond academic achievement. These findings illustrate the significant personal growth that students experience through the JC assessment journey, highlighting how they develop resilience, emotional maturity, discipline, and a strong work ethic. These outcomes extend

beyond academic success, equipping students with life skills that prepare them for future challenges. Students also discussed the fact that assessments can impact their attitudes towards learning and these findings will be presented in the next section of this chapter.

7.2.3 Impact on Student Learning Attitudes

Students expressed their views on the subjects they felt they performed well in the JC and what impacted their attitude to the learning involved for these subjects. In many cases (84.21%, n=16), they mentioned the enjoyment of the subject/s, the practical element/s of the subject/s and their relationships with their teachers which had been built over time. The findings reveal significant factors contributing to students' academic success within JC, emphasising the complex intersection between intrinsic motivation and supportive educational relationships. The analysis highlights how students' enjoyment of subjects and the quality of their interactions with teachers profoundly shape their academic performance and engagement. The relevant sub-themes in this section are drawn as: (a) enjoyment and interest in a subject/s as key drivers of academic endeavour; and (b) the impact of teacher-student relationships on academic success.

➤ Enjoyment and interest in a subject/s as key drivers of academic endeavour

Students consistently highlighted that their enjoyment and interest in a subject positively influenced their academic performance. When they found a subject engaging or relevant to everyday life, they were more motivated and confident, which contributed to successful

outcomes. Thus, enjoyment and intrinsic interest in a subject are powerful motivators that enhance student engagement and lead to better academic performance.

*I performed best in Maths, French, Irish and Science. I think **I did well because I enjoy these subjects.***

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I performed best in home economics because it is practical work and everyday life!

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I did best in Home Ec, I think the 50% cooking practical really helps.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

*Geography was my best subject. I think I did best in this because it is one of my strongest subjects and I always receive high marks. Even though **I didn't necessarily put any more study into it than my other subjects I had a level of confidence going into the exam that motivated me to be efficient and calm resulting in a successful outcome. Not to mention I quite enjoy the subject and find it comes easily to me.***

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

This suggests that incorporating engaging and relatable content into the curriculum can foster deeper learning and improve academic results linking with Rogoff's (1995) tenet regarding the personalisation of learning via participatory appropriation as key to learner development.

➤ Impact of teacher-student relationships on academic success

Positive relationships with teachers were mentioned by students (31.25%, n=5), via anonymous questionnaire, as a very significant factor in students' academic success. Teachers who provided clear explanations, personalised feedback, and demonstrated genuine care for their

students' progress were credited with making learning more effective and enjoyable. Thus, strong, supportive teacher-student relationships are identified as crucial for fostering academic growth (Banks and Smyth, 2021).

I ... did well in maths because I had a really good maths teacher who really helped and was involved in all the students work and she cared a lot about them doing good.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I think I did well in Irish because I got the highest grade in it and my teachers really good.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I also performed best in geography because it is everyday life and I have a brilliant teacher that broke down the complexity and made it simple to understand. The way my teacher taught was impeccable, this is because my teacher did not dismiss any homework we had and always corrected it and went through it, this really helped me improve the understanding of the subject.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

Teachers who engage actively with students and provide consistent, meaningful support can greatly enhance student confidence and comprehension, leading to better performance. This is consistent with the work of Banks and Smyth (2021), who highlight the importance of positive student-teacher relationships, and of Elwood (2006) who also emphasises that formative interactions between teachers and students can facilitate a more personalised and effective learning experience. Students relating to their teacher and feeling cared about, heard and treated with respect also proves motivating for students. This aligns with Flynn's (2018) study where she connects students' feeling heard and respected to an improved sense of belonging.

Overall, these findings underscore the critical role that student interest and teacher support play in fostering positive attitudes in students, shaping a learning environment that promotes both

their confidence and deeper understanding. This highlights the necessity of fostering engaging curricula and strong teacher-student relationships to maximise student potential. In the penultimate section of this findings chapter, students transition from reflecting on these growth experiences to considering the impact of the JC terminal exam; their insights provide a rich and holistic view of how these final subject assessments shaped their academic journey thus far.

7.3 Reflections on the Junior Cycle Terminal Exam

The penultimate section of this findings chapter presents the students' reflections as they consider the JC terminal exam, offering a critical analysis of their final perspectives on the concluding components of their assessment journey, including CBAs. Students provided candid insights into whether they perceive the JC as a fair and comprehensive measure of their learning or a flawed representation of their academic abilities. Additionally, this section captures students' practical advice and stress-management strategies, informed by their lived experiences, as they navigated the challenges of what they perceived to be a high-stakes assessment. By giving voice to these perspectives, a richer understanding emerges of the complexities for students surrounding JC assessment and the complex pathway these students have had to navigate. The relevant themes in this section are drawn as: (a) insights after the Junior Cycle; (b) final thoughts and takeaways from CBAs; and (c) The Junior Cycle scorecard – one cohort's perspective of its fairness and flaws.

7.3.1 Insights after the Junior Cycle

In this section, findings from the questionnaire are particularly relevant in relation to students expressing how they met (or not) their expectations in the JC exams, and key aspects that they felt contributed to challenges they faced.

➤ Overall satisfaction with JC results but challenges identified in some subjects

When asked how they felt about their JC exam results, 81.25% (n=13) of respondents (n=16) contended that they were either happy, very happy or extremely happy with their results. 18.75% (n=3) were not very happy. When asked if they felt they had met their expectations in terms of JC results, again 81.25% (n=13) of respondents confirming that they had, with 18.75% (n=3) stating that they didn't.

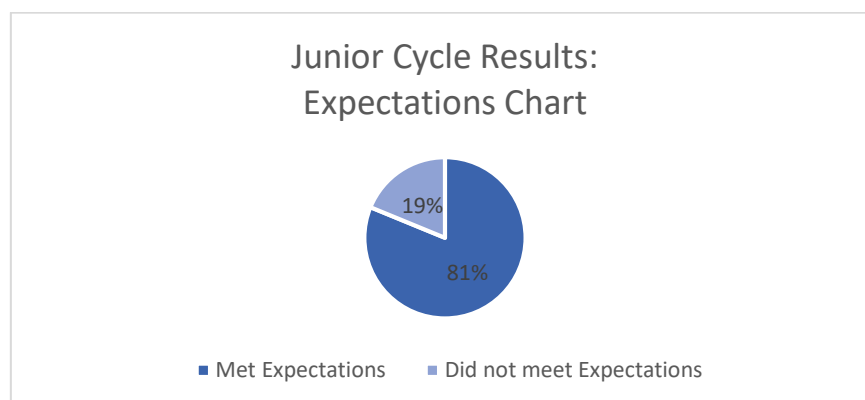


Chart 7.1 – Junior Cycle Results: Expectations Chart

According to this cohort of students, maths was one of the subjects which they found most challenging (56.25%, n=9) with languages causing difficulty for some students (25%, n=4) also. Therefore, when the students in the cohort reflected on their JC results, the following findings can be extrapolated from the data.

Maths presented the most significant challenges because any kind of questions could be asked. I went over lots of exam questions.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

Maths was most challenging but that tends to but the stereotype of the subject. But I do not think anything would be changed in the maths curriculum. The contribution factors is the little time we have to complete the course.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

The languages were also the most difficult because there isn't an amount that you have to complete before you sit the exam.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

For French I found the test to be slightly challenging with the listening and also the essay being not what I learnt and expected. That through [sic] me off a better and higher grade unfortunately.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

The majority of students (81.25%, n=13) were satisfied with their Junior Cycle (JC) exam results and felt that they had met their expectations. However, mathematics and languages were consistently cited (81.25%, n=13) as the most challenging subjects, with students highlighting issues such as difficulty in understanding the material, unexpected exam content, and insufficient preparation time. While overall student satisfaction with JC results is high, the consistent struggle with maths and languages points to several challenges that could be impacting students' performance and confidence in these areas. Andersen (2020) emphasises the importance of clear, supportive instruction to build student confidence and engagement with Curtin *et al.* (2020) also stressing the need for engaging and active learning experiences

to make complex subjects more accessible and enjoyable. Thus, these challenges suggest a potential need to review curriculum pacing and teaching strategies to better support students in mastering these subjects.

➤ Contributing factors to academic challenges

Many (81.25%, n=13) students attributed their struggles in maths and languages (earlier identified as the most challenging subjects) to teaching methods that did not align with their learning needs or to the perceived inflexibility and the fast pace of the curriculum. There were a few students (31.25%, n=5) who reported that they had to rely on self-directed learning or external resources to understand the material, which indicates a potential disconnect between classroom instruction and student needs. Interestingly, no student in the cohort mentioned grinds as an external tool to support learning.

Maths because I didn't agree with my teachers teaching method. I overcame this by studying a lot and watching videos on it.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

For French I found the teacher's teaching didn't work with me sometimes, so I had to get more help at home.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I found Maths to be the most challenging subject as I find the teaching of the subject not to be engaging for students our age. The course isn't for those who take longer to learn and me and a lot of my friends found that we had to teach ourselves the course the nights before the exam.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

The need for additional self-teaching efforts suggests that more personalised and differentiated approaches to teaching (for this cohort) could be beneficial, particularly in subjects that are traditionally considered difficult; the work of Elwood (2006) is especially important here as she emphasises the importance of formative assessments and feedback in bridging gaps in understanding. While students often report a higher perception of learning when their preferred learning styles are matched, there is no empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of this approach (Pashler *et al.*, 2008). Instead, alignment between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, alongside the use of formative assessment strategies - such as those outlined by Wiliam (2011) in his five key strategies for formative assessment - has been shown to be far more impactful. Additionally, the implementation of evidence-based learning strategies, including retrieval practice, interleaved practice, distributed practice, and elaboration, has been demonstrated to enhance learning outcomes significantly (Dunlosky *et al.*, 2013). These approaches are not only more effective, but also align well with SCT, assessment policy, and contemporary educational research (Hattie, 2023).

The findings suggest that while students generally feel positive about their JC results, significant academic challenges remain for them in certain subjects. Addressing these issues may require curricular adjustments, more adaptive teaching methods and enhanced use of formative assessment strategies to better support diverse learners and alleviate the difficulties associated with complex subjects like maths and languages. These insights highlight the importance of tailoring instruction to meet diverse learning needs and ensuring that students feel adequately prepared for what they perceive to be more complex subjects. These findings highlight the need for approaches such as CBAs to complement traditional exams by offering summative evaluations that reflect a broader range of student skills and learning outcomes. The next section narrates the students' final reflections on CBAs, examining whether they

perceived these assessments as valuable learning experiences and if/how they influenced their overall academic journey.

7.3.2 Final thoughts and takeaways from CBAs

In their third-year interviews, all students (n=19) involved in this research had stated that they were either ‘relieved’, ‘delighted’ or ‘so glad’ that they didn’t have to complete a second CBAs in many of their subjects in third year. Having received their JC results, I thought that it might be a prudent reflective task to ask the group via anonymous questionnaire for some final thoughts on their experiences of CBAs. The relevant sub-themes were educed as: (a) perceived lack of academic value and misalignment with high-stakes outcomes; (b) skills acquired and limited perceived practical benefits; and (c) external help with CBAs.

➤ Perceived lack of academic value and misalignment with high-stakes outcomes

These findings shed light on the mixed perceptions students have of CBAs in JC, with a prevailing sentiment that these assessments did not meaningfully contribute to their academic success or exam preparedness.



Chart 7.2 – Did you find the CBAs to be a valuable learning experience?

While some students acknowledged the acquisition of practical skills through CBAs, the overall experience was marred by feelings of unnecessary stress, and a sense of wasted instructional time, highlighting significant gaps in how these assessments are perceived and valued by students.

I feel there was no point in doing them. I didn't learn anything and all it did was put unnecessary stress and pressure over students and take up valuable class learning time.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I do not think that doing the CBA's helped me in anyway.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I think the CBAs were unnecessary stress to be added and the time spent on them could've been used to study for the exams.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

A substantial portion (68.75%, n=11) of the respondents (n=16) expressed a view that CBAs lacked academic value, with several respondents criticising them for taking away essential class

time that could have been better utilised for preparing for what they perceive to be the high-stakes JC exams. The perceived disconnect between CBAs and final exam outcomes contributed to students' frustration, as they felt the assessments did not impact meaningfully to their academic success.

Students are experts in their own learning experiences, as their lived experiences shape their understanding and engagement with assessment (Flynn, 2018). Their perspectives, therefore, offer valuable insight into how assessments function within the learning environment. However, McGarr *et al.* (2022) found that, rather than being seamlessly integrated into the fabric of students' learning experiences, CBAs were often interpreted at the school level as distinct, standalone assessment instruments. This has implications for how students perceive the value and purpose of CBAs within the broader Junior Cycle framework.

For students to fully grasp the coherence between CBAs, final examinations, and the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA), constructive alignment between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment is essential. Ensuring that these elements function as part of an integrated assessment framework strengthens students' understanding of the purpose and relevance of assessment in their learning journey. However, while students' perspectives are critical, relying solely on their views without considering the broad sociocultural lens, risks overlooking the structural and systemic factors that shape their perceptions. A critical stance, informed by the sociocultural context, is necessary to fully interpret how and why students engage with assessment in particular ways.

This finding chimes with Elwood and Murphy (2015), who argue that assessments must be perceived as significant and relevant within the broader educational framework. Milligan *et al.* (2020) further highlight that poorly integrated assessments can exacerbate student anxiety and detract from meaningful learning experiences.

➤ Skills acquired and limited perceived practical benefits

Despite the criticisms, some students acknowledged that CBAs facilitated the development of practical skills, such as using digital tools like PowerPoint and conducting research, among other valuable skills presented in the previous findings chapter of this thesis. These skills, though not directly tied to exam performance, were recognised as potentially valuable for future academic and professional contexts.

The CBA's did really help with learning how to use PowerPoint, word and computers in general. The geography CBA was also beneficial because in the exam we were able to use the topic we did our CBA on in a long question when it came up. The other CBA's weren't beneficial and did take up a lot of time that could've been used for learning instead.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I did things during them I'd never done before, such as using Powerpoint and researching a specific topic. Although I didn't like it at the time, I also think presenting projects to the class were a valuable thing to have done.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

However, the consensus remained that these benefits did not outweigh the stress and workload associated with CBAs, especially when the skills are not perceived as transferable to high-stakes testing, despite the inherent potential. Thus, while CBAs provided opportunities for skill development, the perceived limited scope of their practical benefits left students feeling that the assessments did not justify the time and effort invested. This aligns with the work of Rogoff (1995) who supports the view that learning is most effective when students engage in culturally and socially meaningful activities, suggesting that the value of experience-based learning depends on its relevance within the learners' context. To maximise the impact of CBAs, there is a need to ensure that these skills are explicitly connected to both exam

preparation and broader educational competencies, thereby enhancing students' perceptions of their value. This finding connects with Curtin *et al.* (2020), who emphasise the importance of active, skills-based learning experiences that are relevant and clearly articulated to students but it also triangulates with the research of McGarr *et al.* (2022, p. 67) as they found that

While students were deemed to learn from CBAs, CBAs do not appear to have been experienced as intended. CBAs appear to be currently experienced by many as a significant assessment instrument and as a stressor resulting in anxiety amongst students (and teachers). The low percentage afforded to CBAs in comparison to the workload attached, was also noted.

Furthermore, Lucas (2021) discusses the role of skill development in assessments, stressing the importance of making these links explicit to avoid student perceptions of wasted effort. Accordingly, these findings suggest a dual reality: while some students recognise the skill-building potential of CBAs, their overall negative perception largely stems from their misinterpretation at school level, misalignment with high-stakes exam preparation and the inevitable associated stress. For CBAs to be more effective, their implementation must consider the constructive alignment towards both academic relevance and the well-being of students, ensuring that the skills developed are visibly beneficial within their broader educational journeys.

➤ External help with CBAs

Students were asked two questions in relation to this topic. Firstly, if they had ever asked a parent or guardian for help with a CBA, and secondly, if they did ask for help from a parent or guardian, why they had sought assistance. I received a positive response of 50% (n=8) to the first question. The reasons for seeking assistance put forward by students varied, and lie on a

continuum from explanations that are perfectly reasonable and understandable to those that could be explored more deeply in another research project.

It was about our family history for the History CBA.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

If I was doing a CBA at home and I need help with information or how to work PowerPoint I would ask my parents.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

If I were to I would ask for them to look over it and ask their opinion on it.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I asked for help in my maths CBA as I found it difficult.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

They had experience in the subject I needed help in.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

Because the level of criteria needed to get an exceptional was higher than an average 14 year old would know.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

The data highlights some concerns regarding equity in education, particularly in the context of CBAs and the varying degrees of support students may receive at home. The findings suggest that the availability of external assistance, such as help from parents or guardians, is a crucial factor influencing student performance on CBAs. This discrepancy raises questions about whether *all students have equal access* to these types of extra resources, support, and opportunities to succeed academically. Responses indicating that students relied on adult help

for tasks such as working with digital tools (e.g., PowerPoint), or to help them meet the high criteria required for exceptional grades. This underscores the uneven playing field that can exist in the educational system. Milligan *et al.* (2020) argue that students who lack support outside the classroom are at a disadvantage compared to peers who can rely on knowledgeable adults or technology at home. The literature emphasises that disparities in access to resources contribute to inequities in educational outcomes. This unequal distribution of support exacerbates achievement and outcome gaps, as students from more privileged backgrounds are better equipped to meet assessment criteria (Curtin *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, Bui (2023) highlights that equitable education requires not only equal access to formal schooling but also equal access to the social and cultural capital that influences academic success. The responses provided by students in this study illustrates how family involvement and familiarity with academic content or technology can provide an advantage, raising concerns about how CBAs may inadvertently perpetuate socioeconomic disparities. Elwood and Murphy (2015) emphasise the importance of designing assessments that consider the diverse backgrounds and resources of students. The advantage of parental help for some students completing CBAs suggests that assessment tasks may not be entirely fair or accessible to all students, especially those whose families lack the knowledge or resources to provide this support.

This situation challenges the notion of educational equity and highlights the need for schools to ensure that assessments are designed in a way that minimises external influence and provides equal opportunities for all students to demonstrate their capabilities. These findings highlight the need for education systems to address critical inequities in resource distribution and consider how certain types of assessments, such as CBAs, may privilege students with greater access to support at home. McCoy (2024) supports this tenet as she avers that family resources significantly influence an individual's ability to make and act on educational decisions. Thus,

further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of resource disparities on academic outcomes and how educational policies can be adjusted to promote a more equitable learning environment. This is particularly important in the light of senior cycle reform with tranche one subjects being introduced in September 2025, each of which has an additional assessment component (AAC) worth 40% of the overall subject mark for the LC exam.

For this cohort of students, once their JC exams had been completed and their respective results received, thoughts of the LC loomed large. While their opinions on whether the JC prepared them for senior cycle and the LC exam, I thought it prudent to ask them to reflect on JC and whether they felt that it adequately measured their knowledge and skills in the subjects they had studied. These findings will be explored in the following section of this chapter.

7.3.3 The Junior Cycle Scorecard – One Cohort’s Perspective of its Fairness and Flaws

This section of the chapter examines JC students' perceptions of the fairness and validity of their exams as a measure of academic aptitude. Drawing from student anonymous questionnaire responses (n=16), the analysis explores whether students believe that the JC exams accurately capture their skills, knowledge, and learning journey, or if they view the exams as a flawed metric that fails to account for the complexity and diversity of their abilities. By understanding students' views on the efficacy and limitations of standardised testing, this section sheds light on broader questions of assessment equity, the pressures of high-stakes exams, and the extent to which students believe that these assessments reflect or misrepresent their achievements and potential. Additionally, the discussion draws connections to relevant literature on assessment validity and educational justice, framing the debate around standardised testing in contemporary education.

➤ Perceived validity of JC exams as an accurate reflection of knowledge and skills

There was an even split amongst the students in terms of opinions here: 50% (n=8) felt that it did accurately measure their knowledge and skills with 50% (n=8) of the cohort holding the opposite view. Based on student responses, the findings examine whether students perceive the JC exams as a comprehensive and accurate reflection of their three-year learning journey - effectively measuring their academic knowledge and skills - or as narrow, high-stakes assessments that fail to capture the full extent of their abilities.

Yes, for the more practical subjects because there was a practical exam, such as music, art and home economics. However, no for the other subjects, because I think that one exam with specific questions on a specific day does not accurately assess your skills and knowledge from three years.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

In home economics it is important that they have a practical exam that is worth 50%. This is brilliant! But it should be tweaked 25% a physical garment and 25% cookery.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I do think the Junior Cycle measured my knowledge and it also did help learning how to use PowerPoint which I wouldn't have known how to do without the CBAs.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

Yes I think it did, because the effort that I put into each subject was reflected in the results.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I think it does because it covers nearly every subject you've done in the past 3 years.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

While 50% (n=8) of respondents (n=16) felt that the JC exams effectively measured their knowledge and skills, this belief was more commonly tied to subjects with practical components, such as home economics, art, and music, where assessments included tangible, skills-based evaluations. Conversely, many students (n=8) believed that written exams in other subjects failed to account for the breadth and depth of their learning over three years, highlighting the limitations of a single high-stakes exam. Students who viewed JC exams as valid often appreciated their comprehensive nature and alignment with their effort. However, the absence of practical assessments or more continuous evaluation in certain subjects contributed to a perception of inadequacy among others. This aligns with the views of Elwood and Murphy (2015), who emphasise the importance of balancing process and structure in assessments to meet societal and individual needs. Furthermore, Bennett (2018) argues that high-stakes exams must integrate practical and continuous elements to provide a holistic evaluation of student learning thus there is a need for incorporating diverse assessment types across the curriculum to better reflect students' varied skills and knowledge.

➤ Critique of perceived high-stakes assessment as a flawed metric

As outlined previously, 50% (n=8) of student respondents (n=16) felt that the JC exams were an inadequate measure of their abilities, criticising the reliance on a single exam day to capture three years of learning.

The junior cycle does not adequately measure my knowledge and skills because there is so much I had put a lot of effort into learning over the 3 years and a 2 hour exam does not reflect that. On some of the days I was tired and so not able to perform my best. There were not enough questions to show how much I had learned over the 3 years.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I understand it isn't possible to include everything in 2 hours however I feel a more continuous assessment approach could cover more topics and prevent stress over one singular exam. Perhaps you are having a bad day so that one exam for all 100%. That exam will most likely have a bad outcome because of how you felt on that one particular day.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

Nope, it does not!

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

Concerns included the limited scope of the exams, the inability to account for poor performance due to external factors like fatigue, and the lack of breadth in exam questions. Some suggested that continuous assessment could provide a more equitable and comprehensive measure. Thus, high-stakes testing was perceived as a flawed metric by half of the students, as it did not fully represent their knowledge, skills, or effort over the three years, a critique which resonates with Milligan *et al.* (2020), who highlight the limitations of high-stakes exams in promoting deep learning and equitable assessment.

The work of Black and Wiliam (2012) also resonates here as they emphasise the importance of formative assessment in capturing ongoing student progress, suggesting that a more balanced approach could address the issues raised by these students. This again highlights a need for alternative assessment models, such as continuous assessment, which could alleviate stress and provide a more inclusive evaluation of student achievement. The data certainly highlights the complexity of student perceptions around JC exams. While some students see value in their structure and scope, others highlight critical flaws that question their fairness and validity. This dichotomy suggests a need for blended assessment models that combine high-stakes exams with continuous or practical assessments, ensuring a more equitable and comprehensive representation of student learning.

7.4 Beyond Junior Cycle: A Launch Pad or Learning Curve?

In the penultimate section of this findings chapter, the students' perspectives on whether they feel their JC assessment experiences have prepared them for future educational challenges will be presented. 75% (n=12) of respondents (n=16) to the anonymous survey felt that they were prepared with 25% (n=4) feeling a little less positive about it - whilst still acknowledging some benefits. In terms of the findings which can be elicited from this data, the majority of students (78.57%, n=11) who responded (n=14) to the final question on the anonymous questionnaire, felt that JC assessments had prepared them for future educational challenges. However, a few students (21.43%, n=3) identified what they perceived to be a wide gap between what they needed to know at JC and what they will need to know at SC. One student mentioned that she would have liked to have received feedback on her JC exams. Each of these findings will be examined in the following paragraphs.

➤ Preparation for future high-stakes assessments

The majority of students (n=11, 78.57%) who responded (n=14) to this question, reported that their JC assessment experiences helped them prepare for future educational challenges, particularly by familiarising them with the structure and process of state exams. Students cited improved study skills, understanding of exam formats, and reduced stress about future assessments as key benefits. Thus, for this cohort of students, it can be said that JC assessments provide an important foundation for managing high-stakes exams like the Leaving Certificate.

I think the junior cycle assessment experiences have prepared me for future educational challenges because I have had a lot of experience of exams and assessments and I now feel more prepared and ready for bigger exams and assessments.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I think it has prepared me well for the Leaving Cert, as they are a similar formula. I think the CBAs have given me a taste of what college assignments might be like.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

The Junior Cycle has prepared me for going into leaving cert because I know what it's like to sit a state exam and I also have learnt how to study properly.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

I think the exams have taught me the importance of working for the results you want. I was happy with my results because I worked hard for them. I hope to be happy with the results of future exams.

Anonymous Questionnaire, Administered November 2023 after the JC results were published

The structured exposure to exam conditions and preparation builds resilience, confidence, and familiarity with standardised testing procedures aligning with the work of Bennett (2018), who emphasises the role of assessments in developing critical exam-taking strategies and deepening understanding. Andersen (2020) also supports the principle that repeated engagement with assessments increases students' readiness for more complex and demanding challenges, helping to bridge the gap between stages of education.

In the following concluding section of this findings chapter, the diverse perspectives shared by students throughout their JC assessment journey are synthesised, reflecting on the broader implications of their experiences. This concluding section considers how the insights gathered inform our understanding of the JC as both a preparatory stage for future educational challenges and a framework for academic and personal development. By highlighting recurring themes such as the value of structured assessment, the importance of meaningful feedback, and the challenges of navigating high-stakes exams, this conclusion seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the assessment system's strengths and areas for improvement. These reflections also lay the foundation for discussing how JC assessments might evolve to better align with student needs and support their long-term educational trajectories.

7.5 Conclusion

This findings chapter has explored JC students' diverse perspectives on their assessment experiences, offering a rich understanding of how these experiences influence their academic and personal development. Drawing from student reflections on CBAs, summative exams, and the broader JC framework, this findings chapter highlighted the complexities of the assessment process, underscoring its strengths, limitations, and areas for refinement. These findings illuminate the critical role of assessments in shaping students' learning journeys and their preparation for future educational challenges, providing valuable insights into how the Junior Cycle impacts student growth and attitudes toward learning.

One of the central themes emerging from the findings is the dual perception of JC assessments as both a meaningful measure of knowledge and a flawed metric that does not fully capture the depth and diversity of students' abilities. While 50% of respondents felt that the exams effectively reflected their skills, particularly in subjects with practical components, the remaining half criticised the reliance on single high-stakes exams as inadequate. Students expressed concerns about the limited scope of the exams, which failed to account for the breadth of material covered over three years, as well as the impact of external factors like stress or fatigue on performance. These critiques resonate with Elwood and Murphy's (2015) argument that assessments should balance process and structure to ensure they are equitable and representative. The inclusion of practical elements in some subjects, such as home economics, was widely praised, suggesting that these assessments provide a more holistic view of student capabilities. Bennett (2018) would concur with this view, emphasising the importance of incorporating diverse assessment formats to capture a fuller picture of student learning. However, the findings also suggest a broader need to integrate practical and continuous assessments across all subjects to ensure greater alignment between student effort, skill development, and assessment outcomes. This would help address students' calls for more

equitable and comprehensive evaluation methods that recognise their diverse abilities and potential.

CBAs emerged as a contentious aspect of the JC experience, with students offering polarised views on their value. While some appreciated the opportunity to develop practical skills such as research, presentation, and the use of digital tools, others viewed CBAs as unnecessary stressors that detracted from valuable instructional time. This duality reflects Andersen's (2020) observation that active, skills-based learning can be highly beneficial when perceived as meaningful by students, but it also highlights the potential for misalignment between assessment design and student expectations. Interestingly, students recognised the potential of CBAs to prepare them for future academic challenges, including college-style assignments and project-based work. This acknowledgment underscores the importance of framing CBAs as an integral part of the broader assessment system rather than as standalone tasks. However, the lack of integration between CBAs and final exam outcomes was a recurring criticism, with many students arguing that their efforts would have been more meaningful if CBAs contributed to their overall grade. This critique echoes the work of Milligan *et al.* (2020) who emphasise the need for assessments to be perceived as significant and relevant to students' academic trajectories.

The findings also reveal that most students (78.57%, n=11) felt that their JC assessment experiences prepared them for future educational challenges, particularly the Leaving Certificate. Students cited improved study habits, familiarity with exam formats, and resilience in handling high-stakes assessments as key benefits of the JC framework. This aligns with Andersen's (2020) argument that repeated engagement with structured assessments builds confidence and readiness for more demanding challenges. However, two students noted significant gaps in continuity between the JC and LC, highlighting differences in exam rigor, style, and content depth. This perceived challenge reflects Milligan *et al.*'s (2020) concern that

inconsistencies between educational stages can hinder student adaptation. Addressing these gaps by aligning assessment expectations and structures across the JC and LC could enhance the preparatory value of the JC, ensuring a smoother transition for students.

A further concern raised by the findings is the disparity in resources and support available to students, particularly in relation to CBAs. The data revealed that students (50%, n=8) sometimes relied on external assistance for completing CBAs, raising questions about equity in assessment. Bui (2023) and Elwood and Murphy (2015) emphasise that assessments must account for the diverse circumstances of students to ensure fairness. This finding suggests a need for further consideration by schools, policy makers and stakeholders to minimise disparities and ensure that all students can engage with assessments on an equal footing. Thus, the highlighted spaces of assessment inequity and tension for students and may serve as a portent for the AACs to be navigated at LC from September 2025.

Finally, the absence of meaningful feedback emerged as a limitation of the JC assessment experience. One student expressed her frustration with the lack of detailed post-exam reviews, which she felt hindered her ability to learn from mistakes and identify areas for improvement. This critique aligns with Black and Wiliam (2012) who stress the importance of feedback in supporting student growth and guiding future learning. Incorporating detailed feedback mechanisms into the JC terminal assessment framework could enhance its educational value, providing students with actionable insights to inform their academic development.

Thus, the JC assessment framework offers valuable opportunities for academic and personal growth, but it is not without its challenges. While students recognise the benefits of structured assessments in preparing them for future educational demands, some small gaps remain in areas such as equity, alignment, and feedback. Addressing these issues requires a more integrated

and student-centred approach to assessment design, ensuring that assessments are meaningful, inclusive, and reflective of diverse learning styles.

The insights gathered in this, the last of the findings chapters provide a potential foundation for a further reimagining the JC assessment system to better meet the needs of our students. These perspectives pave the way for the concluding chapter, which synthesises the key findings, addresses the research questions, integrates insights from students, discusses the study's implications and limitations, and proposes recommendations and avenues for future research. The concluding chapter should serve as a critical reflection on the research journey, tying together the disparate elements of the thesis into a cohesive and meaningful whole, while potentially setting the stage for ongoing dialogue in the field.

Chapter Eight - Conclusion

Amplifying Student Voices: Synthesising Insights and Charting the Path Forward

8.0 Introduction

This concluding chapter draws together the threads of the research, which set out to illuminate the voices of JC students as they reflected on and shared their perspectives of their unique assessment journeys throughout a complete cycle of learning at post-primary level. Through an exploration of their experiences, perspectives, and reflections, this study has examined their perceptions of assessment, their views on disparate types of assessment, and how assessment practices shape their academic, personal, and emotional growth. The research has also provided a detailed analysis of student perspectives on the diverse dimensions of assessment, including its perceived fairness, the impact of formative assessment, summative assessment, and particularly the role of the CBAs and state exams, in preparing them for future educational and life challenges.

Here, the chapter synthesises the key findings to address the research questions, offering a cohesive summary of the study's contribution to the dearth of knowledge which exists on students' experiences of a *complete learning cycle* at post primary level. It is therefore, novel and significant. Additionally, this chapter highlights potential areas for future research that could further explore the role of student voice in shaping equitable and effective assessment systems. By amplifying the perspectives of students, the chapter concludes this thesis with a forward-looking emphasis, accentuating the transformative potential of integrating student-centred insights into ongoing policy review and implementation. In doing so, it affirms the significance of empowering student voice in driving meaningful educational reform.

Section 8.1 proffers a summary of the key findings of the research in the form of a thematic map while Section 8.2 curates a synthesised response to each of the research questions. In the following section, Section 8.3, the limitations of the study are outlined. Section 8.4 considers the implications of the research. The final section, Section 8.5, offers some final personal reflections on the contribution of the research.

8.1 Summary of the Key Findings

This study examined students' perceptions, experiences, and conceptualisations of assessment throughout JC in Ireland, guided by five subsidiary research questions. The research adopted a qualitative longitudinal approach, documenting the assessment journeys of a cohort of nineteen students over a three and a half year period. The findings illuminate the dynamic and complex intersectional tensions between assessment practices, cultural influences, and student perceptions.

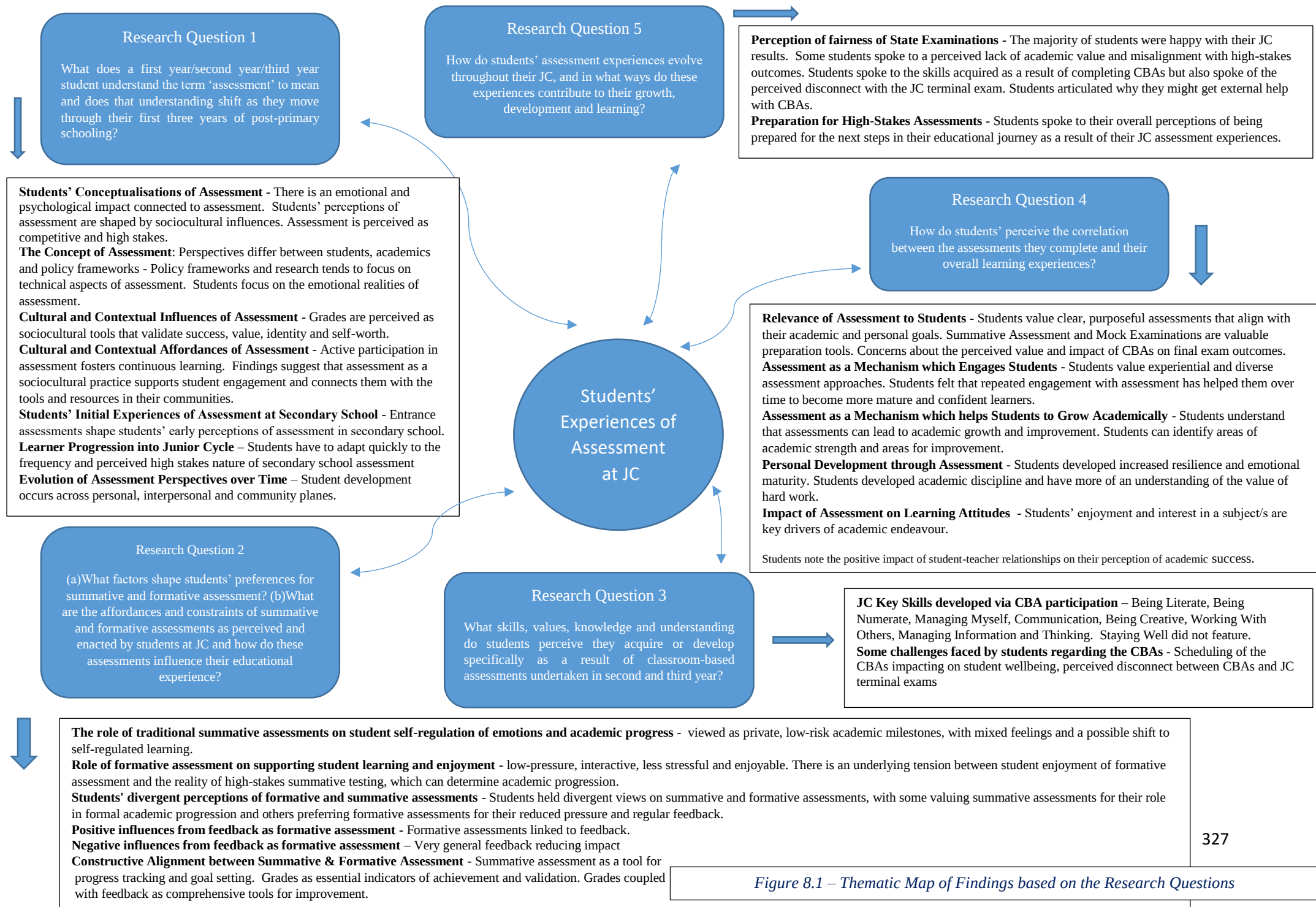


Figure 8.1 – Thematic Map of Findings based on the Research Questions

8.2 Synthesis of Insights

The findings across the individual research questions reveal a compelling interconnectedness that illuminates the complex nature of assessment at JC. Students' evolving understanding of assessment as they progress through their learning cycle highlights a journey from summative-centric perceptions to a more nuanced and mature appreciation of formative approaches. This transformation links directly to their preferences and experiences, with the affordances of formative assessments (such as feedback and skill development) emerging as critical catalysts. Simultaneously, the limitations of summative assessments in fostering engagement point to a need for balance. Together, these findings suggest that assessment practices cannot be viewed in isolation; they are shaped by and contribute to a dynamic ecosystem of pedagogical, emotional, contextual and sociocultural factors.

Students' perceptions of assessment are shaped by sociocultural influences, with emotional and psychological factors playing a central role. Assessment is often seen as competitive and high stakes, reinforcing its function as a tool for validating success, identity, and self-worth. Early exposure through entrance assessments introduces students to post-primary exam culture, fostering stress and competition while also contributing to inequalities. As students progress through the Junior Cycle, they encounter challenges adapting to the increased frequency and perceived importance of assessments. Over time, their perspectives evolve through personal and community experiences, with active participation fostering engagement, self-regulated learning, and alignment with broader sociocultural practices.

Students hold varying perspectives on summative and formative assessments, shaped by their role in academic progression, emotional regulation, and engagement. Summative assessments are often favoured for their private nature and function as academic milestones, but students also acknowledge their potential to induce stress and over-preparation. While some value the

clarity and structure they provide, others prefer formative assessments for their interactive, low-pressure approach, which allows participation without public exposure of mistakes. The preference for formative methods reflects a broader shift towards self-regulated learning, where students prioritise ongoing feedback over isolated high-stakes exams. However, concerns remain about the perceived disconnect between CBAs and terminal exams, as well as their scheduling and impact on overall student well-being.

While formative assessments, particularly those involving feedback, play a critical role in fostering confidence, skill development, and motivation, students highlight challenges such as unclear or overly general feedback, which can lead to frustration. Although CBAs support critical thinking, communication, and self-management, students question their alignment with final assessments. Despite these concerns, most students feel their JC assessment experiences have prepared them for future academic challenges, helping them develop resilience, discipline, and an appreciation for hard work. These findings highlight the need for a more coherent alignment between formative and summative assessments to ensure both academic validation and student engagement.

8.3 Implications of the Research

The research, conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), through a qualitative longitudinal mixed-methods design, provides rich insights into students' lived experiences with JC assessment in Ireland. While it is important to acknowledge that IPA's idiographic focus emphasises individual meaning-making rather than generalisation, the findings do reveal broader themes and contextual nuances that have been triangulated with

theoretical and empirical research, as well as with guiding educational policy, thus *contributing to* and *informing* theory, practice, policy, and future research. These implications align with the study's qualitative foundation, offering depth and relevance without compromising the specificity and authenticity of participants' experiences who warrant that implications relative to them should also be considered.

8.3.1 Theoretical Implications: Expanding Understanding through Context

IPA studies are well-positioned to contribute to theoretical discourse by grounding abstract concepts in the lived realities of participants (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021). This research enriches existing theories of assessment, learning, and student engagement by illuminating the myriads of ways students experience and make sense of (JC) assessment practices. The findings highlight the deeply social nature of assessment, consistent with sociocultural frameworks that view learning and evaluation as mediated by cultural norms and interpersonal dynamics (Elwood and Murphy, 2015; Rogoff, 1995). Students' experiences highlight the dual pressures of cultural scripts - such as comparisons among peers and parental expectations - and institutional frameworks that prioritise performance. This provides a compelling example of how sociocultural theory operates in real-world educational contexts, adding depth to existing theoretical constructs.

By foregrounding the emotional toll of high-stakes assessments and the contrasting sense of accomplishment derived from formative practices like those naturally embedded in CBAs (despite their summative purpose), the research highlights an often-underexplored aspect of assessment theory: its impact on identity, motivation, and emotional well-being. The findings challenge traditional dichotomies between summative and formative assessments by showing how both types can intersect in students' lived experiences. This insight invites theoretical

reconsideration of assessment frameworks to better account for the overlapping and fluid nature of evaluative practices (Elwood, 2006).

8.3.2 Practical Implications: Transforming Educational Practice

The students' voices in this study provide actionable insights for educators seeking to design and implement more inclusive and meaningful assessment practices. Although these implications are specific to the JC and Irish context, they likely resonate with broader educational settings and could guide reflective practice. The findings highlight the need for assessments that align with students' developmental needs and learning goals. CBAs, when well-implemented, offer a valuable platform for fostering critical thinking, collaboration, and personal growth (Black and Wiliam, 2018).

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) could develop standardised guidelines and provide further professional development for teachers and school leaders to ensure that CBA interpretation is aligned at school level. These guidelines should include dates of commencement for subject CBAs, timelines, guidelines on feedback, and assessment criteria, with continuous professional development focusing on the research which explicates the merit, self-esteem, and skills development students acquire as a result of completing CBAs.

However, for immediate results, school leaders should simply involve students in the timetabling of CBAs, aiming to spread them out at disparate times throughout the school year. CBAs could also be more explicitly linked to real-world skills and the broader curriculum, with positive messaging being initiated by schools. Teachers should continually highlight how skills developed via participation in CBAs, such as collaboration, communication, and research, apply to other subjects, and future educational contexts, thereby increasing students' perceived value of these assessments.

This study's evidence from students who revealed that they have used parental/guardian help for CBAs, exposes a gap in the autonomy-support balance within these assessments. To address this, schools should provide clear instructions regarding the importance of the individuality of the work to both students and their parents/guardians. However, despite the name CBA explicitly linking these assessments to the classroom, students often find themselves working on their projects at home. It could be argued that this challenges the reliability and trustworthiness of these type of assessment, as it raises concerns about the authenticity of the work submitted, the potential for unequal access to resources, and the varying levels of support students may receive from parents, guardians, online, or from external tutors. Thus, this can complicate the fairness and consistency of the evaluation process. This is particularly relevant as Additional Assessment Components (AACs) are being embedded in all subjects at senior cycle with eminent academics highlighting this as a cause for concern (Hyland, 2024; Swan, 2024). Teacher unions are also calling for teachers to be indemnified from legal action over their students' improper use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the Leaving Certificate (Irish Times, 2025).

The emotional strain associated with summative assessments was a recurring theme. Given the high levels of stress associated with summative assessments, schools should implement further stress-management programs, including workshops on study skills, time management, and coping mechanisms. Teachers can also foster a supportive classroom culture by framing assessments as opportunities for growth rather than judgment. Educators and school guidance counsellors should continue to develop safe spaces where students can discuss their emotions regarding assessment. By normalising these conversations, schools can help students develop resilience and a positive mind-set toward learning and evaluation.

Teachers can also play a pivotal role in alleviating stress through preparatory activities, such as mock exams and reflective exercises, which help students build confidence and resilience.

Feedback is central to fostering growth and reflection (Black and Wiliam, 2018; Hattie, 2023). Schools should ensure that students receive timely, actionable feedback on both formative and summative assessments. Professional development programs can equip teachers with skills to provide feedback that encourages self-improvement and reduces anxiety. Introducing structured peer and self-assessment practices can deepen students' understanding of assessment criteria and encourage reflection. These methods empower students to take ownership of their learning and reduce reliance on external validation. Nationally, perhaps the SEC should consider offering feedback to students (in the form of allowing them access to their exam papers) which might afford them further opportunities to learn from their completed assessments.

Emphasising feedback and framing assessments as tools for growth rather than judgment can also reduce performance pressure. The study highlights the critical role of timely, constructive feedback in fostering reflection and improvement (Black and Wiliam, 2018; Hattie, 2023). Teachers should continue to prioritise feedback mechanisms that guide students in understanding their strengths and areas for development, both within formative and summative contexts. These practical implications not only enhance the immediate educational experience but also equip students with lifelong skills for navigating evaluation and feedback in future endeavours.

8.3.3 Policy Implications: Aligning Assessment Frameworks with Lived Experiences

The study's findings underscore the importance of designing assessment policies that are equitable, student-centred, and responsive to the realities of those most directly affected – the students themselves. By centering the voices of participants, this study and other ongoing

research (McGarr *et al.*, 2022, 2023) provides a strong basis for evidence-based policy adjustments. Students widely appreciated the skill-building opportunities provided by CBAs but expressed frustration with their perceived lack of weight in final grades. However, it is clear that the messaging around CBAs is problematic, as students fail to recognise them as a summative assessment process equal in importance to the exam paper. This highlights the need for clearer communication and more strategic planning within schools, not only to prevent student overload but also to elevate the profile and perceived value of CBAs.

The findings advocate for a more integrated approach to assessment, where formative and summative elements are designed to complement rather than compete with one another aligned with a sociocultural theorisation of assessment (Elwood and Murphy, 2015). Policies should promote a coherent assessment framework that values both developmental learning and accountability. Students' lived experiences offer invaluable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of existing assessment frameworks. Policymakers must actively seek student input in shaping reforms (Elwood and Lundy, 2010), and when conducting post-implementation reviews, recognising them as critical stakeholders with unique expertise (Flynn, 2018) on the realities of assessment practices. These policy implications aim to create an assessment system that is both fair and impactful, prioritising meaningful learning over rigid standardisation.

Students are key stakeholders in the educational process, and their perspectives should inform policy and practice (Flynn, 2018). Schools and policymakers should establish fora where students can provide feedback on assessment experiences, challenges, and potential improvements outside of the traditional Student Council, and which should be framed by the work of Lundy, (2007) and Flynn (2013; 2018). Clear communication about the purpose, expectations, and criteria of assessments can reduce student anxiety and foster trust. Teachers should continue to provide detailed rubrics and explanations to help students understand how their work is evaluated. Parents must be involved in all stages of these processes to ensure that

they understand the mechanisms that schools use to help their children develop academically and personally.

The findings of this study illuminate several avenues for future research, particularly as senior cycle reform is underway and new subject syllabi will launch in September 2025. With that reform comes an Additional Assessment Component (AAC) at Senior Cycle where each subject will have an AAC completed in school worth 40% of the final exam mark. This reform introduces significant shifts in student evaluation, including a greater emphasis on school-based assessment. Understanding how students (and teachers) adapt to these changes will be critical for ensuring a smooth transition and effective policy implementation and research will be needed to review how these assessment modifications are experienced by our SC students.

Another area for future exploration is the longitudinal impact of JC assessment experiences on SC readiness. Research could be undertaken to investigate how the skills, attitudes, and perceptions cultivated during JC influence students' ability to engage with the new subject syllabi and the AAC framework. Specifically, studies could examine whether CBAs, with their focus on skill development and formative feedback, adequately prepare students for the research rigor and demands of the AAC.

Additionally, research could focus on the affordances and constraints presented by school-based assessments under the AAC, as perceived by LC students, with a particular emphasis on their implications for equity and consistency. The JC findings highlighted some disparities in access to resources and support, which could become more pronounced as school-based assessments are enacted with tranche one subjects in September 2025 at SC. Exploring strategies to mitigate these disparities will be crucial to ensuring fairness and inclusivity for all students as they undertake the AAC of their SC subjects.

8.3.4 Methodological Implications: Advancing IPA and educational research

The research design, rooted in IPA, offers methodological insights that can inform future studies on assessment and beyond. Tracking students' experiences across their JC assessment journey allowed me to capture the dynamic nature of their perceptions and adaptations. Future IPA studies could similarly benefit from longitudinal approaches to explore how lived experiences evolve over time in response to changing contexts. The use of sketches, interviews, anonymous questionnaires and participatory focus groups provided rich, multidimensional insights into students' conceptualisations of assessment. These methods demonstrate the value of creative and interactive approaches in eliciting detailed, authentic and rich narratives, particularly when working with younger participants.

While IPA traditionally focuses on small, homogeneous samples, this study illustrates its potential for exploring systemic issues through the lens of individual experiences as a collective. Researchers could further expand IPA's application by integrating it with mixed-methods approaches, such as combining qualitative findings with quantitative measures, for example, of academic outcomes or well-being. These methodological contributions encourage researchers to adopt innovative, participant-centred strategies that honour the complexity of lived experiences. Thus, through the lens of IPA, this research offers a unique exploration of students' lived experiences engaging with JC assessment, revealing the complexity of ways in which they navigate and interpret formative and summative practices.

While the study's idiographic focus emphasises individual meaning-making, the findings resonate with broader themes and triangulate with findings from other recent research (McGarr *et al.*, 2023) that have significant implications for theory, practice, policy, and future research. By centering student voices, the study advocates for an assessment framework that prioritises equity, emotional well-being, and meaningful learning. These implications challenge

educators, policymakers, and researchers to rethink traditional paradigms, embracing a more inclusive and reflective approach to assessment in education. This work not only contributes to the evolving discourse on educational assessment but also underscores the transformative potential of giving voice to those most affected and subsumed by educational practices.

8.3.5 Implications for the Students Involved in this Study

Most importantly, the findings of this study have important implications for the students who participated, affirming their voices as critical contributors to the discourse on assessment practices and empowering them as co-creators of their learning environment. By sharing their experiences, these students highlighted the emotional and cognitive challenges of summative assessments while emphasising the confidence-building potential of formative practices such as CBAs. This research validates their struggles and successes, offering a pathway to reduce anxiety and foster resilience by reframing assessments as opportunities for growth rather than just judgment. Additionally, the study underscores the broader value of assessment in developing life skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and adaptability, helping students appreciate the holistic role of education in preparing them for future challenges. Through their participation, these students not only advanced current understanding of effective assessment practices but they also gained deeper insights into their own learning processes, supporting their educational and personal development.

Finally, the voices of the participating students directly influenced senior management at the school site where this study took place, to introduce a structured CBA timetable, ensuring that future students would not face the challenge of multiple CBAs occurring simultaneously. This proactive change reflected the school's commitment to reducing student stress and enhancing

the manageability of assessments for its learners. I look forward to engaging with the students who participated in the study before the conclusion of this academic year to share and to reflect on the meaningful impact their contributions have made and to update them on where and how their voices have been heard.

8.4 Limitations of the Study

Every research endeavour has its limitations and acknowledging them is an integral part of academic rigor. This study, grounded in IPA and focused on students' experiences of JC assessment in Ireland, is no exception. While the findings offer rich insights into the lived experiences of participants, several limitations inherent to the methodology, scope, and context of the study must be considered.

Sample: Size and Context

IPA emphasises depth over breadth, prioritising detailed exploration of a small number of participants (Oxley, 2016). While this allowed for deep understanding, it also limits the generalisability of the findings. The study's insights are specific to the 19 students involved and may not represent the experiences of all JC students across Ireland. This idiographic focus means the results are best understood as illustrative of particular experiences rather than definitive across diverse populations. However, the timely publication of the McGarr *et al.* (2022, 2023) studies triangulated much of the data, which is encouraging.

The sample was based on voluntary participation rather than targeted recruitment aimed at capturing specific demographic cohorts. The study's participants were drawn from a single-

gender school site with a predominantly homogeneous socio-economic and cultural background. While this provided depth and specificity, it limits the study's ability to address how experiences of assessment might differ for students in co-educational, disadvantaged, or ethnically diverse settings.

Focus on Junior Cycle in the Irish context:

The research is contextually bound to the Irish JC framework, which has unique features such as CBAs. While some insights may resonate with broader discussions on assessment, the findings are not directly transferable to countries with different educational systems or assessment practices.

Impact of COVID-19:

The study spanned a period affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted normal schooling and assessment practices (Lucas, 2021). Adjustments to the JC framework during this time, such as changes in the weighting of CBAs, may have influenced students' perceptions and experiences in ways that might not reflect non-pandemic conditions.

Parental influence and equity:

Parental involvement in CBAs was identified as a finding of this study, but the study did not explicitly account for disparities in access to resources, such as parental education, time, or financial means. These factors likely influenced students' experiences but were not systematically examined.

Focus on experience over outcomes:

The IPA methodology prioritises subjective experiences and meaning-making over measurable outcomes. As a result, the study provides limited insights into actual academic performance or objective effectiveness of the JC assessment framework. The analysis of the findings by cohorts of educational achievement as an outcome, or by wellbeing measures, would certainly offer additional insights.

Exclusion of Other Stakeholders:

The study centres on student voices, which is a strength, but it excludes perspectives from other key stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, or policymakers. These perspectives could provide a more holistic understanding of the JC assessment system.

8.7 Concluding Remarks

At the heart of this research lies a deep commitment to centering students' voices and experiences in the discourse on assessment. This thesis was driven by a fundamental question: what does assessment mean to the students who live it, and how can their perspectives inform a more meaningful, equitable, and impactful approach to education? The journey through the JC assessment framework revealed the profound ways in which students navigate the complex intersections of learning, growth, and identity within an evolving educational landscape.

The findings of this study underscore the critical need to view students as agents of assessment practices - knowing participants whose insights are indispensable. Their lived experiences, articulated with authenticity, honesty and clarity, challenge educators, policymakers, and

researchers to reconsider traditional assessment paradigms and to embrace approaches that prioritise engagement, equity, and holistic development. By amplifying students' voices, this research advocates for assessment systems that value not just performance but the process of learning itself - systems that are responsive to their emotional, cognitive, and social needs.

As we prepare for the introduction of new subjects and syllabi in September 2025, which have an AAC in Senior Cycle, this thesis serves as a timely reminder of the importance of student-centred equitable practice. The lessons learned from students' JC experiences can inform a transition to SC that empowers learners, ensures fairness, and nurtures the diverse skills they require for the future. In placing students at the core of this research, the study contributes to a broader vision of education that fosters resilience, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. The work does not end here. Rather, it lays a foundation for further reflection, adaptation, and advocacy, ensuring that the voices of students remain central to the ongoing evolution of assessment, curriculum and learning.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Letter of Permission request to the School Board



*School of Education,
University College Cork.*

24th August, 2021.

Dear Ms XXX & Mr XXX,

I am currently undertaking a research dissertation in Education as part of my studies through the PhD Cohort in Education at UCC, under the supervision of Dr Alicia Curtin and Dr João Costa. My research is a longitudinal study, broadly concerned with mapping students' assessment experiences at Junior Cycle level.

Therefore, I am writing to you to seek your permission to allow all interested and assenting second year students in XXX to participate in this research. The key points of the study I wish to emphasise are:

- The research is concerned with documenting students' experiences of the disparate types of assessment they participate in throughout their Junior Cycle assessment journey.
- All second year students will be asked to participate in the research project. Student assent and parental consent will be required.
- A student who agrees to participate will be asked to complete three online questionnaires at home; one at the beginning of second year, one towards the end of second year with the final questionnaire being administered in third year. Within the cohort, a group of students (between 15 and 20) will also be asked to participate in a series of forty minute interviews and/or focus groups to be conducted over three years, in November and/or December 2021, April 2022 and February/March 2023.
- Samples of students' assessment work/documents may be viewed and discussed with the students where relevant to the research.
- Assessment records may also be accessed in order to track student progress.
- The duration of the research project is planned to run from September 2021 to November 2023.
- Anonymity and confidentiality of participating students and the school site will be protected at all times.
- Neither the school nor any of the participating students will be identified in the write up of the findings.
- All information gathered will be stored securely and will be used only for the purpose of this project.

It is my view that students may benefit from participating in the study by discussing their experiences of assessment and by sharing their experiences to enhance and deepen their understanding of the new learning processes they are now undertaking at Junior Cycle e.g. Classroom-based Assessments. All information gathered will remain confidential and used only for the purpose of this study. It will be stored safely with access only available to the researcher and the researcher's supervisors.

Students are under no obligation to participate in this study. They have the right to withdraw from participation at any time prior to the completion of the questionnaire without any consequences and they do not need to give a reason for withdrawing participation. Students who volunteer to participate in the interview process may withdraw from the process up to one month after the interview has been completed (without any consequence) and they do not need to give a reason for doing so. They may opt in again at another stage if desired.

The Social Research Ethics Committee (UCC) has granted ethical approval for this research and a Data Protection Impact Assessment has been completed and approved by the relevant compliance officer in UCC. I have enclosed a copy of the Information Sheets, Assent and Consent Forms for students, parent(s)/guardian(s) for your perusal together with the interview schedule for the duration of the research which is expected to run from September 2021 to November 2023.

I would like to thank you for taking time to read this letter. Should you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me regarding same through my UCC email, lchadwick@ucc.ie. If you wish to discuss the study with my Research Supervisors, you may contact Dr Alicia Curtin via e-mail at a.curtin@ucc.ie, or Dr João Costa via email at joao.costa@ucc.ie.

Finally, if you are interested in obtaining a report on the research, please let me know via my e-mail address above and I will forward this information to you once the research is complete.

Should you give your approval for the research, I would be grateful if you would both sign the declaration on the following page.

Is mise le meas,

Lorraine Chadwick

Appendix 2 - Letter of Permission request to the Principal of the School Site



*School of Education,
University College Cork.*

24th August, 2021.

Dear Ms XXX,

I am currently undertaking a research dissertation in Education as part of my studies through the PhD Cohort in Education at UCC, under the supervision of Dr Alicia Curtin and Dr João Costa. My research is a longitudinal study, broadly concerned with mapping students' assessment experiences at Junior Cycle level.

Therefore, I am writing to you to seek your permission to allow all interested and assenting second year students in XXX to participate in this research. The key points of the study I wish to emphasise are:

- The research is concerned with documenting students' experiences of the disparate types of assessment they participate in throughout their Junior Cycle assessment journey.
- All second year students will be asked to participate in the research project. Student assent and parental consent will be required.
- A student who agrees to participate will be asked to complete three online questionnaires at home; one at the beginning of second year, one towards the end of second year with the final questionnaire being administered in third year. Within the cohort, a group of students (between 15 and 20) will also be asked to participate in a series of forty minute interviews and/or focus groups to be conducted in November/December 2021, April 2022 and February/March 2023.
- Samples of students' assessment work/documents may be viewed and discussed with the students if relevant to the research.
- Assessment records may also be accessed in order to track student progress.
- The planned duration of the research project is September 2021 to November 2023.
- Anonymity and confidentiality of participating students and the school site will be protected at all times.
- Neither the school nor any of the participating students will be identified in the write up of the findings.
- All information gathered will be stored securely and will be used only for the purpose of this research.

It is my view that students may benefit from participating in the study by discussing their experiences of assessment and by sharing their experiences to enhance and deepen their understanding of the new learning processes they are now undertaking at Junior Cycle e.g. Classroom-based Assessments. All information gathered will remain confidential and used only for the purpose of this study. It will be stored safely with access only available to the researcher and the researcher's supervisors.

Students are under no obligation to participate in this study. They have the right to withdraw from participation at any time prior to the completion of the questionnaire without any consequences and they do not need to give a reason for withdrawing participation. Students who volunteer to participate in the interview process may withdraw from the process up to one month after the interview has been completed (without any consequence) and they do not need to give a reason for doing so. They may opt in again at another stage if desired.

The Social Research Ethics Committee (UCC) has granted ethical approval for this research and a Data Protection Impact Assessment has been completed and approved by the relevant compliance officer in UCC. I have enclosed a copy of the Information Sheets, Assent and Consent Forms for students, parent(s)/guardian(s) for your perusal together with the interview schedule for the duration of the research which is expected to run from September 2021 to November 2023.

I would like to thank you for taking time to read this letter. Should you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me regarding same through my UCC email, lchadwick@ucc.ie. If you wish to discuss the study with my Research Supervisors, you may contact Dr. Alicia Curtin via e-mail at a.curtin@ucc.ie, or Dr. João Costa via email at joao.costa@ucc.ie.

Finally, if you are interested in obtaining a report on the research, please let me know via my e-mail address above and I will forward this information to you once the research is complete.

Should you give your approval for the research, I would be grateful if you would sign the declaration on the following page.

Is mise le meas,

Lorraine Chadwick

Appendix 3 - Garda Vetting Approval

An Garda Síochána

Bíúró Náisiúnta Grinnfhiosrúcháin,
Bóthar an Ráschúrsa,
Durlas,
Contae Thiobraid Árann,
E41 RD60.

Teileafón / Tel: (0504) 27300
Facs / Fax: (0504) 27373



National Vetting Bureau,
Racecourse Road,
Thurles,
Co. Tipperary,
E41 RD60.

Láitheán Gréasain/Web Site: www.garda.ie

Bí linn/Join us



Luaig an uimhir tagarta B.N.G. a leanas le do thoil /
Please quote the following N.V.B. Ref. No: **UCC002-20201022-00228**

Nochtadh Grinnfhiosrúcháin / Vetting Disclosure

Danielle Byrne
University College Cork Students

Maidir le / Re: Mary Chadwick, Cork

De bhun d'iarratais de réir fhorálacha Alt 13 de na hAchtanna um an mBíúró Náisiúnta Grinnfhiosrúcháin (Leanaí agus Daoine Soghonta), 2012 go 2016 maidir leis an té atá ainmnithe thuas, eisítear an nochtadh grinnfhiosrúcháin leis seo duit de réir fhorálacha Alt 14 de na hAchtanna um an mBíúró Náisiúnta Grinnfhiosrúcháin (Leanaí agus Daoine Soghonta), 2012 go 2016.

Pursuant to your application within the provisions of Section 13 of the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012 to 2016 in respect of the above named, the herewith vetting disclosure is issued to you within the provisions of Section 14 of the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012 to 2016.

Rinneadh cuardaigh ar an / Searches were conducted on the **03/11/2020**.

Taifead Coiriúil / Criminal Record

Nil / Nil

Tabhair faoi deara: Má dhearbhaíonn an té atá ainmnithe thuas go bhfuil an taifead coiriúil seo míchruinn, ba cheart don Teagmhálaí Ainmnithe aghaidh a thabhairt ar an gceist i scríbhinn chuig an mBíúró Náisiúnta Grinnfhiosrúcháin.

Please Note: If the above-named asserts that this criminal record is inaccurate, the Liaison Person should address the matter in writing to the National Vetting Bureau.

Faisnéis Shonraithe / Specified Information

Nil / Nil

Appendix 4 - Ethics Application Form submitted to UCC's SREC

APPLICANT(S) DETAILS

Name of UCC applicant(s)	Mary Lorraine Chadwick	Date	18 th February 2021
Name of Department / School / Research Institute / Centre / Unit / College	School of Education, UCC	Contact No.	087/7928108
Correspondence Address	33 Parkview, Passage West, Co. Cork	Email Address	lochadwick@ucc.ie
Course Code/Name and year of course (students only)	Cohort PhD in Education, Year II	Name of supervisor(s) (students only)	Dr. Alicia Curtin Dr. Joao Costa
Is this a resubmission?	No	SREC Log No. (if a resubmission):	2021-029
<i>Obtaining ethical approval from SREC does not free you from securing permissions and approvals from other institutional decision-makers and agency ethical review bodies. These bodies may accept the SREC approval, but researchers are responsible for ensuring they are compliant in advance of collecting data.</i>			

Project working title	A longitudinal study of Junior Cycle students' assessment experiences
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Appendix 5 - Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) application



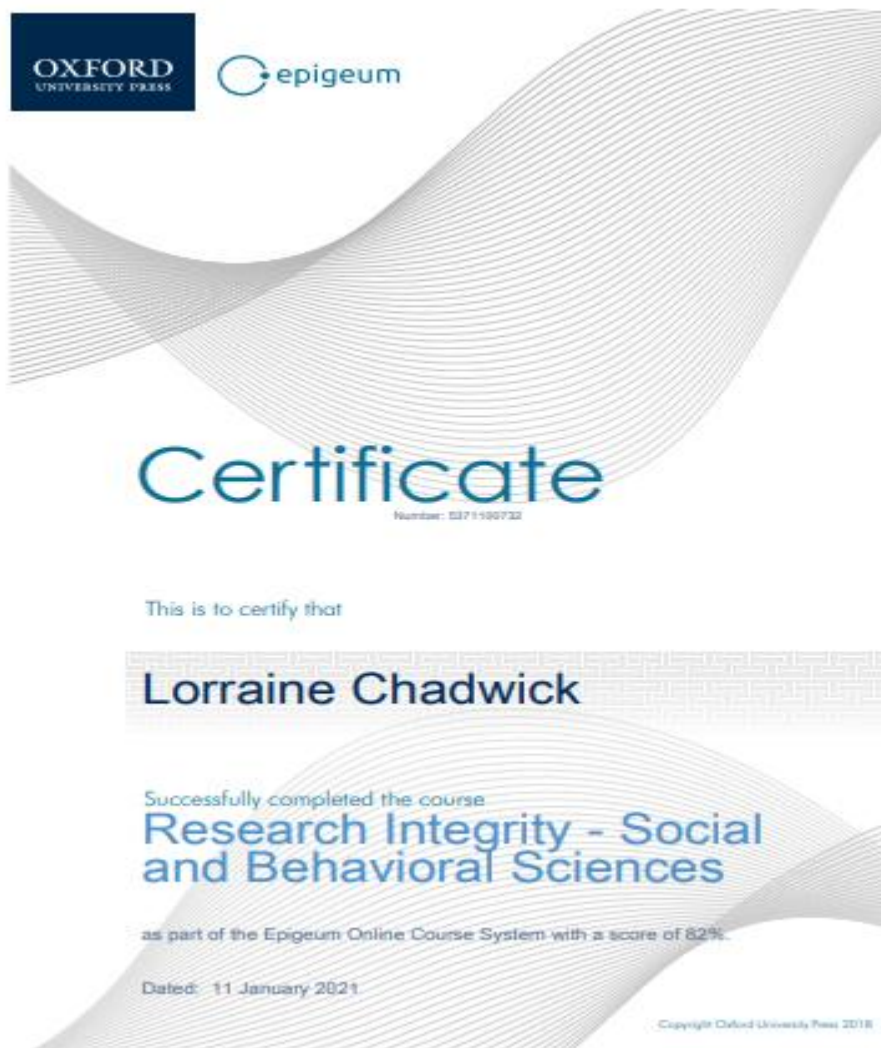
University College Cork National University of Ireland, Cork

Data Protection Impact Assessment

Version 0.4

Step 1a: DPIA Screening Checklist		
Does your project involve:	Yes	No
Evaluation or scoring of personal data (including profiling and predicting)		X
Automated decision-making with legal or similar significant effects		X
Systematic monitoring including through a publicly accessible place on a large scale		X
Sensitive data or data of a highly personal nature (including special categories of data and criminal data)		X
Data processed on a large scale		X
Matching or combining data sets		X
Data concerning vulnerable people (including children)	X	
Innovative use or applying technological or organisational solutions		X
Processing preventing data subjects from exercising a right or using a service or contract		X
If you have answered yes to any of the above questions, you must carry out a DPIA. Please see the DPIA Procedure for further information.		

Appendix 6 - Oxford University – Epigeum Certificate for Research Integrity



Certificate

Number: 0371100732

This is to certify that

Lorraine Chadwick

Successfully completed the course

**Research Integrity - Social
and Behavioral Sciences**

as part of the Epigeum Online Course System with a score of 82%.

Dated: 11 January 2021

Copyright Oxford University Press 2018

Appendix 7 - SREC Approval (17.05.21)

From: Ethics Committee, Social Research <srec@ucc.ie>

Sent: Monday, May 17, 2021 9:01 AM

To: Chadwick, Lorraine <lchadwick@ucc.ie>

Subject: Log 2021-029 Approved

Dear Lorraine

The Social Research and Ethics Committee has now approved your application Log 2021-029 entitled "A longitudinal study of Junior Cycle students' assessment experiences."

The committee wishes you every success with your research.

All the best

Liz

Appendix 8 - DPIA Approval (29.06.21)

<u>Step 7: Document DPIA Outcomes</u>		
Item	Name/date	Notes
DPO advice provided:	Catriona O'Sullivan, Information Compliance Manager & DPO	DPO should advise on compliance, step 6 measures and whether processing can proceed
Summary of DPO advice: By emails with my office and a meeting with Lorraine Chadwick in June 2021, my office sought clarifications as to the personal data collected for this project and in particular the controls in place in relation to the data relating to children. I am satisfied with the responses my office received, that no special category data is being collected as part of this project and the data collected in respect of children is limited to the recordings which will be transcribed by the researcher and pseudonymized thereafter. These clarifications and controls identified have been incorporated into the DPIA. The measures identified in this DPIA are appropriate to the study and the risks as set out and will achieve the objective, whilst at the same time minimising the amount of data to be collected. I am satisfied that the residual risks identified for this project are LOW. Lorraine Chadwick should notify UCC SREC and DPO if there are any planned changes to the way the data is to be processed or planned changes to any of the mitigation of risks as set out in this DPIA. Please notify UCC SREC and DPO if an event occurs that is likely to result in a breach of data. Catriona O'Sullivan Information Compliance Manager & DPO 29 June 2021		

Appendix 9 – Parent/Guardian Information Letter

Research Invitation **Information Sheet for Parent(s)/Guardian(s)**

30th August, 2021.

Current Title of Dissertation:

A longitudinal study of Junior Cycle students' assessment experiences

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

I am currently undertaking a research dissertation in Education as part of my studies in relation to the PhD Cohort in Education at UCC, under the supervision of Dr Alicia Curtin and Dr João Costa. My research is broadly concerned with mapping students' assessment experiences at Junior Cycle level.

The purpose of my research is to investigate the disparate assessment experiences of students in the Junior Cycle Classroom by addressing a broad ranges of research questions such as:-

- Having just completed first year, what do our second year students understand the term 'assessment' to mean and does that understanding shift as they move through their first three years of post-primary schooling?
- What are second year students' experiences of assessment and do these experiences alter as they move through their Junior Cycle assessment journey?
- Do students place more 'value' on summative or formative assessment? Why?
- What skills, values, knowledge and understanding do students acquire or develop specifically as a result of classroom-based assessments undertaken in second and third year?
- What are the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as perceived and enacted by students at Junior Cycle level?
- What do students learn as a result of completing assessments?

The focus of this research will be to give voice to students' perceptions of and attitudes towards Assessment as they move along the learning continuum of Junior Cycle and to map any changes in their experiences along that pathway. The study will also examine the role of classroom-based assessments in creating more independent learning opportunities within our classrooms and in the shaping of critical thinkers our knowledge-based economy will need in the future. While acknowledging the capacity of the inquiry, project, problem and design-based learning approaches that are already evident in the teaching of all subjects at Junior Cycle, which are intended to advance participation and student engagement, this study will further explore the extent to which students perceive the classroom-based assessment process builds on these foundations to promote gains in

their confidence, wellbeing, learning, independent inquiry and critical thinking through the use of rubrics, success criteria and features of quality.

I plan to use the findings of this study as a platform to inform my own personal development and to continue my personal growth as a professional teacher but predominately to deepen my understanding of the needs of my students and to more fully understand their perceptions and experiences of assessment at Junior Cycle level.

I would like to invite your daughter(s) to participate in the research. Participating in this research will potentially involve:

- Completing three online questionnaires; two in second year and one in third year
- Participation in a forty minute interview and/or focus group in second and third year

The planned research schedule for questionnaires and interviews is outlined below, but may be subject to change as the research evolves:-

Schedule	Dates
Initial Online Questionnaire Second Year	September 2021
Initial Interview/Focus Group Second Year (40 mins)	November/December 2021
Further Online Questionnaire Second Year	April 2022
Further Interview/Focus Group Second Year (40 mins)	April 2022
Final Online Questionnaire Third Year	February & November 2023
Final Interview/Focus Group Third Year	April 2023

The research will be conducted between September 2021 and November 2023. The online questionnaire/s should take approximately 15 minutes to complete and is entirely anonymous. The interviews and/or focus groups will be no longer than forty minutes (specific times and dates are to be decided later) and pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants to ensure confidentiality. Samples of students' assessment work/documents may be viewed and discussed with the students where relevant to the research and students' assessment records may also be accessed in order to track student progress. All information gathered will remain strictly confidential and used only for the purpose of this study and all data will be stored safely with access only available to myself as the researcher and to my supervisors. The anonymised data will become publicly available when the research is published. The Social Research Ethics Committee (UCC) has granted ethical approval for this research and a Data Protection Impact Assessment has been completed and approved by the relevant compliance officer in UCC.

Your daughter is under no obligation to participate in this study. She has the right to withdraw from participation at any time prior to completing the online questionnaire and within one month of participating in the interview, without any consequences, and she does not need to give a reason for withdrawing participation. She may opt in again at another stage if desired. Should you have any questions about the research please contact me at XXX on XXX or by email at Ichadwick@ucc.ie. If you wish to contact either of my Research Supervisors, you should do so via e-mail at a.curtin@ucc.ie or joao.costa@ucc.ie.

Please indicate that you give your daughter consent to participate by completing and returning the enclosed consent form by Friday 10th September 2021. Your daughter should also sign the enclosed assent form indicating her willingness to participate in this study. Completed forms may be handed directly to me in school or may be submitted via email to ichadwick@ucc.ie.

If you are interested in obtaining a report on the research, please contact me via e-mail at ichadwick@ucc.ie and I will forward the information to you once the study is complete.

Yours faithfully,

Lorraine Chadwick

Appendix 10 – Student Information Letter

*School of Education,
University College Cork*

Research Invitation **Information Sheet for Students**

30th August, 2021.

Current Title of Dissertation:

A longitudinal study of Junior Cycle students' assessment experiences

Dear Student,

I am currently undertaking a research dissertation in Education as part of my studies in relation to the PhD Cohort in Education at UCC, under the supervision of Dr Alicia Curtin and Dr João Costa. My research will investigate students' assessment experiences at Junior Cycle.



Why am I doing this research?

The purpose of my research is to investigate the different assessment experiences of students in the Junior Cycle classroom by asking you some questions. Some of these questions are listed for you below:-

- Having just completed first year, what do you understand the term 'assessment' to mean?
- What are your experiences of assessment in XXX so far?
- Do you place more importance on assessments that tell you what grade you got or on the assessments that show you how you could improve your work the next time? Why?
- What skills, values, knowledge and understanding do/might you develop as a result of classroom-based assessments that you participate in during second and third year?
- In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of the different types of assessment you experience at Junior Cycle?
- What do you learn as a result of completing assessments?

What will I do with the information I collect?

I plan to use the findings of this study to deepen my understanding of the needs of my students and to more fully understand your experiences of assessment at Junior Cycle level.

How do you get involved?

I would like to invite you to participate in the research. Participating in this research will involve:

- Completing an online questionnaire in third year
- Participation in a forty minute interview and/or focus group in second and third year

Planned Research Schedule

Schedule	Dates
Initial Online Questionnaire Second Year	September 2021
Initial Interview/Focus Group Second Year (40 mins)	November/December 2021
Further Online Questionnaire Second Year	April 2022
Further Interview/Focus Group Second Year (40 mins)	April 2022
Final Online Questionnaire Third Year	February & November 2023
Final Interview/Focus Group Third Year	April 2023

**More information about the questionnaire and interview/focus group!**

The questionnaires can be completed at home and are totally anonymous. The interviews and/or focus groups will be conducted in school between December 2021 and November 2023 and will be also be completely confidential and the data collected from you used only for the purpose of this study. You might also like to share some assessment documents (during the interviews/focus groups) with me to help me to understand what your opinions are about different types of assessments. All the information I gather will be stored safely with access only available to me as the researcher and to my supervisors. The data will become publicly available when the research is published but remember, it will still be completely anonymous! You might benefit from participating by sharing your experiences of different assessments and how they might be changed or improved for other students in the future.

Remember ...

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You have the right to withdraw from participation at any time without any consequences and you do not need to give a reason for withdrawing. You may opt in again at another stage if you want to. If you would like to read the more detailed information sheet given to your parent(s)/guardian(s), please do so!

And finally ...

I would be grateful if you would indicate your willingness to participate in this research by completing and returning the enclosed assent form by Friday 10th September 2021. Completed forms may be handed directly to me in school or may be submitted via email at ichadwick@ucc.ie. Your parents completed consent form should also be returned to me at this time.

Yours faithfully,



Lorraine Chadwick

Appendix 11 – Parent/Guardian Consent Form

*School of Education,
University College Cork*

Consent Form (Parent(s)/Guardian(s))

Name of Researcher: Lorraine Chadwick

Declaration: I _____ (parent(s)/guardian(s) name in block capitals) confirm the following:-

Please note that you can give permission for your daughter to participate in the online questionnaire only by circling 'Yes' as the answer to questions 1 – 7 and no to the remaining questions. However, if you are happy for your daughter to participate fully in the research, all questions 1 – 10 should have the 'Yes' answer circled.

Please circle as appropriate:-

1. I have read the information letter and understand what the research is about and what it involves.
[YES] [NO]
2. I understand that participation is voluntary and that participants have the right to withdraw in writing at any time, without giving any reason, and without consequences.
[YES] [NO]
3. I understand that all data collected will be confidential and anonymised.
[YES] [NO]
4. I give my daughter permission to complete the anonymous online questionnaire/s
[YES] [NO]
5. I understand that only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the raw data generated but that once the research is published the data will be more widely accessible, though still ~~anonymised~~.
[YES] [NO]

6. I understand that my daughter(s) must also sign an assent form to indicate her consent to participate in this study.

[YES] [NO]

7. I agree that the data collected (questionnaire data and interview transcripts etc.) will be stored securely, for a period of 10 years after the completion of this study and then destroyed. I understand that the thesis published containing the anonymised data will remain in the public domain.

[YES] [NO]

8. I give my daughter permission to take part in the three scheduled focus groups/ interviews regarding assessments which will be held in the school (these will adhere to up to date public health and Covid19 guidelines) in second year and third year. I understand that these sessions will be of a forty minute duration.

[YES] [NO]

9. I understand that the research interviews/focus group discussions will be audio recorded and transcribed and that pseudonyms will be assigned to participating students to ensure their anonymity. I also understand that the digital recordings will be destroyed once the transcription process has been completed by the researcher.

[YES] [NO]

10. I agree that Lorraine Chadwick may access my daughter's anonymised assessment data, records and documents for the purposes of this study only. This data will be treated confidentially at all times.

[YES] [NO]

I agree for my daughter _____ (name in block capitals) to participate in this research.

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix 12 – Student Assent Form

Adolescent Assent Form

Name of Researcher: Lorraine Chadwick

Declaration: I _____ (student's name in block capitals) confirm the following:-

Please note that you can give your permission to participate in the online questionnaire only by circling 'Yes' as the answer to questions 1 – 7 and no to the remaining questions. However, if you are happy to participate fully in the research, all questions 1 – 11 should have the 'Yes' answer circled.

Please circle as appropriate:

1. As a participant in this study, I confirm that I have read through the student information letter, I understand its contents and I have had time to consider whether or not I want to participate in this study.
[YES] [NO]
2. I was provided with contact details for the researcher of this study and was encouraged to ask any questions I may have.
[YES] [NO]
3. I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary.
[YES] [NO]
4. I understand that I may stop participating in this study at any time by letting Lorraine Chadwick know either verbally or in writing and re-join at another stage if I want to.
[YES] [NO]
5. I understand that I am being asked to complete an online (anonymous) questionnaire, and I consent to completing this questionnaire.
[YES] [NO]

6. I agree that the data collected (questionnaire data and interview transcripts etc.) will be stored securely, for a period of 10 years after the completion of this study and subsequently destroyed. I understand that the thesis (published research) containing the anonymised data will remain in the public domain.

[YES] [NO]

7. I understand that the online questionnaires are completely anonymous and that I will be assigned a pseudonym (fake name) should I agree to participate in the interview/focus group process to ensure my anonymity at all times.

[YES] [NO]

8. I understand that I am being asked to agree to take part in the three focus group interviews which will be held twice in second year and one interview in third year which will be held in the school for a period of 40 minutes. I agree to take part in these interviews.

[YES] [NO]

9. I understand that all interviews will be recorded using a digital device by the researcher, that she will transcribe the recordings personally using assigned pseudonyms (fake names) and destroy the recordings as soon as the transcription process is complete.

[YES] [NO]

10. I understand that the focus group discussions are to remain confidential and I agree that I should not discuss the opinions and viewpoints of others outside of the interview space.

[YES] [NO]

11. I agree that Lorraine Chadwick may access my assessment data, records and documents for the purposes of this study only and that this data will be anonymised and treated confidentially at all times.

[YES] [NO]

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix 13 – Initial Focus Group Semi-Structured Question Schedule

Semi-structured Interview Framework (40 minute session)

2nd Year Students

Focus – Assessment Experiences prior to starting Post-Primary School and in First Year of Post-Primary School

RQ 1	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
What do first year students understand the term ‘assessment’ to mean and how does that understanding shift as they move through their first three years of post-primary schooling? Note - Focus on the students’ understanding of assessment for this focus group, mapping any potential shift in understanding will be addressed at the	Assessment Acuity	General Acuity/Understanding of Assessment Specific Acuity/Understanding of Assessment	Using the paper and colouring pencils provided, draw a picture/pictures or diagram/diagrams which would help me to understand your visual representation of the word assessment i.e. draw me a picture of what assessment looks like. How would you define/explain the word assessment, without using the word assessment? Think about Junior Cycle, what are the different types of <u>graded</u> assessment that you expect to complete? Explain the term graded, if required, at this point.	Compare/contrast/link to seminal definitions of assessment by theorists such as:- Ball (1994), (2012), (2018), (2021), William (2000), (2006, (2011) Black and William (1998) Anchor within the sociocultural framework and the research of Wenger (1999), (2002), Elwood (2015) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) JC Framework (2015) NCCA Subject Specifications at www.nca.ie www.curriculumonline.ie

end of second year.				
RQ 5	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
How do students' assessment experiences evolve throughout their Junior Cycle and in what ways to these experiences contribute to their growth, development and learning? Note - Focus on experiences of assessment for this focus group, mapping any potential shift in attitude can be addressed at the end of second year.	Assessment Experiences	Detailed understanding of the students' experiences of their entrance assessment undertaken in January 2020. Specific understanding of the different assessment methodologies experienced to date.	I'd like you to think of the first assessment experience you had in XXX, your entrance assessment. Please describe:- • When was the assessment and how did you feel about taking this assessment? • What did you know about the assessment prior to taking the assessment? • What were your expectations for this assessment? • What did you do to help you to achieve your expectations? • Do you feel that you were successful in achieving your expectations in this assessment? • Were there any challenges with regard to this assessment? • If there were, how did you overcome them? Please consider the different types of assessment listed in the handout. I'd like you to put your initials on the top of the page please. Can you please now circle any of the assessment types you've experienced in XXX. If there are others that you've experienced, not	Elwood & Murphy (2015) Barrance & Elwood (2018, a) Barrance & Elwood (2018, b) Barrance (2019) Student Records – Entrance Assessment CAT Scores Student Records – SEN identified pre-assessment test and post-assessment test

			on this list, please list them in the space provided. Which are your most preferred forms of assessment? Why? Which are your least favourite? Why?	
RQ 2	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
What factors shape students' preferences for summative or formative assessment? What are the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as perceived and enacted by students at Junior Cycle and how do these assessments influence their educational experiences?	Assessment attitudes	Cognitive & affective attitudes towards assessment (Explore the beliefs, thoughts and attributes of the students towards assessment together with an evaluation of their emotional reaction or feelings towards assessment.	Read the flash cards I've given you which have a definition of summative and formative assessment. Now, let's consider the following questions:- - Do you like to get a grade only on your assessment tasks? Why? Why not? - Do you like to get feedback only on your assessment tasks? Why? Why not? - Which is more important, summative or formative assessment? Why? - What do the numbers or grades tell you? - What does the feedback tell you? - Is there a difference between how you might feel if you know you will be given either a grade only comment or feedback only comment on an upcoming assessment? - Is there a particular number or grade that you aim for when you are taking an assessment?	Ball (1994), (2012), (2018), (2021) William (2000), (2006, (2011) Black and William (1998) Fullan (1991) Reay (1999), Reay and William (2008) Elwood & Murphy (2015) Barrance & Elwood (2018, a) Barrance & Elwood (2018, b) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Barrance (2019) Adie et al. (2018)

			• What preparation do you undertake to try to ensure that you achieve that number or grade? • How do you feel if you don't achieve that number or grade on an assessment?	
RQ 3	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
What skills, values, knowledge and understanding do students acquire or develop specifically as a result of classroom-based assessments undertaken in second and third year?			Not required for this group, will be needed for the second series of focus groups later in the academic year.	
RQ 4	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
How do students' perceive the correlation between the assessments they complete and their overall	Assessment attitudes & experiences Student voice, fairness, justice, rights and needs	Pedagogical affordances Socio-cultural attitudes and	Thinking about the various assessment types that you've experienced in first year, please answer the following questions:- • Think of a time when you were successful in completing an assessment task – what was the assessment, when was the assessment and describe why	Gibson, Affordance Theory (1966) Sociocultural theorisation of assessment, anchored in the work of:- Wenger (1999), (2002),

learning experiences?		orientations of students	you feel you were successful at that time? • Think of a time when you were not as successful as you would have liked in completing an assessment task – what was the assessment, when was the assessment and describe why you feel you were unsuccessful at that time? • What are the reasons you may have performed better in some assessments? • What are the reasons you may not have performed as well in some assessments?	Elwood (2015) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Fullan (1991) Reay (1999), Reay and William (2008) Elwood & Murphy (2015) Barrance & Elwood (2018, a) Barrance & Elwood (2018, b) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Barrance (2019) Adie et al. (2018)
Other Qs	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
What do students' learn as a result of completing assessments?	Assessment acuity, attitudes and experiences	General understanding as to the purpose of assessment	Again, thinking about the various assessment types that you've experienced in first year, please answer the following questions:- • What have you learned about yourself as a result of completing different assessments?	Consider the work of theorists on assessment and learning and compare/contrast/evaluate the students' responses:- Ball (1994), (2012), (2018), (2021), William (2000),

		Cognitive attitudes Socio-affective attitudes	• What have you learned about assessments as a result of completing different assessments? • What have you learned about learning as a result of completing different assessments? • Are some assessments more important than others or do you think all assessments are important? • Are assessments fair? • What is the purpose of assessment?	(2006, (2011) and Black and William (1998) Refer back to the sociocultural framework and the research of Wenger (1999), (2002), Elwood (2015) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Rooted also in policy - JC Framework (2015) & NCCA Subject Specifications at www.nca.ie and on www.curriculumonline.ie
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Appendix 14 – Second Focus Group Semi-Structured Question Schedule

Semi-structured Interview Framework (40 minute session)

2nd Year Students

Focus – Assessment Experiences in Second Year of Secondary School

RQ 1	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
What do first year students understand the term ‘assessment’ to mean and how does that understanding shift as they move through their first three years of post-primary schooling? Note - Focus on the students’ understanding of assessment including the mapping of any potential shift in understanding from first year.	Assessment Acuity	General Acuity/Understanding of Assessment Specific Acuity/Understanding of Assessment	Define the word assessment for me please. Think about Junior Cycle, what are the different types of <u>graded</u> assessment that you expect to complete? Explain the term graded, if required, at this point.	Compare/contrast/link to seminal definitions of assessment by theorists such as:- Ball (1994), (2012), (2018), (2021), William (2000), (2006, (2011) Black and William (1998) Anchor within the sociocultural framework and the research of Wenger (1999), (2002), Elwood (2015) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) JC Framework (2015) NCCA Subject Specifications at www.nca.ie www.curriculumonline.ie

RQ 5	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
How do students' assessment experiences evolve throughout their Junior Cycle and in what ways to these experiences contribute to their growth, development and learning? Note - Focus on experiences of assessment for this focus group, together with mapping any potential shift in attitude which may have occurred from first year.	Assessment Experiences	Detailed understanding of the students' experiences assessment in second year. Specific understanding of the different assessment methodologies experienced to date.	I'd like you to think of the assessment experiences you have had in XXX with particular emphasis on house examination at Christmas and/or Summer • When was the assessment and how did you feel about taking this assessment? • What did you know about the assessment prior to taking the assessment? • What were your expectations for this assessment? • What did you do to help you to achieve your expectations? • Do you feel that you were successful in achieving your expectations in this assessment? • Were there any challenges with regard to this assessment? • If there were, how did you overcome them? Please consider the different types of assessment listed in the handout. I'd like you to put your initials on the top of the page please. Can you please now circle any of the assessment types you've experienced in XXX. If there are others that you've experienced, not on this list, please list them in the space provided.	Elwood & Murphy (2015) Barrance & Elwood (2018, a) Barrance & Elwood (2018, b) Barrance (2019) Student Records – Entrance Assessment CAT Scores Student Records – SEN identified pre-assessment test and post-assessment test

			Which are your most preferred forms of assessment? Why? Which are your least favourite? Why?	
RQ 2	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
What factors shape students' preferences for summative or formative assessment? What are the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as perceived and enacted by students at Junior Cycle and how do these assessments influence their educational experiences?	Assessment attitudes	Cognitive & affective attitudes towards assessment (Explore the beliefs, thoughts and attributes of the students towards assessment together with an evaluation of their emotional reaction or feelings towards assessment.	Let's consider the following questions:- - Do you like to get a grade only on your assessment tasks? Why? Why not? - Do you like to get feedback only on your assessment tasks? Why? Why not? - Which is more important, summative or formative assessment? Why? - What do the numbers or grades tell you? - What does the feedback tell you? - Is there a difference between how you might feel if you know you will be given either a grade only comment or feedback only comment on an upcoming assessment? - Is there a particular number or grade that you aim for when you are taking an assessment? - What preparation do you undertake to try to ensure that you achieve that number or grade? - How do you feel if you don't achieve that number or grade on an assessment?	Ball (1994), (2012), (2018), (2021) William (2000), (2006, (2011) Black and William (1998) Fullan (1991) Reay (1999), Reay and William (2008) Elwood & Murphy (2015) Barrance & Elwood (2018, a) Barrance & Elwood (2018, b) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Barrance (2019) Adie et al. (2018)

RQ 3	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
What skills, values, knowledge and understanding do students acquire or develop specifically as a result of classroom-based assessments undertaken in second and third year?	Assessment attitudes & experiences Building on knowledge, values, skills and understanding per the JC Framework	Cognitive & affective attitudes towards assessment (Explore the beliefs, thoughts and attributes of the students towards assessment together with an evaluation of their emotional reaction or feelings towards classroom based assessment.	1. How many CBA 1s have you completed this academic year? 2. Are you still completing CBAs at the moment? 3. How are CBAs graded? 4. Describe the feedback you've received from teachers with regard to CBAs where SLARs have been conducted. 5. Could you describe any key skills you feel that you have developed as a result of your participation in CBA1 across your subjects. 6. Were the CBAs a positive learning and assessment experience? 7. Are there any key learning moments that you experienced while participating in the CBAs this year? Describe them to me please. 8. Did completing CBA1s help your confidence? 9. Did they boost your wellbeing? 10. What are the affordances of the CBAs 11. Are there any constraints? 12. Could the CBAs be improved in any way?	Ball (1994), (2012), (2018), (2021) William (2000), (2006, (2011) Black and William (1998) Fullan (1991) Reay (1999), Reay and William (2008) Elwood & Murphy (2015) Barrance & Elwood (2018, a) Barrance & Elwood (2018, b) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Barrance (2019) Adie et al. (2018) Rooted also in policy - JC Framework (2015) & NCCA Subject Specifications at www.nca.ie and on www.curriculumonline.ie

RQ 4	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
How do students' perceive the correlation between the assessments they complete and their overall learning experiences?	Assessment attitudes & experiences Student voice, fairness, justice, rights and needs	Pedagogical affordances Socio-cultural attitudes and orientations of students	Thinking about the various assessment types that you've experienced in first year, please answer the following questions:- • Think of a time when you were successful in completing an assessment task – what was the assessment, when was the assessment and describe why you feel you were successful at that time? • Think of a time when you were not as successful as you would have liked in completing an assessment task – what was the assessment, when was the assessment and describe why you feel you were unsuccessful at that time? • What are the reasons you may have performed better in some assessments? • What are the reasons you may not have performed as well in some assessments?	Gibson, Affordance Theory (1966) Sociocultural theorisation of assessment, anchored in the work of:- Wenger (1999), (2002), Elwood (2015) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Fullan (1991) Reay (1999), Reay and William (2008) Elwood & Murphy (2015) Barrance & Elwood (2018, a) Barrance & Elwood (2018, b) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Barrance (2019) Adie et al. (2018)

Other ...	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
What do students' learn as a result of completing assessments?	Assessment acuity, attitudes and experiences	General understanding as to the purpose of assessment Cognitive attitudes Socio-affective attitudes	Again, thinking about the various assessment types that you've experienced in first year, please answer the following questions:- • What have you learned about yourself as a result of completing different assessments? • What have you learned about assessments as a result of completing different assessments? • What have you learned about learning as a result of completing different assessments? • Are some assessments more important than others or do you think all assessments are important? • Are assessments fair? • What is the purpose of assessment?	Consider the work of theorists on assessment and learning and compare/contrast/evaluate the students' responses:- Ball (1994), (2012), (2018), (2021), William (2000), (2006, (2011) and Black and William (1998) Refer back to the sociocultural framework and the research of Wenger (1999), (2002), Elwood (2015) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Rooted also in policy - JC Framework (2015) & NCCA Subject Specifications at www.nca.ie and on www.curriculumonline.ie

Appendix 15 – Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire for 3rd Years

Semi-structured Interview Framework (40 minute session)

3rd Year Students

Focus – Assessment Experiences in Third Year of Secondary School &

Reflection of Assessment over 3 years in Junior Cycle

RQ 1	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
What do first year students understand the term ‘assessment’ to mean and how does that understanding shift as they move through their first three years of post-primary schooling? Note - Focus on the students’ understanding of assessment including the mapping of any potential shift in understanding from first year.	Assessment Acuity	General Acuity/Understanding of Assessment Specific Acuity/Understanding of Assessment	Define the word assessment for me please. Think about Junior Cycle, what are the different types of <u>graded</u> assessment that you have completed? Explain the term graded, if required, at this point.	Compare/contrast/link to seminal definitions of assessment by theorists such as:- Ball (1994), (2012), (2018), (2021), William (2000), (2006, (2011) Black and William (1998) Anchor within the sociocultural framework and the research of Wenger (1999), (2002), Elwood (2015) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) JC Framework (2015) NCCA Subject Specifications at www.nca.ie www.curriculumonline.ie

RQ 5	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
How do students' assessment experiences evolve throughout their Junior Cycle and in what ways to these experiences contribute to their growth, development and learning? Note - Focus on experiences of assessment for this individual together with mapping any potential shift in attitude which may have occurred from first year.	Assessment Experiences	Detailed understanding of the students' experiences assessment in third year. Specific understanding of the different assessment	I'd like you to think of the assessment experiences you have had in XXX with particular emphasis on house examination at Christmas and your Pre Exams. • When was the assessment and how did you feel about taking this assessment? • What did you know about the assessment prior to taking the assessment? • What were your expectations for this assessment? • What did you do to help you to achieve your expectations? • Do you feel that you were successful in achieving your expectations in this assessment? • Were there any challenges with regard to this assessment? • If there were, how did you overcome them? Please consider the different types of assessment listed in the handout. I'd like you to put your initials on the top of the page please. Can you please now circle any of the	Elwood & Murphy (2015) Barrance & Elwood (2018, a) Barrance & Elwood (2018, b) Barrance (2019) Student Records – Entrance Assessment CAT Scores Student Records – SEN identified pre-assessment test and post-assessment test

		methodologies experienced to date.	assessment types you've experienced in XXX. If there are others that you've experienced, not on this list, please list them in the space provided. Which are your most preferred forms of assessment? Why? Which are your least favourite? Why?	
RQ 2	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
What factors shape students' preferences for summative or formative assessment? What are the affordances and constraints of summative and formative assessments as perceived and enacted by students at Junior Cycle and how do these assessments influence their	Assessment attitudes	Cognitive & affective attitudes towards assessment (Explore the beliefs, thoughts and attributes of the students towards assessment together with an evaluation of their emotional reaction or feelings towards assessment.	Let's consider the following questions:- - Do you like to get a grade only on your assessment tasks? Why? Why not? - Do you like to get feedback only on your assessment tasks? Why? Why not? - Which is more important, summative or formative assessment? Why? - What do the numbers or grades tell you? - What does the feedback tell you? - Is there a difference between how you might feel if you know you will be given either a grade only comment or feedback only comment on an upcoming assessment? - Is there a particular number or grade that you aim for when you are taking an assessment?	Ball (1994), (2012), (2018), (2021) William (2000), (2006, (2011) Black and William (1998) Fullan (1991) Reay (1999), Reay and William (2008) Elwood & Murphy (2015) Barrance & Elwood (2018, a) Barrance & Elwood (2018, b) Pryor & Crossouard (2018)

educational experiences?			• What preparation do you undertake to try to ensure that you achieve that number or grade? • How do you feel if you don't achieve that number or grade on an assessment?	Barrance (2019) Adie et al. (2018)
RQ 3	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
What skills, values, knowledge and understanding do students acquire or develop specifically as a result of classroom-based assessments undertaken in second and third year?	Assessment attitudes & experiences Building on knowledge, values, skills and understanding per the JC Framework	Cognitive & affective attitudes towards assessment (Explore the beliefs, thoughts and attributes of the students towards assessment together with an evaluation of their emotional reaction or feelings towards classroom based assessment.	13. How many CBA 2s have you completed this academic year? 14. Are you still completing CBAs at the moment? 15. How are CBAs graded? 16. Describe the feedback you've received from teachers with regard to CBAs where SLARs have been conducted. 17. Could you describe any key skills you feel that you have developed as a result of your participation in CBA2 across your subjects. 18. Were the CBAs a positive learning and assessment experience? 19. Are there any key learning moments that you experienced while participating in the CBAs this year? Describe them to me please. 20. Did completing CBA2s help your confidence? 21. Did they boost your wellbeing? 22. What are the affordances of the CBAs 23. Are there any constraints?	Ball (1994), (2012), (2018), (2021) William (2000), (2006, (2011) Black and William (1998) Fullan (1991) Reay (1999), Reay and William (2008) Elwood & Murphy (2015) Barrance & Elwood (2018, a) Barrance & Elwood (2018, b) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Barrance (2019) Adie et al. (2018)

			24. Could the CBAs be improved in any way?	Rooted also in policy - JC Framework (2015) & NCCA Subject Specifications at www.nca.ie and on www.curriculumonline.ie
RQ 4	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
How do students' perceive the correlation between the assessments they complete and their overall learning experiences?	Assessment attitudes & experiences Student voice, fairness, justice, rights and needs	Pedagogical affordances Socio-cultural attitudes and orientations of students	Thinking about the various assessment types that you've experienced since first year, please answer the following questions:- • Think of a time when you were successful in completing an assessment task – what was the assessment, when was the assessment and describe why you feel you were successful at that time? • Think of a time when you were not as successful as you would have liked in completing an assessment task – what was the assessment, when was the assessment and describe why you feel you were unsuccessful at that time? • What are the reasons you may have performed better in some assessments? • What are the reasons you may not have performed as well in some assessments?	Gibson, Affordance Theory (1966) Sociocultural theorisation of assessment, anchored in the work of:- Wenger (1999), (2002), Elwood (2015) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Fullan (1991) Reay (1999), Reay and William (2008) Elwood & Murphy (2015) Barrance & Elwood (2018, a) Barrance & Elwood (2018, b)

				Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Barrance (2019) Adie et al. (2018)
Other ...	Concept/s	Indicators	Questions or Previously Validated Tools	Relevant References
What do students' learn as a result of completing assessments?	Assessment acuity, attitudes and experiences	General understanding as to the purpose of assessment Cognitive attitudes Socio-affective attitudes	Again, thinking about the various assessment types that you've experienced in first year, please answer the following questions:- • What have you learned about yourself as a result of completing different assessments? • What have you learned about assessments as a result of completing different assessments? • What have you learned about learning as a result of completing different assessments? • Are some assessments more important than others or do you think all assessments are important? • Are assessments fair? • What is the purpose of assessment?	Consider the work of theorists on assessment and learning and compare/contrast/evaluate the students' responses:- Ball (1994), (2012), (2018), (2021), William (2000), (2006, (2011) and Black and William (1998) Refer back to the sociocultural framework and the research of Wenger (1999), (2002), Elwood (2015) Pryor & Crossouard (2018) Rooted also in policy - JC Framework (2015) & NCCA Subject Specifications at www.nca.ie and on www.curriculumonline.ie

Appendix 16 – Anonymous Online Questionnaire (October/November 2023 – 4th Year)

Junior Cycle Assessment Experiences

Online Questionnaire Questions

1. How do you feel about your Junior Cycle exam results overall?
2. Did you meet your expectations for your Junior Cycle results?
3. Please explain your answer to the previous question in more detail.
4. What subjects did you feel you performed best in and why do you think you did well in those subjects?
5. Which subjects presented the most significant assessment challenges and what do you think contributed to those challenges?
6. Did you find the CBAs to be a valuable learning experience?
7. Please explain your answer to the previous question in more detail.
8. What was the most enjoyable subject CBA you worked on during Junior Cycle and why?
9. Did you ever ask a parent or guardian for help with a CBA?
10. Are you aware of a fellow classmate or friend who received help from an adult with their CBA?
11. If you asked for help from a parent or guardian with your CBA, why did you seek their assistance?
12. Please tell me how you feel assessments have impacted your learning and personal growth?
13. In your opinion, does the Junior Cycle adequately measure your knowledge, skills and understanding in the subjects you studied? Why, or why not?
14. Did you feel anxious or stressed during the Junior Cycle assessment period? If you did, what did you do to manage your stress?
15. How do you think the Junior Cycle assessment experiences have prepared you for future educational challenges?

Appendix 17 – Annotations on transcribed narratives (example)

Value of Assessment

Interviewer: So what kinds of things did you learn?

Kappa 1: I learned to stop procrastinating and to do it now and get it over with. And I kind of learned how to teach myself stuff and write my own notes and again pick out the relevant information from the videos you've given and learn how to condense it so that I understand it myself.

Interviewer: Very good. And do you think that when you get an assessment back, like that maybe in an assessment that you might not have done as well as you might have liked, you got your grade and you got some feedback?

Kappa 1: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you know then how you can improve for the next time.

Kappa 1: Yeah.

Interviewer: In which do you prefer to get? Do you prefer to get the grade, the feedback or both?

Kappa 1: I prefer to get the feedback because I feel like if you get a grade and no feedback, that's all you can focus on. But when you get feedback, you can focus on what you need to improve on and not what you did badly, but what you can do better on the next time.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's really important, isn't it? We're learning through the process of assessment, and that's a good thing to kind of pick up on as well, and I think that's really important. Do you think that society places a lot of value on the grade?

Kappa 1: Probably. Like even when you get a test back and all your friends are asking you, like, what you got, what you got. I feel like they don't even want to know. It's just what everyone does. Even when you're like, ... I don't know how to apply for jobs, but I assume you talk about how you did in school or whatever, and yeah, you're kind of focused on the grades and, like, I got this in this test and this and this test, rather than like we did this in class or something, rather than the entire journey, just the one end grade.

Interviewer: And so do you feel even now and you haven't even done the junior cycle exams, but do you feel that pressure now, even coming up to a little bit?

Kappa 1: A little bit, I know, say, my extended family would be asking how the grades are, and if you get a lower grade in an exam than you expect, then it kind of impacts your confidence a little bit.

Interviewer: Yeah. And do you always when you take an exam or an assessment, do you always have a grade in mind or a number in mind that you'd like to get for different?

Kappa 1: Not like a specific one, but I kind of know I'd like to get above this, but I wouldn't have, like, a specific not a specific number.

Handwritten Annotations:

- Value of Assessment* (circled, with arrow pointing to the first question)
- Study skills learned* (circled, with arrow pointing to Kappa 1's first response)
- understanding progress more relevant* (circled, with arrow pointing to Kappa 1's preference for feedback)
- nothing + score* (circled, with arrow pointing to Kappa 1's preference for feedback)
- social pressure* (circled, with arrow pointing to Kappa 1's response about family asking for grades)
- nothing* (circled, with arrow pointing to Kappa 1's response about confidence)
- specific grade* (circled, with arrow pointing to Kappa 1's response about not having a specific number)

Appendix 18 – Initial super-ordinate themes

Initial super-ordinate themes
Students' Conceptualisations of Assessment
The Concept of Assessment differs between students, academics and policy frameworks
The Cultural and Contextual Influences of Assessment
The Cultural and Contextual Affordances of Assessment
Students' initial experiences of assessment at Secondary School
Learner Progression into Junior Cycle
Evolution of Assessment Perspectives over Time
The role of traditional summative assessments on student self-regulation of emotions and academic progress
Role of formative assessment on supporting student learning and enjoyment
Students' divergent perceptions of formative and summative assessment
Positive influences from feedback as formative assessment
Negative influences from feedback as formative assessment
Constructive Alignment between Summative and Formative Assessment
Junior Cycle Key Skills developed via CBA participation
Challenges faced by students participating in CBAs
Relevance of Assessment to Students
Assessment as a mechanism which engages students
Assessment as a mechanism which helps students to develop academically
Personal Development through Assessment
Impact of Assessment on Learning Attitudes
Positive Student-Teacher relationships
Perception of fairness of State Examinations
Preparation for high-stakes assessments

Appendix 19 – Sub-ordinate themes elicited from the super-ordinate themes

Initial Sub-Ordinate Themes
Emotional & Psychological Impact connected to assessment
Students' perceptions of assessment are shaped by sociocultural influences
Assessment is perceived as competitive and high-stakes
Perspectives differ between students, academics and policy frameworks
Policy frameworks tend to focus on technical aspects of assessment
Students focus on the emotional realities of assessment.
Grades are perceived as sociocultural tools that validate success, value, identity and self-worth
Active participation in assessment fosters continuous learning
Assessment as a sociocultural practice supports student engagement & connects them with the tools and resources in their communities
Entrance assessments shape students' early perceptions of assessment in secondary school
Students have to adapt quickly to the frequency and perceived high-stakes nature of secondary school assessment
Student development occurs across personal, interpersonal and community planes
Traditional assessments viewed as private, low-risk academic milestones, with mixed feelings and a possible shift to self-regulated learning
Formative Assessment perceived as low-pressure, interactive, less stressful and enjoyable
There is an underlying tension between student enjoyment of formative assessment and the reality of high-stakes summative testing, which can determine academic progression.
Students held divergent views on summative and formative assessments, with some valuing summative assessments for their role in formal academic progression and others preferring formative assessments for their reduced pressure and regular feedback.
Formative assessment is linked to feedback
Very general feedback has a reduced impact
Summative assessment viewed as a tool for progress tracking and goal setting
Grades as essential indicators of achievement and validation
Grades coupled with feedback as comprehensive tools for improvement.
Key Skills were developed as a result of completing CBAs - Being Literate, Being Numerate, Managing Myself, Communication, Being Creative, Working With Others, Managing Information and Thinking. Staying Well did not feature explicitly.
Scheduling of the CBAs impacting on student wellbeing
Perceived disconnect between CBAs and JC terminal exams
Students value clear, purposeful assessments that align with their academic and personal goals
Summative Assessment and Mock Examinations are valuable preparation tools
Concerns about the perceived value and impact of CBAs on final exam outcomes
Students value experiential and diverse assessment approaches
Students felt that repeated engagement with assessment has helped them over time to become more mature and confident learners
Students understand that assessments can lead to academic growth and improvement

Students can identify areas of academic strength and areas for improvement
Students developed increased resilience and emotional maturity
Students developed academic discipline and have more of an understanding of the value of hard work
Students' enjoyment and interest in a subject/s are key drivers of academic endeavour
Students note the positive impact of student-teacher relationships on their perception of academic success
The majority of students were happy with their JC results
Some students spoke to a perceived lack of academic value and misalignment with high-stakes outcomes.
Students spoke to the skills acquired as a result of completing CBAs but also spoke of the perceived disconnect with the JC terminal exam
Students articulated why they might get external help with CBAs
Students spoke to their overall perceptions of being prepared for the next steps in their educational journey as a result of their JC assessment experiences

Appendix 20 – Master table of super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes

Master Table: Super-Ordinate and Sub-Ordinate Themes

Super-Ordinate Theme	Sub-Ordinate Themes
Students' Conceptualisations of Assessment	There is an emotional and psychological impact connected to assessment. Students' perceptions of assessment are shaped by sociocultural influences. Assessment is perceived as competitive and high stakes.
The Concept of Assessment differs between students, academics and policy frameworks	Perspectives differ between students, academics and policy frameworks - Policy frameworks and research tends to focus on technical aspects of assessment. Students focus on the emotional realities of assessment.
The Cultural and Contextual Influences of Assessment	Grades are perceived as sociocultural tools that validate success, value, identity and self-worth.
The Cultural and Contextual Affordances of Assessment	Active participation in assessment fosters continuous learning. Assessment as a sociocultural practice supports student engagement and connects them with the tools and resources in their communities.
Students' initial experiences of assessment at Secondary School	Entrance assessments shape students' early perceptions of assessment in secondary school.
Learner Progression into Junior Cycle	Students have to adapt quickly to the frequency and perceived high stakes nature of secondary school assessment.
Evolution of Assessment Perspectives over Time	Student development occurs across personal, interpersonal and community planes.
The role of traditional summative assessments on student self-regulation of emotions and academic progress	Traditional summative assessment viewed as private, low-risk academic milestones, with mixed feelings and a possible shift to self-regulated learning.
Role of formative assessment on supporting student learning and enjoyment	Formative assessment seen as low-pressure, interactive, less stressful and enjoyable. There is an underlying tension between student enjoyment of formative assessment and the reality of high-stakes summative testing, which can determine academic progression.

Students' divergent perceptions of formative and summative assessment	Students held divergent views on summative and formative assessments, with some valuing summative assessments for their role in formal academic progression and others preferring formative assessments for their reduced pressure and regular feedback.
Positive influences from feedback as formative assessment	Formative assessments linked to feedback.
Negative influences from feedback as formative assessment	Very general feedback reducing impact.
Constructive Alignment between Summative and Formative Assessment	Summative assessment as a tool for progress tracking and goal setting. Grades as essential indicators of achievement and validation. Grades coupled with feedback as comprehensive tools for improvement.
Junior Cycle Key Skills developed via CBA participation	Being Literate, Being Numerate, Managing Myself, Communication, Being Creative, Working With Others, Managing Information and Thinking. Staying Well did not feature.
Challenges faced by students participating in CBAs	Scheduling of the CBAs impacting on student wellbeing, perceived disconnect between CBAs and JC terminal exams.
Relevance of Assessment to Students	Students value clear, purposeful assessments that align with their academic and personal goals. Summative Assessment and Mock Examinations are valuable preparation tools. Concerns about the perceived value and impact of CBAs on final exam outcomes.
Assessment as a mechanism which engages students	Students value experiential and diverse assessment approaches. Students felt that repeated engagement with assessment has helped them over time to become more mature and confident learners.
Assessment as a mechanism which helps students to develop academically	Students understand that assessments can lead to academic growth and improvement. Students can identify areas of academic strength and areas for improvement.
Personal Development through Assessment	Students developed increased resilience and emotional maturity. Students developed academic discipline and have more of an understanding of the value of hard work.
Impact of Assessment on Learning Attitudes	Students' enjoyment and interest in a subject/s are key drivers of academic endeavour. Students note the positive impact of student-teacher relationships on their perception of academic success.
Perception of fairness of State Examinations	The majority of students were happy with their JC results. Some students spoke to a perceived lack of academic value and misalignment with high-stakes outcomes. Students spoke to the skills acquired as a result of completing CBAs but also spoke of the perceived disconnect with the JC terminal exam. Students articulated why they might get external help with CBAs.
Preparation for high-stakes assessments	Students spoke to their overall perceptions of being prepared for the next steps in their educational journey as a result of their JC assessment experiences.

**A FRAMEWORK
FOR JUNIOR CYCLE**



Statements of Learning

The student	
1	communicates effectively using a variety of means in a range of contexts in L1*
2	listens, speaks, reads and writes in L2* and one other language at a level of proficiency that is appropriate to her or his ability
3	creates, appreciates and critically interprets a wide range of texts
4	creates and presents artistic works and appreciates the process and skills involved
5	has an awareness of personal values and an understanding of the process of moral decision making
6	appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which she/he lives
7	values what it means to be an active citizen, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts
8	values local, national and international heritage, understands the importance of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change
9	understands the origins and impacts of social, economic, and environmental aspects of the world around her/him
10	has the awareness, knowledge, skills, values and motivation to live sustainably
11	takes action to safeguard and promote her/his wellbeing and that of others
12	is a confident and competent participant in physical activity and is motivated to be physically active
13	understands the importance of food and diet in making healthy lifestyle choices
14	makes informed financial decisions and develops good consumer skills
15	recognises the potential uses of mathematical knowledge, skills and understanding in all areas of learning
16	describes, illustrates, interprets, predicts and explains patterns and relationships
17	devises and evaluates strategies for investigating and solving problems using mathematical knowledge, reasoning and skills
18	observes and evaluates empirical events and processes and draws valid deductions and conclusions
19	values the role and contribution of science and technology to society, and their personal, social and global importance
20	uses appropriate technologies in meeting a design challenge
21	applies practical skills as she/he develop models and products using a variety of materials and technologies
22	takes initiative, is innovative and develops entrepreneurial skills
23	brings an idea from conception to realisation
24	uses technology and digital media tools to learn, communicate, work and think collaboratively and creatively in a responsible and ethical manner

*L1 is the language medium of the school (Irish in Irish-medium schools). L2 is the second language (English in Irish-medium schools).