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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Assessment in Primary Education in Ireland

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Thesis presented in fulfilment of the regulations governing the award of the degree of PhD

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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.

Signed:

Student Number: 104 111 451

Date:

ABSTRACT

This doctoral study examines assessment in primary education in the Republic of Ireland. The nature and purpose of assessment offer an insight into the values which are prioritised by an education system. In 2011, in the Republic of Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published a strategy aiming to improve standards of literacy and numeracy. The document, entitled, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life: the national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy for children and young people 2011-2020*, contains improvement targets as measured by standardised tests. It also mandates the increased use of standardised tests in primary education, and directs that aggregated scores should be reported to both Boards of Management and the DES.

The study is framed by the theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. Both of these commentators examine social policy and practice in an effort to provide insight into the history and operation of social institutions. This study is especially influenced by Foucault's archaeology and genealogy of knowledge, and his notion of governmentality. It is also particularly cognisant of Bourdieu's thoughts on habitus, doxa and capital. The study contains reviews of literature in the areas of assessment, assessment policy, and assessment policy in Ireland. These reviews highlight current debate in each of these areas while also grounding this debate in an historical context. The dissertation contains four empirical sections. 1) It analyses policy documents prepared in the development of the published strategy as well as investigating the strategy itself. In so doing it is aware of the burgeoning influence of pan-national bodies on policy development. 2) A number of high profile policy makers were interviewed as part of the study and their views are interpreted in light of the findings of the literature reviews. 3) The perspective of teachers was sought through a questionnaire survey. This gathered data on these teachers' views on the purpose of assessment as well as their actual practice. 4) Finally, children were also included as participants in this study. They were interviewed in focus groups and encouraged to contribute drawings as well on their views of assessment in primary school.

Literacy and numeracy for learning and life is seen as a seminal document in Irish education. This study is significant in its analysis of original data from high profile policy makers, including two Ministers for Education and Skills. It is also significant in its inclusion of the perspectives of primary school pupils. Finally, the study considers the nature and role of assessment in a holistic manner by including the views of policy makers, teachers and pupils. The study notes that policy development in Ireland underwent a change in the preparation of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* and that international influences, while present, are also mediated to suit the local context. It also highlights a lack of clarity in the definition of assessment in primary education and argues that there is a lack of balance in the approaches that are prioritised. The study demonstrates that teachers are impacted by the strategy but that they also change it by focusing on their own concerns while using assessment tools. The children provide compelling evidence of the impact of assessment on the learner. The study shows how assessment tools (and school subjects) are valued with differing levels of importance by a variety of stakeholders.

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I would like to thank all of the participants in this research. These included policy makers, teachers and primary school pupils. I am very grateful for their generosity – both in the time that they took in participating and in the honesty of their responses.

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I am also very appreciative of contribution of the wider staff of the School of Education through the Cohort programme, and, in particular, the advice of my second supervisor, Dr. Vanessa Rutherford. I wish to thank all of my colleagues on the Cohort programme who participated in the doctoral journey with me. Our discussions were extremely influential on the direction taken by my study.

I would like to thank all of my family and friends for their endless patience and support over the past four years, especially my wife, Edel, my parents, Veronica and Tadhg, my brother, Paul, and his family. I would also like to thank all of the pupils, staff and parents of Rochestown Educate Together National School for their encouragement of my doctoral studies since our school opened in 2013.

Finally, this research has received financial support from two bodies. I wish to thank the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) for the award of a research bursary in 2014. I would also like to thank the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences (CACSSS) at UCC for the bursary from the CACSSS Research Postgraduate Travel Fund in 2013.

DEDICATIONS

To my parents, Veronica and Tadhg

For your sacrifices and support

To my wife, Edel

For your patience and love

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 My research journey

Undertaking a doctoral study has been a professional and personal goal of mine for a number of years. I have been eager to develop my personal abilities in the areas of critique, reflection and debate, as well as continuing my evolution as an educational practitioner. This chapter outlines how I arrived at this particular stage in my journey. It offers a chronological view of my teaching career to date, as well as documenting the various qualifications which I have pursued. Following this personal and professional backdrop, the chapter then proceeds to identify the research area which is the subject of this doctoral investigation. It describes the three major research questions and then presents the theoretical perspectives on which this work is based, namely the works of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.

1.1.1 My professional experience

My career as an educationalist commenced in 2000, when I began a Bachelor of Education degree at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. I was particularly interested in the foundational subjects, especially the history, sociology and philosophy of education. I was intrigued by exploring how philosophies and theories of learning develop and compete with one another, and how they impact on teaching and learning. I was also extremely affected by how the system of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are manifestations of value-laden decisions in policy making spheres. I was introduced to the work of Pierre Bourdieu during my

undergraduate degree, which was very influential in my developing thoughts on how certain values are reproduced through the education system.

I began my teaching career in 2003. Over the next 10 years I taught in a variety of classes and settings. These included Infant classes, Middle classes and Senior classes. It also consisted of 4 years' experience in teaching in a special class for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). I have always been passionate about a child-centred approach to education, which I attempt to bring to my practice. I am also motivated by using current methodologies and theories of learning to ensure that my teaching is best suited to the needs of all of the pupils in my classes.

During these years I continued my professional development by completing a Masters in Education at University College Cork (2004-06) and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs (ASD) in St. Angela's College, Sligo (2009-11). Both of these explored various theories of learning and a variety of teaching strategies. For my Masters' thesis I focused on the area of curriculum and explored the epistemologies of knowledge present in the *Revised Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999). I was introduced to the work of Michel Foucault whilst completing the M.Ed. This work offered theoretical insights to the development of curriculum and pedagogy.

The highlight of my professional career thus far has been my appointment as the first principal teacher of Rochestown Educate Together National School in 2013. This is a new primary school that was established to cater for the needs of the local community. It is a unique privilege to be involved in a start-up school. There is a wonderful sense of community among our pupils, parents and staff and it is a very fertile environment for basing policies and pedagogy on best practice from research.

I was successful in attaining a place on the Cohort PhD programme in UCC in 2011. The past four years have been a considerable challenge as I have developed my critical thinking and analytical skills as part of this doctorate programme. The next section presents the aim and research questions of the dissertation.

1.1.2 The aim of the dissertation and the research questions

In 2011, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published a national strategy, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life: the national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people 2011-2020* (DES, 2011). This strategy contains reforms that are proposed to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of the pupils in our schools. Some of these reforms include changes to the manner in which assessment data is collected and reported.

The nature and purpose of assessment offer an insight into the values which are prioritised by an education system (Bruner, 1996; Bourdieu, 1977). This dissertation aims to examine the development of the literacy and numeracy strategy and investigate the nature and role of assessment contained within it. It seeks to ascertain how this is influenced by international trends in educational reform, particularly around the use of assessment. The dissertation also endeavours to examine teachers' perspectives on the purpose and use of assessment in primary schools and questions whether these are aligned with the conceptualisation of assessment in the Strategy. Finally, the dissertation aims to investigate pupils' thoughts on assessment and explore the impact of its practice on them.

This doctoral project has three major research questions:

1. How were the uses of assessment for primary schools in the national strategy, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*, devised and for what purposes are they based?

2. What are primary teachers' views on the purpose of assessment and what constitutes their practice?

3. How do assessment strategies impact on primary school pupils?

The first question aims to explore the epistemology of assessment in the national literacy and numeracy strategy as it relates to primary education. It also seeks to understand the premise on which this is based and the manner at which it was arrived. O'Sullivan states that "a pervasive weakness of Irish policy discourse is its failure to theorise the nature of educational change in recent times" (2009, p.137). McSpadden-McNeill and Coppola (2006) note that a problem of such policies is that they become reified and their origins are not analysed. The project seeks to identify the extent to which the national strategy is influenced by the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) trends outlined by Sahlberg (2011). This takes the form of a document analysis of the draft plan, submission to the DES in response to the strategy and analysis of the literacy and numeracy strategy itself. The question is also investigated utilising a qualitative methodology, through high-profile interviews with significant figures in the creation, development and implementation of the strategy, including two Ministers for Education and Skills as well as representatives of the Education Research Centre (ERC), Inspectorate, Irish National Teachers'

Organisation (INTO), National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and Teaching Council.

The second question seeks to examine teachers' assessment practices and identify if these have been influenced to any extent by the national strategy. The INTO (2008) believes that there is a lack of usage of formative assessment strategies. The question of teachers' assessment practices is examined by quantitative methods, through a questionnaire survey of teachers. This explores teachers' usage of formative and summative assessment and researches the potential effect of the strategy.

Finally, the third question aspires to study children's perspectives of themselves as learners and their view of assessment. The opinions of primary school pupils were not ascertained in the development of the literacy and numeracy strategy, a criticism noted by the NCCA (2010, p.14). The project endeavours to collect data through semi-structured qualitative interviews and focus groups with two separate groups of five pupils from two different schools.

1.2 Theoretical perspectives

This section outlines the theoretical perspectives to be employed in the dissertation. The dissertation examines the role of assessment in Irish primary school, explores the various philosophical underpinnings of the variety of purposes of assessment, demonstrates the nature of assessment in the formation of a pupil's identity as a learner, and details the policy formation in assessment in primary education in Ireland. A key underlying factor in these areas is power – how it is

distributed, who uses it, where it is located. The dissertation considers the following three themes of power in the use of assessment in primary schools in Ireland: 1) discourse; 2) control; and 3) access. This section develops theoretical constructs to explore these themes across the various spheres of assessment in primary education in Ireland by utilising the relevant work of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. These philosophers offer social theories regarding education and assessment which have been utilised by a number of researchers. These comprise of some utilising a Foucauldian perspective such as McCoy et al. (2012), Grek, (2009), Gillies (2008), McDermott (2001), and Broadfoot (1996b). Others use a Bourdieuian perspective, including Allais (2012), MacRuairc (2009), Rawolle and Lingard (2008), Devine (2003) and Reay and Wiliam (1999). This research is examined in Chapters 2 and 3, and provides insights for the design and analysis employed in this dissertation. The work of Stephen Ball is influenced by both Foucault and Bourdieu and offers a framework for analysing policy in Chapter 3.

1.2.1 Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984)

Foucault believes that the use of power is fundamental to understanding the modern state. For Foucault, power is a creative force. It creates a certain type of individual through their internalisation of power relations and in their interactions with their environments. He examines the development of various public institutions such as policing, medicine and mental institutions to demonstrate how the nature of power has changed over time. Scheurich and McKenzie (2005) argue that there are three shifts in Foucault's thoughts: archaeology to genealogy to care of the self and

governmentality. Each of these is useful when considering the role of assessment in Irish primary schools.

1.2.1.1 The archaeological method

Foucault's archaeological method is constructive in analysing the theme of discourse in assessment in Irish primary education. Foucault argues against modernity's teleological assumption that history moves upward or forward. He argues that an archaeological approach to understanding concepts shows that there are displacements and transformations in their development. The history of a concept, such as assessment, is not of its progressive refinement or increasing rationality, but that of its "various fields of constitution and validity, that of its successive rules of use, that of the many theoretical contexts in which it developed and matured" (1989, p.5). Foucault avers that the problem of whether there is movement to difference or stable structures can be analysed in the questioning of the document. For Foucault, "history is now trying to define within documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations" (1989, p.7). Foucault asks that we take documentary material, such as curricular or policy documents, not at face value but question the underlying narrative in their development. He states that all documents are a product of the context in which they are written and that the discourses surrounding the production of the document should be questioned. Foucault states that discourses "do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be made known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinised" (1989, p.28). This is particularly relevant to my research into assessment policy in Ireland and particularly the

development of the *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* strategy and is investigated in Chapters 4 and 6. Foucault's argument offers a perspective through which to analyse this document to understand how it was given its structure and how the material in it relates to itself.

His argument also signals the importance of exploring the broader context in which the strategy was written. This method is not seeking to find out what intentionality is behind what is being said, it is not a history of thought. Instead it seeks to show only why the discourse could not be other than what it was, "how it assumes, in the midst of others and in relation to them, a place that no other could occupy" (1989, p.31). As well as exploring the origins of discourse, it is essential to explore the relations between them. Foucault explains that discourses give each other further status or power when they group together. He argues that the event of clinical medicine in the nineteenth century must not be regarded as a new technique of observation, or as the result of the search for pathological causes of illnesses, or as the effect of the teaching hospital, or the introduction of the concept of tissue. Instead, it should be viewed as "the establishment of a relation, in medical discourse, between a number of distinct elements, some of which concerned the status of doctors, other the institutional and technical site from which they spoke, others their position as subjects perceiving, observing, describing, teaching, etc" (1989, p.59). This conceptualisation, if applied to assessment in primary education in Ireland, implies that it is important not only to examine the document, but also the relation among the document, policymakers, teachers, pupils and the wider educational context, and indeed the relation of all these factors to each other. Foucault asserts that archaeology "analyses the degree and form of permeability of a discourse: it provides the principle of its articulation over a chain of successive events; it defines

the operators by which the events are transcribed into statements" (1989, p.185). I will utilise Foucault's archaeological method as one approach in understanding the nature of assessment in Irish primary schools at present, and also to explore the development of the literacy and numeracy strategy. Foucault offers an analytical framework, which can be employed to examine policy formation (1991b, p.59-60). This focuses on an archaeology of knowledge to explore how a system came into being:

a) The limits and forms of the sayable – what is it possible to speak of?

b) The limits and forms of conservation – what disappears without a trace? What is marked as reusable?

c) The limits and forms of memory – which utterances does everyone recognise as valid/invalid?

d) The limits and forms of reactivation – what is retained from previous epochs or foreign cultures? What transformations are worked on them?

e) The limits and forms of appropriation – what individuals/groups/classes have access to a particular type of discourse?

1.2.1.2 The genealogical method

The genealogical method outlined by Foucault gives insights into the themes of control and access in assessment in primary education. Foucault argues that assessment is an instrument of the state to create its subjects (1975). He urges analysts to see new practices in education as "a practice of power that has emerged

and circulates more broadly in society" (Scheurich and McKenzie, 2005, p.855). Foucault uses a genealogical method to outline how disciplinary mechanisms have changed over the past three hundred years (1975). Disciplinary mechanisms were external to the person in the eighteenth century. These included such measures as flogging and the stocks, leading ultimately to the spectacle of the public execution. Foucault posits that these disciplinary mechanisms were employed so that the state could exert its power through fear. To cross the state could result in a very public punishment. However, this changed in the nineteenth century with the advent of the industrial revolution, which led to the establishment of schools. Foucault argues that the state changed from exerting power externally on its subjects to exerting power internally through its subjects. This is done by control of the body through the distribution of individuals in space; the control of activity through the manipulation of time and the instruction of the correct relation between body and gesture; and instilling the means of correct training through hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and examination (Foucault, 1975).

In education, this includes choosing the content from the curriculum, organising the classroom (including seating arrangement and the positioning of furniture), timetabling the various curricular areas and activities of the school day, and choosing what to assess and how to assess it. This process is not neutral. Through making these decisions, the teacher works through a norm, normalising whilst categorising. Foucault's notion of the examination is particularly relevant to my research. He avers that subjects internalise the power relations of the state through a process of normalisation – by comparing oneself with what they should be like. This has led to the growth of objective and standardised tests and the development of phrases such as 'atypical development'. In regard to this doctoral

dissertation, the genealogical method provides a thinking tool to analyse how assessment practices in Ireland have developed in the present day. It can open up who has access to the development of these practices and how the practices impact on the pupils. It also gives a tool to explore teachers' assumptions about the role of assessment, as well as exploring the locus of control in the utilisation of assessment techniques between the institution, the teachers and the pupils (Chapters 6 – 9).

1.2.1.3 Governmentality

The concept of governmentality is especially beneficial when considering the development of education policy and exploring the themes of discourse, control and access. Michel Foucault argues that power relations are internalised by subjects and are not scrutinised or examined as the subjects are unaware that they have been internalised. He also avers that "the instruments of government, instead of being laws, now come to be a range of multiform tactics" (1991a, p.95). These tactics include social control mechanisms outlined in the previous section. Foucault argues against the "individualisation of discourses" (1991b, p.54). He asks what do we mean by 'medicine' or 'economics'? For him, "Each discourse undergoes constant change as new utterances are added to it" (p.54). Foucault argues that one should examine how certain laws or policies came into being in the first place. For him, there are discourses that give legitimacy to each political act. These discourses limit what can be thought or spoken in the policy development process by creating the construct in which the policy is to be developed. Foucault outlines his theory of discourse analysis: "The question which I ask is not about codes but about events: the law of *existence* of statements, that which rendered them possible – them and

none other in their place: the conditions of their singular emergence; their correlation with other previous or simultaneous events, discursive or otherwise" (1991b, p.59).

Foucault argues that from the sixteenth century there is a 'double movement' in governmentality of state centralisation from feudalism and religious dissidence. He asserts that the art of government and policy making is "essentially concerned with answering the question of how to introduce economy – that is to say the correct manner of managing individuals, goods and wealth within the family and of making the family fortunes prosper" (1991a, p.92). The correct manner of managing the individual within family was replaced in the eighteenth century with the problem of population. Power is exercised through disciplinary mechanisms that reflect and regulate the norms outlined in the previous section. The mechanisms include "methods of observation, 'productivity' benchmarks and apparatuses of control" (O'Brien, 2012, p.552). The theory of governmentality will be central to my analysis of assessment policy development in primary education in Ireland (Chapter 4). It offers an insight into the reasons why specific modes of assessment policy were constituted rather than others.

1.2.2 Pierre Bourdieu (1930 – 2002)

Bourdieu examines how cultural norms and power relations are reproduced through the institution of schooling. He outlines two techniques that are especially productive to the aims of this dissertation in understanding the themes of discourse, control and access in assessment in primary education: habitus and capital.

1.2.2.1 Habitus

Pierre Bourdieu argues that the structures of an environment produce habitus - "systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures...objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them" (1977, p.72, italics in original). Habitus represents the unspoken or unexamined influences in an educational policy (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008). Bourdieu argues that, not only should one examine what is in a policy, but also examine what is omitted. For Bourdieu, habitus creates an environment where certain opinions or thoughts are valued more than others and become the dominant discourse. This leads to a situation where policy makers may not even know that they are reproducing these dominant ideas as Bourdieu argues that habitus is the source of a "series of moves which are objectively organised as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention" (1977, p.73). This is an important technique in analysing the content of the literacy and numeracy strategy in Chapter 6. Furthermore, the notion of habitus limits the possibilities of policy making as it narrows the potential content or aims that could be included, and establishes 'a right way' of development and implementation. Bourdieu avers that "The homogeneity of habitus is what...causes practices and works to be immediately intelligible and foreseeable, and hence taken for granted" (1977, p.80). This is similar and complimentary to Foucault's archaeology of knowledge and theory of governmentality outlined previously.

Bourdieu claims that habitus is reproduced and reinforced through doxa, which creates the impression that the natural and social world appear self-evident. Bourdieu states that "Every established order tends to produce the naturalisation of

its own arbitrariness" (p.164). As the social world appears self evident, policy makers are not inclined to question it. Not only that, there are assumptions made in policy construction that are reified, or believed to be the natural order of things. Bourdieu argues that, for those with political power, "what is essential *goes without saying because it comes without saying*" (1977, p.167). In this way, ideas and power relations are legitimised since the very question of legitimacy is not asked. Bourdieu calls globalisation the new neoliberal doxa. He states that "globalisation is not a mechanical effect of the laws of technology or the economy but the product of a policy implemented by a set of agents and institutions, and the results of the application of rules deliberately created for specific ends, namely trade liberalisation" (2003, p.84). Bourdieu's ideas of habitus and doxa are tools to explore the construction, content and implementation of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. They can highlight the discourse surrounding the policy during its development (including the notion of globalisation) and also outline the language employed to promote the policy among teachers and the wider public. These tools are also useful in investigating power relations within the document and outline whose access is assisted or compromised (policy makers, teachers, pupils) through the language and concepts that are employed within it (Chapters 6 and 7).

1.2.2.2 Capital

Bourdieu theorises that the interplay of these power relations manifests itself in different layers of capital (economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, symbolic capital), which are possessed by each citizen. He tells of how a family buys an ox after the harvest which appears absurd, only to sell it before autumn.

Bourdieu explains how this is a way of making it known that the crop has been plentiful – the ox acts as an "addition to the family's symbolic capital in the late-summer period in which marriages are negotiated" (p.181). Bourdieu asserts that in today's society domination is no longer exhibited in a personal manner. Whereas Foucault argues that domination is now exhibited through the internalisation of power relations through a series of disciplinary techniques, Bourdieu offers the theory that it is entailed in the possession of economic or cultural capital. He states that relations of domination are made, unmade and remade in and by the interactions between persons, and through social formations, such as schooling, which are mediated by institutional mechanisms, such as the distribution of titles (e.g. academic degrees).

Bourdieu states that "academic qualifications are to cultural capital what money is to economic capital" (1977, p.187). He argues that the unequal distribution of cultural capital makes people think that they deserve to be in the position in which they find themselves: "The educational diploma is not merely a mark of academic distinction; it is perceived as a warrant of natural intelligence, of giftedness" (2003, p.33). This leads to a racism of intelligence, where the perception is proffered that today's poor are poor because they are intellectually incapable. The examination impacts on a person's self image and, indeed, can create a person's identity as a learner. This is an essential insight for my doctoral study. This dissertation aims to examine in an original manner, pupils' perspectives on assessment in Irish primary education. It explores the issue that Bourdieu theorises regarding how pupils develop their perceptions of intelligence and the role of examinations and teacher feedback in this process (Chapter 9). Bourdieu argues, in any analysis of assessment or examination in education, it is necessary to break with the "illusion of the

neutrality and independence of the school system with respect to the structure of class relations" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p.141). He believes that examination provides one of the most efficacious tools for inculcating the dominant culture and the value of that culture. Bourdieu asserts that those from working class backgrounds 'eliminate themselves' from examination. He summarises this argument by stating that

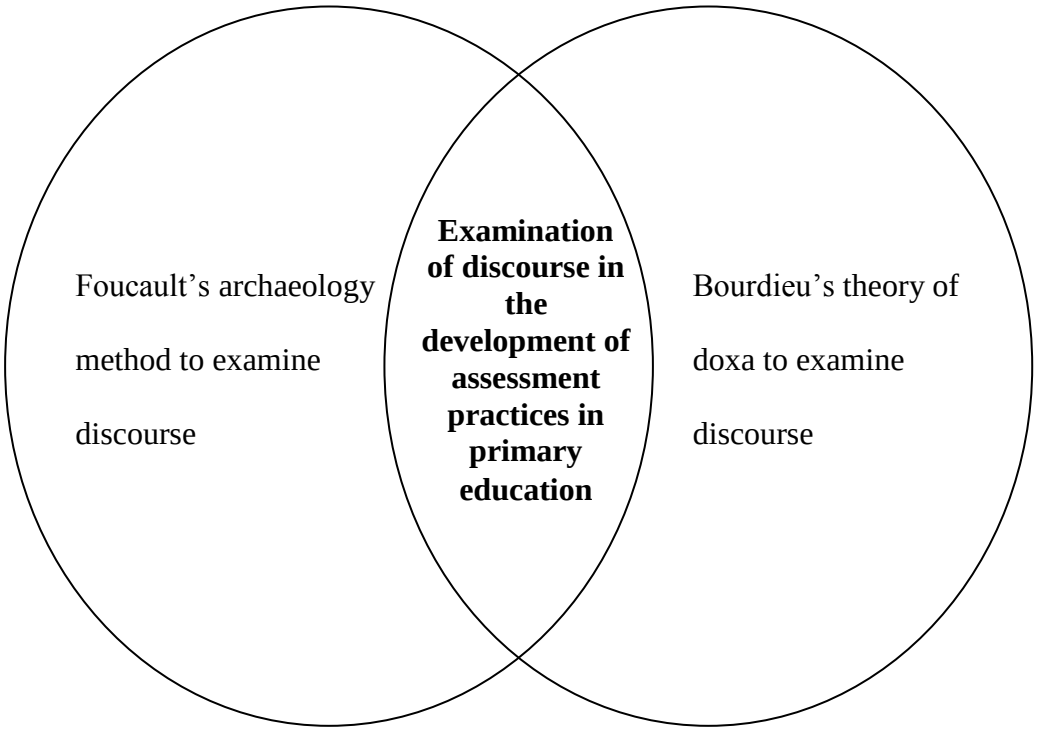
> "When one knows how much examiners' judgements owe to implicit norms which retranslate and specify the values of the dominant classes in terms of the logic proper to the education system, it is clear that candidates are handicapped in proportion to the distance between these values and those of their class origin" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p.162).

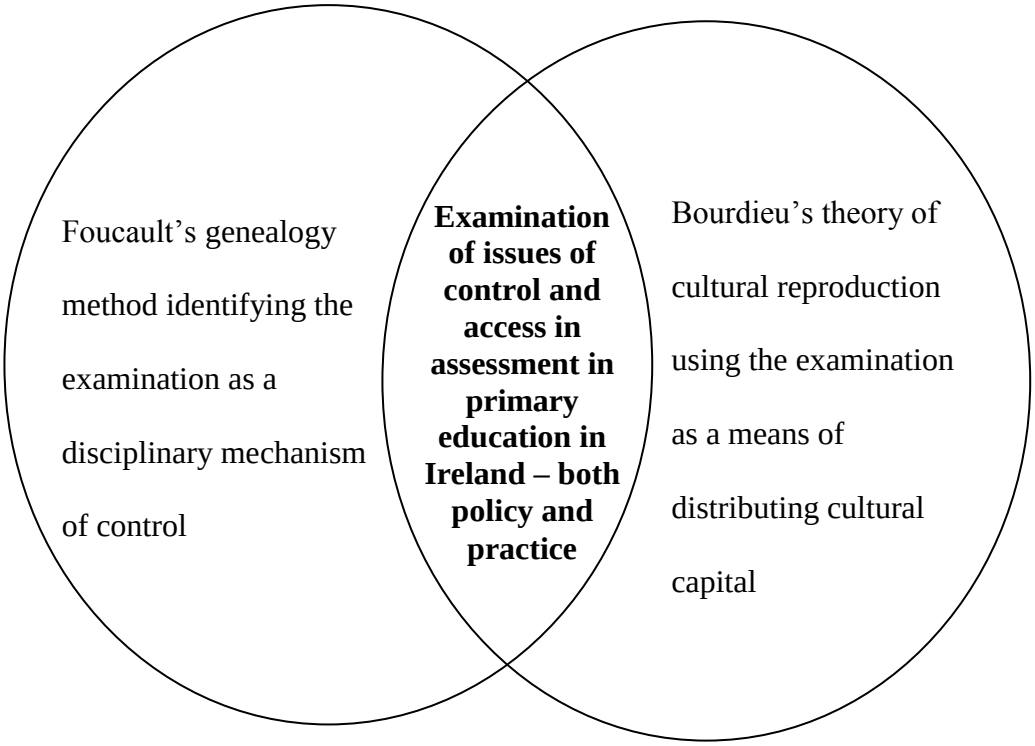
This insight is important to dissecting the themes of discourse, control and access in assessment in primary education. Bourdieu's argument implies that it is essential to explore the philosophical position held by the people who administer the tests, i.e. teachers, which this dissertation examines in Chapter 8. It is also vital to explore the epistemological foundation of educational policy regarding assessment and to examine the perspectives of those involved in its development (politicians, policy makers, unions), which occurs in Chapters 6 and 7. This notion is also similar to Foucault's theory on the normalisation of people through comparisons to normative values in the process of the examination. Bourdieu argues that "any analysis of ideologies...which fails to include an analysis of the corresponding institutional mechanisms is liable to be no more than a contribution to the efficacy of those ideologies" (1977, p.188).

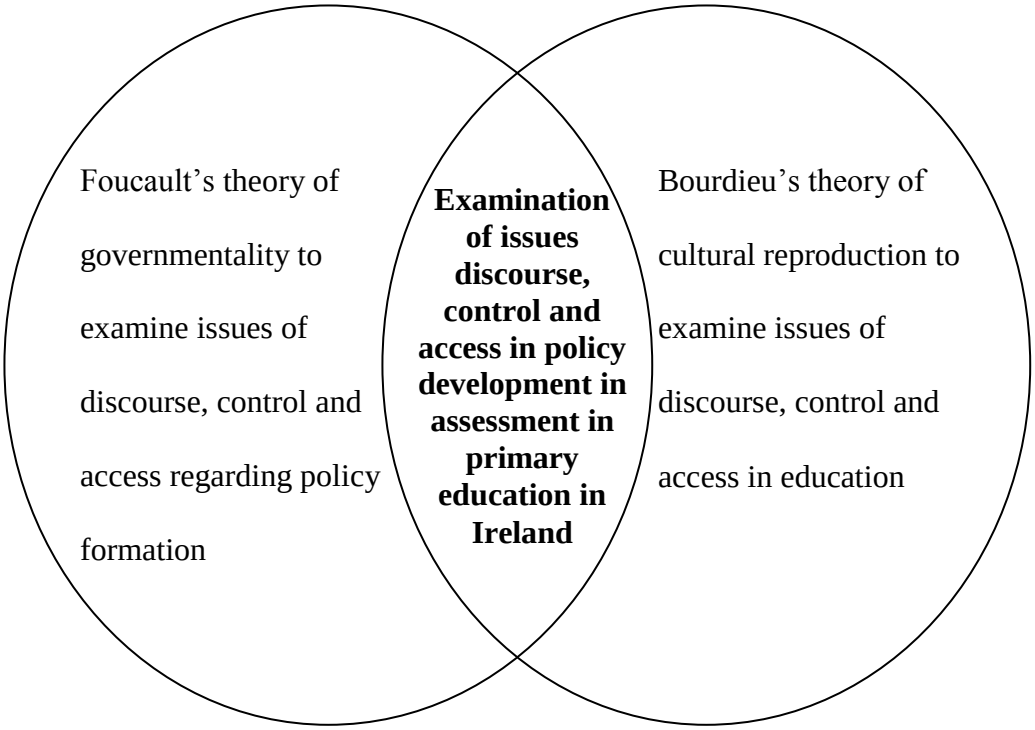
1.2.3 Summary of theoretical perspectives

This section outlined theoretical perspectives to be utilised in this doctoral dissertation. The dissertation explores themes of power in assessment in primary school in Ireland, namely discourse, control and access. This section has reviewed the work of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu to identify tools of analysis in exploring assessment at primary school. The following is a diagraphic summation of the key insights as they relate to this dissertation:

Diagram 1 Summation of the key insights from the work of Foucault and Bourdieu as they relate to this dissertation




Foucault's genealogy method identifying the examination as a disciplinary mechanism of control
Examination of issues of control and access in assessment in primary education in Ireland – both policy and practice
Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction using the examination as a means of distributing cultural capital


Foucault's theory of governmentality to examine issues of discourse, control and access regarding policy formation
Examination of issues discourse, control and access in policy development in assessment in primary education in Ireland
Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction to examine issues of discourse, control and access in education

1.3 Outline of the study

Chapter 2 consists of a literature review in the area of assessment. It begins with a chronological approach to the development of assessment and then links various modes and purposes of assessment to learning theories. It reviews some empirical research examining the purposes of assessment, teachers' perspectives on assessment, pupils' perspectives on assessment, and some cultural issues regarding assessment. It also highlights the current debate and confusion regarding the language and purpose of assessment.

Chapter 3 comprises of a literature review of assessment policy. It examines some of the analytical tools for policy in the work of Stephen Ball, which are relevant to this dissertation. It then appraises some conceptualisations of the reasons for policy change in the area of assessment. It also analyses a number of empirical studies researching policy change regarding high stakes assessment, exam data as a technology of governance, and policy change regarding assessment for learning practices.

Chapter 4 continues with a literature review of assessment policy in primary education in Ireland. It offers a chronological account of the changes that took place in three eras: 1831 to 1922, 1922 to 1960, and 1960 to 2010. It examines some theoretical conceptions of Irish primary assessment policy and also investigates some empirical research in this area.

Chapter 5 presents the research design utilised in this study. It propounds the background to the research questions, as well as the study's paradigm and approach to research. It elaborates on the methodologies employed, which include both quantitative and qualitative. It offers reasons why these methods were selected and

describes the development of the approaches, including the pilot studies. It also is cognisant of ethical issues and some limitations of this study.

Chapter 6 entails an analysis of the documents that were used in the development of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* (DES, 2011). These include the draft plan, *Better literacy and numeracy for children and young people: a draft plan to improve literacy and numeracy in schools* (DES, 2010) and the submissions to the DES in response to the draft plan from the INTO, the NCCA, and the Teaching Council. It examines the purpose and nature of assessment in the final published strategy.

Chapter 7 examines the interviews conducted with a number of high profile policy makers. These participants include two Ministers for Education and Skills as well as representatives of the ERC, Inspectorate, INTO, NCCA, and Teaching Council. It investigates a number of themes arising from these interviews including the role and purpose of assessment, a reform agenda in primary education, the policy development process, the impact of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the roles of both the teacher and pupil in assessment.

Chapter 8 analyses the findings of the survey of teachers regarding their assessment perspectives and practices. It critiques teachers' views on the role of assessment as well as their assessment practices. It appraises teachers' opinions on the use of standardised tests and considers their positions on reform in Irish primary education and the role of Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

Chapter 9 investigates the focus group interviews with primary school pupils. It identifies a number of themes in the pupils' discussions including the purposes of assessment, the role of both the pupil and the teacher, feedback on assessment for

pupils, and the ordering of school subjects through assessment. It also includes some of the participants' drawings on the theme of assessment and analyses these in relation to the identified themes.

Chapter 10 concludes this dissertation. It offers a synthesis of the findings and analysis of Chapters 6 to 9, relating them to the dissertation's theoretical perspectives and literature reviews. It proposes recommendations for the development of assessment policy and practice in Irish primary education and suggests further lines of enquiry for the researcher.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW ON ASSESSMENT IN EDUCATION

2.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a review of literature in the area of assessment in education. Whereas the focus of this doctoral dissertation is on assessment in primary school, the literature review will also include relevant research on assessment in secondary school. The literature review is based on the theoretical perspective outlined in Chapter 1. The literature review employs Foucault's archaeological method to create an historical account of the progression in thought on assessment. It also utilises Foucault's genealogical approach to critique assessment practices. The review is also considerate of Bourdieu's notions of habitus, reproduction and cultural capital in its examination of the literature on assessment. These theories provide the philosophical background to the review of the literature and the review will pay consideration to themes of power in assessment, particularly discourse, control and access. In the initial stages the chapter will utilise Gipps' structure (1999) for delineating the literature. Gipps reviewed the literature in education in assessment under the following three headings: a) Assessment in social and historical perspective; b) Changes in the practice and the philosophy of assessment; and c) Assessment in the social world of the classroom. To this I add two further headings to structure this review of the literature: 'Review of some empirical research in assessment' and 'Current challenges in the area of assessment'. I chose these headings as they outline the development in the purposes and use of assessment in primary education over a number of years. This archaeological approach is central to this dissertation's understanding of the role and use of assessment in primary education in Ireland today. In so doing, it seeks to clarify the philosophical underpinnings of a variety of

assessment approaches and practices. The insights gleaned from the literature will influence the subsequent chapters on assessment policy development and assessment policy in Ireland (Chapters 3 and 4). This chapter also develops a critical lens through which the research data is analysed (Chapters 6 – 9). Sections 2.2 and 2.3 of this literature review begin by examining issues at the level of the system macrostructure. Section 2.2 offers a review of the purposes that assessment served in the past as well as identifying a growing role that it serves in education today. Section 2.3 examines how forms of assessment have changed over the past fifty years, and how these are linked to changing epistemologies of knowledge and theories of learning. Section 2.4 investigates issues at the level of the classroom microstructure and examines the importance of relationships and interactions in assessment. Section 2.5 details some of the important empirical research in assessment in recent years. Section 2.6 identifies a number of challenges in assessment today and how this doctoral study aims to contribute to understanding these challenges in Ireland.

2.2 Assessment in social and historical perspective

Assessment has been identified as having three different purposes in education: i) selecting and certifying individuals; ii) evaluating institutions; and iii) assisting learning (Wiliam, 2000; Goldstein and Lewis, 1996). This section examines the first two purposes. The third purpose is examined in Section 2.3.

2.2.1 Assessment for selection and certification

Historically, selection has been the most pervasive purpose of assessment (Gipps. 1999; Broadfoot, 1996a; Sutherland, 1996). Positions of privilege or responsibility were generally assigned to family members or associates of those in power. However, the need for a civil service to attend to the administration of large populations and territories led to the development of selection examinations – initially in Imperial China about fourteen hundred years ago. This demonstrates that, historically, assessment has been associated with power, control and access. Access to the professions was also carefully guarded by families and apprenticeship was usually granted based on patronage or family history rather than academic ability. This began to change with the advent of the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century. More positions were created in the professions and in managerial roles so assessment techniques needed to be devised to select suitable candidates. This was completed largely through the establishment of formal education systems. Many countries, including Ireland as part of the British Empire at the time, formalised school leaving examinations at the end of primary education with a School Certificate. This demonstrates how assessment has always been linked with issues of access and control. Education and success at examinations was the doorway to a better future for many individuals. However, this maintained the power relations in the state as the criteria for assessment were decided by those in power (Gipps, 1999; Broadfoot, 1996a; Sutherland, 1996). Bourdieu argues that this is an example of cultural reproduction through education (1977). He also asserts that the examination is one of the most efficient tools for inculcating the dominant culture and ensuring that power relations are maintained. Foucault argues that the examination is a disciplinary mechanism and that its purpose is to control subjects (1975). For

Foucault, power is also a creative force, so that subjects form themselves through the educational process, including their experience in examinations. This underlines the key social role that assessment assumed and also how it is integral to power relations in society.

Assessment was also used for selection within the education system. A key tool in this process was the IQ test (Gipps, 1999; Sutherland, 1996). IQ tests were developed in the early twentieth century in France by Alfred Binet and they quickly held an allure for education policy makers. These tests were seen to be scientific and objective. Many involved in education believed that they were able to identify innate levels of intelligence. The introduction of IQ tests played an important role in choosing who was suitable for academic secondary education in many countries. IQ tests were also used to identify those pupils with special educational needs. Children with 'subnormal' intelligence were identified so that they could attend special schools. Assessment can demonstrably be seen to be having an impact on the access level in this explanation. Those who succeed in IQ tests have greater opportunities to advance to secondary education, which in turn led to more social and employment opportunities (Gipps, 1999; Sutherland, 1996). Bourdieu argues that those from working class backgrounds eliminate themselves from tests (2003). In his analysis, tests are based on the implicit norms of those that develop them, which specify the norms of the dominant classes. Gipps (1999) outlines how a number of researchers found that this is also the case for the apparently objective IQ tests. These researchers found that results in IQ tests were closely related to social factors and that they were biased in favour of the dominant culture. Foucault's theory of discipline problematises the issue of identifying children with 'subnormal'

intelligence. In Foucault's analysis (1975), the examination is a disciplinary mechanism through which subjects internalise the power relations of the dominant class. By utilising a norm in assessment, people compare themselves and are assigned into categories such as 'subnormal' or 'atypical'. This is very influential in the development of the identity of the person. Foucault's archaeological method (1.2.1.2) influences this dissertation in that the historical use of assessment for the purposes of selection and certification interacts with and influences the development and implementation of any new assessment policy. This is examined in the Irish primary setting in Chapter 4 as well as in the chapters outlining the findings of the research (Chapters 6-9).

2.2.2 Assessment for curriculum control and evaluation of institutions

Recent trends see assessment being used to control and drive curriculum and teaching, and to evaluate the larger institution of education (Gipps, 1998). The driving force behind these developments is essentially economic (Eivers, 2010; Resnik, 2006). The twentieth century has seen the establishment of a number of pan-national bodies that are increasingly having a more influential role in educational policy in assessment in individual countries (Allais, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011; Chawla-Duggan and Lowe, 2010; Hall and Ozerk, 2010; Grek et al., 2009; Rautalin and Alasuutari, 2009; Wang et al., 2006; Broadfoot, 1996b; Goldstein and Lewis, 1996; Gray 1996). Countries have identified that investing in education can have a beneficial impact on economic development. The strengthened role of international agencies, such as the European Union (EU), the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Coordination and Development (OECD) has caused a remarkable

change in education policy over the past twenty years (Allais, 2012; Grek et al., 2009). The OECD is seen to have expert status and its reports are viewed as scientific and objective by member states (Eivers, 2010; Rautalin and Alasuutari, 2009). It has also developed comparative tests to evaluate educational systems across countries. These include the Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) for primary education and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for secondary education. These tests have led to the publication of international league tables, which are widely circulated and discussed by politicians, policy makers, and in the media. This creates a scenario where PISA is increasingly significant (Eivers, 2010; Resnik, 2006). Broadfoot states that "Assessment is arguably *the* most powerful policy 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" (1996a, p.21, italics in original).

Education policies regarding the practice and use of assessment in countries such as France, Germany, Ireland, Norway, and Turkey have been influenced by PISA results (this will be described further in the section of empirical evidence). Eivers (2010), Wiliam (2008) and Goldstein (2004) problematise the use of PISA results for comparative purposes. PISA does not study how students have mastered a particular reading curriculum. Differences in results across jurisdictions, while reflecting differences in educational systems, also reflect social and other differences. Eivers (2010), Wiliam (2008) and Goldstein (2004) also criticise the dimensionality and item response scaling of the PISA tests. Goldstein states that "it needs to be recognized that the reality of comparing countries is a complex

multidimensional issue, well beyond the somewhat ineffectual attempt by PISA to produce subscales" (2004, p.328). He calls for cultural specificity in test question development and a realistic statistical model. Both Eivers and Goldstein also highlight the importance of a longitudinal approach to testing to investigate whether comparisons between countries can truly be made (Eivers, 2010, Goldstein and Thomas, 2008; Goldstein, 2004). Furthermore, Wiliam argues that the use within PISA of differential item functioning to identify and exclude items that are not comparable across languages results in further reduction of the sensitivity of the assessments to instruction. Indeed, in a recent open letter to Dr. Andreas Schleicher, director of PISA, 83 academics from around the world express deep concern about the impact of PISA tests and call for a halt to the next round of testing. They state that "we fail to understand how your organisation has become the global arbiter of the means and ends of education around the world. OECD's narrow focus on standardised testing risks turning learning into drudgery and killing the joy of learning" (The Guardian, 6th May 2014). This dissertation notes the critique of PISA in the research. It examines the understanding of PISA in assessment policy in Ireland and in the views of assessment policy makers in Chapters 6 and 7.

Broadfoot and Black state that "decisions about assessment procedures...are as often based on perceived *political* appeal as they are on a systematic knowledge of the scientific evidence concerning fitness for purpose" (2004, p.9). The significance of PISA can be examined as a highly influential discourse in assessment in education at present. Foucault's archaeological method asks researchers to examine who are the operators in the discourse. Pan-national bodies such as the OECD and the EU are becoming more prominent in the policy making process of individual states through the discourse of comparative testing. But Foucault argues that these bodies

should not be viewed in isolation. Instead, the event of assessment as a tool for international comparison should be viewed as relational and it is essential to examine the relations between these bodies and the various policy makers as well as teachers and pupils. Bourdieu offers the theoretical tool of habitus to examine this issue. For Bourdieu, the notion of habitus limits the possibilities of policy making as it narrows the potential content or aims that could be included, and establishes 'a right way' of development and implementation. Habitus creates an environment or doxa where certain opinions or thoughts are valued more than others and become the dominant discourse. This leads to a situation where policy makers may not even know that they are reproducing these dominant ideas. I will examine these issues in the chapter on policy.

The emerging competitive aspect to education between countries, as evidenced in the PISA tests, is a notable product of globalisation. Chawla-Duggan and Lowe describe this phenomenon as "a competition among nations in which education plays a key role in outsmarting others in the search for scientific knowledge and technologies that enable innovation" (2010, p.263). Some researchers believe that globalisation has had the effect of changing the purposes of education to a more instrumental one and that international comparisons can distort more legitimate and worthy functions of assessment (Chawla-Duggan and Lowe, 2010; Broadfoot, 1996b; Goldstein and Lewis, 1996). In such an outlook the function of primary education becomes one of developing 'core skills' for use in later life, such as literacy and numeracy, as opposed to having any intrinsic value in and of itself. These international trends have led to an increased focus on the use of assessment to raise standards in a number of countries, such as the US, England,

Japan, France, Norway (Hall and Ozerk, 2010; Wang et al., 2006; Gray 1996), but these changes occur in "culturally specific ways" (Hall and Ozerk, 2010, p.384). For example, England has prioritised English, Maths and Science; whereas Japan, France and Norway have a greater emphasis on language (Hall and Ozerk, 2010). Some countries, such as Scotland, Finland and New Zealand, have refused to implement standards-based accountability practices, instead focusing on formative assessment procedures (Sahlberg, 2011; Hall and Ozerk, 2010).

The result of changes in assessment in educational policy is an important theme as part of this dissertation. The changes can be summarised as follows:

- Purposes of education become more instrumental (including developing 'core skills', such as literacy and numeracy)
- Can distort more legitimate and worthy functions of assessment
- Use of assessment to raise standards

This dissertation will examine if these effects are present in assessment policy in primary education in the Republic of Ireland. In particular, the use of assessment to raise standards highlights issues of access and control. Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital is relevant in this instance as it provides a construct to ask questions about the values implicit in the assessment being administered and who these values serve. Foucault's genealogical approach to power can also be employed to highlight the power relations in operation in these assessment techniques. These issues will be examined further in the policy and findings and analysis chapters.

2.3 Changes in the practice and the philosophy of assessment

Assessment practices have changed to focus more on the process of assessment and the learner's role in it, as well as the importance of the teacher (O'Leary, 2006; Gipps, 1998). These changes are linked to changes in philosophy of the epistemology of knowledge, and in related developments in theories of learning (Howe and Mercer, 2010; Conway, 2002; Lin, 2002; Mayer, 1998; Broadfoot, 1996a). Three views of learning can be summarised as behaviourist-empiricist; cognitive-rationalist; and socio-constructivist. The review will continue by examining each view of learning, its epistemology of knowledge and its position on educational assessment.

2.3.1 Behaviourist-empiricist

The first view developed in the early part of the twentieth century. Learning is seen as response acquisition, which was based on learning in animals. The learner in such an outlook is a passive recipient of content, which is taught by the teacher. Knowledge is seen to be external to the learner and can be transmitted through techniques such as repetition. Schooling is quite hierarchical with the teacher/instructor as the dominant person in the interactions and driving the learning process. Instruction takes the form of drill and practice, with evaluation comprising of checklists. These checklists can be mechanical and include time-based responses. These methods are employed in some approaches to special education, such as Applied Behavioural Analysis (Howe and Mercer, 2010; Conway, 2002; Lin, 2002; Mayer, 1998; Broadfoot, 1996a).

2.3.2 Cognitive-rationalist

The second outlook was informed by laboratory work on human learning in the 1950s and 60s. Learning can be seen as knowledge acquisition. The learner in this perspective is a processor of information. Knowledge is seen as something that can be acquired by the learner through a variety of learning activities based on the learner's stage of development. The learner is more of an active participant in this approach as he/she responds to learning tasks set by the teacher. The teacher is responsible for organising appropriate learning opportunities, which will assist the learner to reach the next stage of development. Instruction consists of increasing situations in which the student could acquire knowledge. Evaluation involves measuring learning outcomes (Howe and Mercer, 2010; Conway, 2002; Lin, 2002; Mayer, 1998; Broadfoot, 1996a). The assumptions informing this approach may be identified as:

> (1) "That it is right, 'objectively' to seek to identify relative levels of student performance as the basis for educational selection.
>
> (2) That it is possible to undertake such identification with a sufficient degree of 'objectivity' that it provides a broadly fair outcome for the candidates affected.
>
> (3) That the quality of such assessment is embodied in notions of reliability and validity.
>
> (4) That students' scores on national examinations and tests provide a valid indicator of the quality of institutional performance.
>
> (5) That it is possible usefully to compare the 'productivity' of individual education systems through international comparisons" (Broadfoot and Black, 2004, p.20).

Standardised testing would be informed by this outlook. In this approach, these tests can be administered at various levels to show what learners know and/or have learned. These tests are seen to be objective and a reliable indicator of a learner's level of ability.

Standardised tests can be norm-referenced (compared with similarly aged children), criterion-referenced (compared with performance indicators) or ipsative-referenced (compared with pupil's own previous performance). A postmodern approach to knowledge has critiqued the cognitive-rationalist perspective and standardised tests on a number of levels. The postmodern view offers a fundamental shift in ways of looking at the person – both the person who is the assessor and who is the assessed (Best and Kellner, 1991). In this outlook, both the learner and the assessor are capable of creating their own view of knowledge. A number of researchers have contested the objectivity of standardised tests (MacRuairc, 2009; Lin, 2002; Paris, 1998; Goldstein, 1996). They argue that there is choice in the construction of standardised tests – both in the items selected and in the language that is used. This may lead to cultural bias in the administration of the test. Lin (2002) and Goldstein (1996) both argue that the process of item selection for standardised tests should be subject to scrutiny as test designers must remove items based on their interpretation of the piloting stage. A number of researchers also argue that standardised tests distort curricula as they lead to a narrowing of what is taught in schools (Lin, 2002; Paris, 1998; Broadfoot, 1996b). This narrowing of the curriculum could also result in test pollution due to the fact that some teachers may teach to the test (Paris, 1998; Gray, 1996). Yet, there can be other consequences of such testing, such as an improvement in professional practice and knowledge about assessment procedures (Cizek, 2001 cited by Wang et al., 2006). MacRuairc states that policies promoting the use of standardised tests "are often strongly positioned within a functionalist, meritocratic perspective which does not reflect the complexity and diversity of issues underpinning current attainment patterns" (2009, p.52).

Assessment methods, such as standardised tests, based in the cognitive-rationalist approach have also been criticised based on their consequential validity (Elwood and Lundy, 2010; Sambell et al, 1997). Consequential validity refers to the effects of assessment or testing on the teaching and learning context and the social consequences of the use of assessment information. These criticisms are based on an approach that underlines the social nature of teaching, learning and assessment, which is termed socio-constructivist.

2.3.3 Socio-constructivist

In the 1970s and 80s, because of research completed in realistic situations, learning became seen as knowledge construction. The learner in this viewpoint is a constructor of knowledge and instruction is geared towards helping the student develop learning and thinking strategies. The teacher is a guide or a facilitator of learning and assessment becomes more co-operative. Evaluation is qualitative rather than quantitative. This approach espouses the use of portfolios, authentic tasks, group projects, cooperative learning, self-assessment and pupil choice on what they are learning. Knowledge in such a perspective is created by the learner through interactions with others and through the social context in which these interactions take place (Howe and Mercer, 2010; Conway, 2002; Lin, 2002; Mayer, 1998; Broadfoot, 1996a). From being the independent assessor under the cognitive-rationalist perspective in a largely hierarchical relationship, the teacher is now a partner with the student in the assessment. A key link between assessment and learning is feedback. In the socio-constructivist approach, it is vital for teachers to specify improvement or process rather than attainment in their feedback. This assists

the student in taking ownership of their learning, in identifying the improvements that need to be made, and in ascertaining the means to make these changes. If the feedback focuses on attainment it may lead to the student believing that they cannot improve. As much of this feedback takes place in a public environment, it plays a key role in the identity formation of the student. This is an important shift in the history of knowledge and learning theory and it is reviewed further in the next section.

2.4 Assessment in the social world of the classroom

Many researchers view childhood as a social phenomenon (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Wenger, 1998). For them, curriculum and assessment "are both social and political structures, containing assumptions about how people (that is, largely children) ought best to be" (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998, p.42). Recent studies have found that pupils' identity as learners can be constructed in the assessment process (Devine, 2003; Reay and Wiliam, 1999). Vygotsky is an important theorist in understanding a sociocultural approach to assessment. Vygostky argues that education is a social process based on interactions between the teacher and the students and the students with each other and their environment (1978). Vygotsky disagrees with assessments that examine students based on their individual performance on a given day. He believes that a truer indication of a student's ability was his/her facility when assisted by another – what Vygotsky terms the zone of proximal development (1978). Assessment in this outlook should not be an individual enterprise isolated to the result of an examination administered on one particular day. It should be an on-going, relational process between the student and

teacher. The key idea is that the result of the collaboration is the best result of which the student is capable. Assessment is not an external or formalised activity, but rather it is integral to the teaching process. An important element of this is the nature of feedback between pupils and teacher. Regarding teaching and learning, assessment can be seen as having four purposes:

i. Formative: Formative assessment seeks to assist a learner by identifying the exact stage at which they are performing in a given subject and to provide support and guidance in the successful acquisition of the next stage.

ii. Summative: This form of assessment is utilised at the endpoint of a period of instruction. Its purpose is to quantify what a learner has achieved through objective tests.

iii. Diagnostic: Diagnostic assessment is employed to identify specific weaknesses in a student's ability to learn. This is associated with providing learning support to students who may be having difficulty with learning in a given area.

iv. Evaluative: This seeks to ascertain educational performance on a macro level. It is employed to appraise the performance of institutions or wider systems, including comparisons between countries.

There is much debate in the literature as to efficacy of these purposes and whether one should be focused on above another. This debate has concentrated primarily on the merits of formative (often called Assessment for Learning [AfL]) and summative assessment (termed Assessment of Learning [AoL]). This section

will continue with an analysis of the arguments in the literature surrounding these purposes.

2.4.1 Assessment for Learning (AfL)

The purpose of AfL centres on supporting the learner to achieve the next stage of the learning process. Specific difficulties can be identified and support can be provided at an early stage to ensure that misunderstandings are ameliorated and the learner can develop competence and confidence at a particular skill or knowledge. Assessment is seen as ongoing and collaborative, with an emphasis on the developing nature of the learner's performance. Instruments used for AfL include portfolios, peer assessment and pupil-teacher conferences. The term AfL is relatively recent and its prominence owes much to the work of Black and Wiliam, especially their seminal article '*Assessment and classroom learning'* (1998). The authors reviewed 580 articles or chapters and found that formative assessment produced learning gains, helped low attainers more than the rest, and reduced the spread of attainment whilst raising it overall. They criticised the situation in the UK where there was "no strategy either to study or develop the formative assessment of teachers" (1999, p.7).

Bennet (2011) offers a critique of Black and Wiliam's article. He states that the studies reviewed are too disparate in topic, multiple effects too often come from the same study, and study characteristics such as technical quality or datedness are not considered (p.11). Bennet believes that the studies covered by Black and Wiliam are too diverse as they relate to "feedback, student goal orientation, self-perception, peer assessment, self assessment, teacher choice of assessment task, teacher

questioning behaviour, teacher use of tests, and mastery learning systems" (2011, p.11). He contends that a stronger conceptual argument about formative assessment must be made relating to its definition, effectiveness, domain dependency, measurement, professional development, and systemic aspects. Empirical research on AfL approaches is examined in Section 2.5.

2.4.2 Assessment of Learning (AoL)

Assessment of learning (AoL) can be associated with summative assessment. The purpose of assessment in this guise is to ascertain a pupil's understanding of knowledge or skills at the end of a given period in a course of instruction. Assessment instruments in this framework are seen to be objective and neutral, and can accurately establish a learner's competence at a given topic. Harlen explains that summative assessment of pupils has two purposes: an internal aspect including teacher records and reporting to parents; and an external aspect comprising of national assessments and information gathered to pass on to secondary schools (2010, p.485). Assessment tools for AoL include standardised tests and tests at the end of a cycle of instruction, such as the Leaving Certificate. There is a belief amongst some parents and policy makers that summative assessments, such as increased testing, can increase standards (Harlen and Deakin Crick, 2003). However, Harlen and Deakin Crick (2003) argue that research into testing programmes has been used to show that increase in test scores over time is likely to be due to greater familiarity of teachers and pupils with the tests rather than increasing learning.

Harlen (2005) also states that research demonstrates that summative assessment, particularly high-stakes testing and examinations, has seriously detrimental effects on students' motivation for learning and highlights the importance of teachers' judgements. Harlen and Deakin Crick (2003), in a review of 19 studies, show that low achievers are doubly disadvantaged by summative assessment. Being labelled as failures has an impact, not just on current feelings about their ability to learn, but lowers further their already low self-esteem thus reducing the chance of future effort and success. Harlan and Deakin Crick (2003) also argue that the research shows that when they are accountable for test scores, teachers expend a great deal of time and effort in preparing students for the tests. Many teachers also go further and actively coach students in passing tests rather than spending time helping them to understand what is being tested. Harlen and Deakin Crick (2003) also highlight research which demonstrates the impact of the introduction of national testing on teachers' assessment practices. After the introduction of tests students regarded assessment interactions with their teachers as wholly summative, whereas prior to the tests the same students had regarded these as helping them to learn. Broadfoot states that "Whether the preoccupation with summative, numerical outcomes concerns individual students, institutional standards or even systems as a whole, the effect in every case is the same – a tendency to assume that accountability, especially when linked with competition, will, in itself, promote better levels of achievement" (1996a, p.24). The negative impact of national testing outlined in the literature review should be considered by policy makers when it comes to the development of national assessment policy. Whether this was the case in the Irish setting is examined in Chapters 6 and 7. Empirical research examining assessment of learning approaches is reviewed in Section 2.5.

Section 2.6 explores the confusion regarding the purpose and language of assessment in the literature.

2.4.3 The sociocultural approach to assessment

Wenger (1998) argues that identity is negotiated in social contexts through a constant process which relates the local to the global. He argues that the primary focus of education "must be on the negotiation of meaning rather than on the mechanics of information transmission and acquisition" (p.265). His approach is a sociocultural one, which is separate from a socio-constructivist perspective. A socio-constructivist approach emphasises that assessment should be done for and with the student, rather than something that is done to them. The learner is an active participant in their learning, learning from and with others is key and instruction is seen as intervention in the knowledge construction process (Gipps, 1999). However, Elwood (2006) argues that this does not constitute a fundamental shift from a cognitive-rationalist perspective as the view of mind remains the same: "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" (p.230). Elwood's wish that there should be a fundamental shift from a cognitive-rationalist perspective to a sociocultural one is troublesome using a Foucauldian lens. In Foucault's analysis, the history of a concept is not one of progressive refinement, but one of displacements and transformations. Any new conceptualisation interacts with and is changed by the prevailing discourse.

The sociocultural approach changes the dynamic between teacher and student significantly. Mind and learning is seen as non-local and is located in the interactions between people (Elwood, 2006). Assessment in this view needs to be understood as part of the social, historical and cultural context in which it is constituted. Elwood and Murphy (2015) argue that, in a sociocultural approach, "concepts are socially determined and acquired, and understanding is achieved through individuals appropriating shared meanings through discussion and negotiation" (p.187). The sociocultural view suggests that meanings are derived through interactions. Assessment needs to take into consideration "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). As such, assessment cannot ascertain ability but can rather describe the relationship between the learner, the teacher and the assessment task (Elwood, 2006). Fundamental to a sociocultural approach to assessment is a consideration that the practice is not neutral.

The sociocultural approach can be seen as playing a factor in issues of control and access in assessment in primary education. Bourdieu states that relations of domination are made, unmade and remade in and by the interactions between persons, and through social formations, such as schooling (2003; 1977). If the relation between teacher and pupil changes from a hierarchical one to one of partnership, this could have wider implication for society. If an approach to assessment that is truly sociocultural was developed by teachers, then pupils would have greater access to their own learning. They would be more able to identify the areas in which they are succeeding and in which they need to improve, and they would be capable of deciding how best to achieve these improvements. This would

shift the access of control from teachers and institutions to the learner. Foucault's argument would underscore that assessment is still a disciplinary mechanism and needs to be understood as such, even in Assessment for Learning approaches.

2.5 Review of empirical research in assessment

This section reviews some empirical research undertaken in the area of assessment. While care was taken to prioritise those articles concentrating on primary education, many important studies were completed in assessment in secondary education, which have insights for this dissertation. This is particularly true of the area of research with pupils, which is limited in primary education. The review of empirical research is compiled under four headings: 1) Studies on the purposes of assessment; 2) Teacher perspectives on assessment; 3) Pupil perspectives on assessment; and 4) Cultural issues regarding assessment.

2.5.1 Studies on the purposes of assessment

An earlier section of the literature review outlined how assessment is being used for curriculum control and evaluation of institutions (Section 2.2). It also demonstrates how a number of jurisdictions are introducing educational policies including changes to the use of assessment approaches, many of which are influenced by international comparative tests such as PISA. A number of empirical studies have examined this issue in recent years (Jager et al., 2012; Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Taylor Webb, 2006). These studies have found that the introduction of state-based examinations lead to a discernible teaching to the test

effect. This is true even in situations where the exams are low stakes for schools and teachers as there are no sanctions linked to them, and are low stakes for pupils as exam grades are based on outcomes of exit exams. When exams are introduced on a state-wide level, teachers narrow the curriculum to concentrate on those items included in the exam. This includes a tendency to leave aside topics relevant to everyday life and a failure to consider the interests of the pupils in the class. It also led to time spent on coaching and practice. Testing also occurred which was deemed to be high stakes as the results were published and were used as a tool for control and to encourage parents to select schools based on this information. As well as producing the narrowing of curriculum effects outlined previously, these exams also led to higher order thinking skills being neglected and a growth of a testing industry.

Taylor Webb (2006) outlines a "choreography of accountability" in which teachers generate performances of their work in order to satisfy accountability demands. He describes how "the steady flow surveillance, peer and otherwise, was so pervasive that participants noted how it regulated their practice even when surveillance mechanisms were not physically present—the threat of being watched was sufficient to fabricate practice in ways that were institutionally 'correct'" (2006, p.212). Morrison and Tang (2002) examine the assessment system in Macau. They note that it consists largely of the testing of students' ability to repeat book knowledge and facts. Children start being tested from age three. Three-year-olds sit examinations in school/kindergarten and students from age five are tested frequently – often on a fortnightly basis – in subjects including Chinese and English. Morrison and Tang found that teachers primarily use teacher-designed tests and observation as assessment tools and that there was a dearth of formative assessment approaches. They argue that tests and examinations dominate the kinds and amounts of

assessments and dominate the curriculum, reinforcing its rigidity and narrowness in Macau, and they also demotivate the pupils. However, Hargreaves and Moore (2000) discovered that an outcomes-based approach where equity goals are explicit can lead to beneficial consequences such as fostering stronger collegiality among teachers, and democratic inclusion of pupils and parents in the teaching and learning process. They show how, in Canada, teachers mediated policy proposals in practice by subverting the "the technical–rational logic of outcomes planning with a more emotionally engaged, inside-out approach to planning" (2000, p.35). Assessment policy and the impact of international testing is explored further in the next chapter.

Researchers have examined if assessment for learning approaches have any effects on outcomes (Constant and Connolly, 2014; Wiliam et al, 2004). Wiliam et al. (2004) explored the achievement of secondary school students in maths and science who worked in classrooms where teachers made time to develop formative assessment strategies (including self assessment, comment-only marking and sharing the objectives of the lessons). They found that teachers' practices were slow to change yet the intervention resulted in a mean effect size of 0.32 of a standard deviation. Research in an Irish primary context (Constant and Connolly, 2014) has demonstrated how the use of formative assessment approaches can affect pupils' academic efficacy. A key premise of this research is that pupils must develop their capacity to monitor the quality of their work. The researchers found that the provision of evaluation criteria by means of learning targets and rubrics enabled the pupils to better understand expectations and desired outcomes. The findings also demonstrated that the pupils were increasingly aware of the need to reflect cognitively on the processes involved in learning.

2.5.2 Teacher perspectives on assessment

The literature review demonstrates how developments in theories of learning and in epistemologies of knowledge led to changes in the conceptualisation of assessment over the past fifty years. Teachers are at the forefront in implementing these changes and a number of researchers have completed empirical research examining teachers' perspectives on assessment (Marlow et al., 2014; Leighton et al., 2010; Wyatt-Smith et al., 2010; Torrance, 2007; Marshall and Drummond, 2006; Brown, 2004; Yung, 2001). Assessment is currently utilised in education for a number of purposes, which have been outlined previously. Research (Brown, 2006) has demonstrated that teachers do not believe that assessment is irrelevant. Teachers agreed with the notion that assessment may be used to improve teaching and learning, and that it may also be used for school accountability purposes. However, the research also shows that teachers do not believe that assessment has any purpose in student accountability. This research implies that the implementation of any new assessment policy must take account of teachers' conceptions of assessment in order to succeed. Further research highlights the centrality and complexity of teacher judgement practice in such a policy context (Allal, 2013; Brookhart, 2013; Wyatt-Smith et al., 2010). In an Australian context teachers have stated standards by which they award grades. Wyatt-Smith et al. found that, while the stated standards are utilised by teachers, they are insufficient to fully account for how teachers ascribe grades. Other factors impact largely in this process, especially social and cognitive ones. Allal (2013) also highlights both the individual cognitive and the socially situated aspects of teachers' judgements. This research demonstrates that teachers can introduce adaptations in their procedures to take into account individual student specificities.

Assessment for learning approaches have been introduced in many jurisdictions in the past twenty years. In examining the success of assessment for learning approaches, it was found that there is a strong link between teachers' personal convictions and their successful implementation of assessment for learning practices (Lysaght, 2010; Marshall and Drummond, 2006; Yung, 2001). These practices were more likely to be used effectively if teachers took responsibility for the success or failure of pupil autonomy than those teachers who only implemented the procedures. This has implications for any implementation of reform in assessment practices as reform will not succeed unless teachers have a sense of agency and personal conviction about the changes. Difficulties or obstacles in instigating these reforms were only surmounted when the teachers believed themselves professionally responsible for the success of the reform (Marshall and Drummond, 2006). Lyzaght and O'Leary (2013) recognise these issues for teachers in the Irish primary education setting and developed an assessment for learning audit instrument. They found that most practices associated with AfL approaches were "at best emerging" (2013, p.225). However, Marlow et al. (2014) found that an assessment tool introduced in the UK to support a formative approach is used differently across schools and at times is used in a summative manner, which raises the question of how teacher assessments are used and their purpose.

Assessment for learning approaches also highlight the importance of the pupil's role in mediating their own learning. The teacher-pupil relationship is imagined as one of facilitation and partnership where the teacher assists the pupils in understanding any challenges they may be having and outlining how to improve their learning. As assessment also contains a summative role, where the teacher collects data and reports back to parents or the larger system, this leads to a tension

in the teacher's role. If there is an assessment innovation or initiative that is significantly different to the beliefs that teachers hold, the challenge on the teachers demand them to restructure their belief or 'domesticate' the reform so that it fits into their belief system (Yung, 2001). These findings are especially important at a time when large-scale testing in being introduced in many jurisdictions, including Ireland.

Other researchers have demonstrated that teachers do not believe in the efficacy of such tests (Leighton et al., 2010). Their research shows that teachers who believe that classroom tests provide more information about pupils' learning styles and progress, are more likely to influence meaningful learning, and are more likely to develop learning rather than test-taking strategies. Innovative assessment approaches that are too prescriptive have also led to problems in their implementation. A danger of this practice is that assessment becomes the totality of education – instead of assessment of learning or assessment for learning there is assessment as learning. Research (Torrance, 2007) has demonstrated how assessment can dominate the learning experience. Teachers can begin to use assessment for learning approaches to constitute the curriculum as opposed to aiding learning. Key components of assessment for learning, such as instructive feedback, can be interpreted very narrowly, with an overwhelming focus on criteria compliance and award achievement. Tunstall and Gipps (1996) demonstrate that primary teachers provide a variety of feedback to pupils in a school day. They classify the roles of feedback as socialisation, classroom management, performance orientation, mastery orientation, and learning orientation. They recommend the use of feedback based on learning orientation for formative assessment purposes. Murtagh (2014) found that, whilst teachers may claim that they make effective use of some feedback strategies to support pupils' learning and motivation, that this is not supported by

empirical data. This research demonstrates that when the locus of control regarding feedback lies with the teacher, it negatively affects pupils' intrinsic motivation. In an Irish primary education setting, Lyzaght and O'Leary (2013) found that feedback specifying the nature of progress is being established in classrooms. However, feedback from teachers designed to assist learning and the involvement of pupils in providing feedback to parents is not nearly as common. The next section will examine the empirical research involving pupil perspectives on assessment.

2.5.3 Pupil perspectives on assessment

Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith note that "there has been a pervasive silence around the rights of the child/student and the ways in which they have been positioned by testing and accountability priorities" (2012, p.76). Research is limited in this area, although there have been a number of studies in recent years (**primary school level**: Alkharusi (2008); Brookhart and Bronowicz, 2003; Moni et al., 2002; Weir and Milis, 2001; Reay and Wiliam, 1999; **secondary school level**: Smyth and Banks, 2012; Brown and Hirschfeld, 2008; Wang et al., 2006; Cowie, 2005; Smith and Gorard, 2005). This research demonstrates that pupils' perspectives differ depending on the type and purpose of assessment.

Bourdieu and Foucault theorise how assessment practices impact on a learner's identity. For Foucault, assessment is a disciplinary technique as students compare themselves with a norm and, in so doing, internalise power relations (1975). Bourdieu argues that pupils develop their perceptions of intelligence through the role of examinations and teacher feedback in this process (1977). Research has demonstrated that an assessment approach that focuses on test scores and summative

characteristics can lead to a pupil internalising these scores as fixed points (Wang et al, 2006; Reay and Wiliam, 1999). Pupils relate themselves to these scores, "I'm a 6 in Maths'. Such an approach hampers a pupil's potential to improve as they may believe that the score is as good as they will ever be. This also can lead to a teacher assuming that the child's current level cannot be improved upon, and to teach the child with these expectations in mind. This creates a cycle where the pupil can identify that the teacher expects less of him/her than another pupil and so responds accordingly. Such an approach can lead to a pupil viewing their ability as fixed and static, instead of something that is adjustable and can improve through effort. The pupils can also see these results as conflated with future prospects (Reay and Wiliam, 1999). Research in an Irish primary education setting (Weir and Milis, 2001) found that relationships between pupils' educational aspirations and expectations and their achievements are more linear: higher reading and mathematics scores are associated both with pupils wishing to remain in full-time education longer, and expecting to stay in education longer. These researchers also found that pupils who perceived themselves to be near the top of their class in reading and mathematics performed better in standardised tests than pupils who thought that they were near the bottom of the class. This questions the consequential validity of such assessment approaches.

Consequential validity refers to the impact of assessment on the teaching and learning context and the social consequences of the assessment information. Sambell et al. (1997) discovered that college students reacted very negatively when they discussed 'traditional' assessment approaches, such as examinations. They found that these complaints centred on the detrimental impact such assessments had on the learning process. They state that "one of the key ways in which students

evaluate various assessment techniques is to ask whether they are "fair" or "unfair". The issue of fairness, from the student perspective, is a fundamental aspect of assessment,...which is often overlooked or oversimplified from the staff perspective" (1997, p.362). These students felt that assessment was something that was done to them, rather than something in which they could play an active role. In an Irish second level context, researchers have found that high stakes exams also lead to pressure and stress on the pupils (Smyth and Banks, 2012). Pupils report to preferring active learning approaches. However, in situations where there is a high stakes end of school exam, pupils' views change as they show a strong preference for a narrowly focused approach to exam preparation. This reveals that young people shape and reshape themselves as learners as they move through the education system, and this can happen in response to the demands of the assessment approaches utilised. Other researchers have made similar findings (Brookhart and Bronowicz, 2003; Moni et al, 2002). Pupils can also identify how tests narrow the curriculum that is being taught by the teachers (Reay and Wiliam, 1999). In addition to this, children are also aware of the narrowing of the curriculum to focus on literacy and numeracy due to external standardised tests (Reay and Wiliam, 1999).

Research regarding pupils' conception of assessment for learning displays a similar finding as the research with teachers. Research with teachers demonstrated that assessment for learning approaches are more successfully implemented if there is a strong link between teachers' personal convictions and the new approaches. Research with pupils (Brown and Hirschfeld, 2008; Cowie, 2005) reveals that pupils with learning goals viewed assessment for learning as a joint teacher-pupil responsibility, whereas pupils with performance goals viewed assessment as the sole responsibility of the teacher. It also reveals that these pupils tend to achieve higher

grades. When pupils assess their own work, effort is identified as the most important factor. However, when it comes to standardised tests, pupils are aware that 'achieving' is the required outcome (Robinson and Fielding, 2010). Pupils also identify the affective and social purposes of assessment, as well as the cognitive purpose (Cowie, 2005; Moni et al., 2002). Pupils can identify the manner in which some tests displace a mutually supportive collaborative environment with a more individualised, competitive way of working (Reay and Wiliam, 1999). Alkharusi (2008) found that the shared perceptions of class members about the assessment environment might influence pupil's adoption of achievement goals. In creating an assessment environment, the form and nature of feedback is a key influencing factor in pupils' perceptions of assessment and their views of themselves as learners (Cowie, 2005; Smith and Godard, 2005; Moni et al., 2002). Pupils expressed a desire for more opportunities feedback, especially in a private setting, so that they could explore their misunderstandings and target problem areas. But research also demonstrates that what is crucial for pupil progress is the quality of the feedback provided (Smith and Godard, 2005). This includes providing guidance about how to improve as well as support to understand how to make the improvement.

2.5.4 Cultural issues regarding assessment

MacRuairc (2009) and Reay and Wiliam (1998) contend that there is bias present in the items in standardised tests. This bias can result in children from minority or working-class backgrounds performing less well than their peers. MacRuairc (2009) states that in his study of middle-class and working-class pupils in Ireland, the difference noted in their standardised test is down to the linguistic capital

of the two groups. The middle-class children had more access to the language of the test due to their home background.

The development of various pathologies of childhood can also have a lasting impact on a child's life. The burgeoning use of labels such as slow learner, ADD, ADHD, ODD, learning disability in the past fifty years can mask underlying problems with the educational system. By labelling the child in this way, the system can excuse itself of its responsibilities. In so doing, teachers and other pupils can create the disability by reacting as if it were a constant presence. Such labels, in Foucauldian terms, are also a disciplinary mechanism of the state. McDermott (2001) argues that children can acquire a learning disability through the process of schooling. He describes how Adam is "the negative achievement of a school system that insisted that everyone do better than everyone else" (McDermott, 2001, p.61). McDermott attributes learning disability to a deficit theory within the educational system which places the blame on the child rather than examining systemic responsibility. He argues that the language of schooling comes to us "biased with the social agendas of a school system that pits all children against all children in a battle for success" (2001, p.68). Children are evenly divided by a normative curve, with teachers attempting to identify deviations and classify children with a label.

In the USA, Espinosa (2005) documents how Black and Hispanic children enter kindergarten more than half a standard deviation below the national average in maths and reading achievement whereas White children scored far above the national average. The context of the school also plays a role in how pupils are identified. McCoy et al. (2012) found that, in Ireland, children attending highly disadvantaged primary school contexts are far more likely to be identified with behavioural problems and less likely to be identified with learning disabilities than

children with similar characteristics attending other schools. They demonstrate how boys are more likely than girls to be identified as having a special educational need (SEN); children from lower income families have a higher likelihood of being reported to have an SEN; and that there are much lower levels of SEN among children whose mothers have second-level and third level qualifications, and the converse is also true.

One aim of educational reform policies based on accountability measures is to raise standards, particularly in literacy and numeracy (education policy on assessment is explored in Chapter 3). Research has investigated whether performance-driven educational accountability policy enhances or hinders equity in achievement (Klenowski, 2009; McCarty, 2009; Lee and Wong 2004). McCarty (2009) demonstrates how reading scores for American Indian/Alaskan Natives (AI/AN) fourth- and eighth-graders did not change significantly between 2005 and 2007 when accountability policies were introduced (No Child Left Behind), and in some cases declined, while the performance of non-AI/AN students increased. Similarly, mean mathematics scores for AI/AN students did not change, while the scores of non-AI/AN students increased. He also showed how the emphasis on high-stakes testing tied to state standards in accountability based policies may lead schools to curtail or eliminate Native language and culture instruction. Klenowski (2009) reports similar findings for Australian Indigenous students. She states that Australia's Indigenous students consistently perform at levels well below non-Indigenous students across all content domains in international comparative tests. She argues that those who set the standards and the content of the tests have the power to privilege certain knowledge and groups, outlining the different social and cultural capital that are privy to some groups but outside the experience of others.

Lee and Wong (2004) found that Black-White and Hispanic-White maths achievement gaps have remained the same or have hardly changed as a result of accountability education policies.

The key empirical research findings for this dissertation are summarised as follows:

Table 1 Summary of key research findings in assessment

Heading	**Findings**
Studies on the purposes of assessment	• Assessment policies have changed in some countries in response to international tests • When exams are introduced, teachers teach to the test and narrow the curriculum • This can also lead to the neglect of other areas and higher order thinking skills
Teacher perspectives on assessment	• New assessment policies must take teachers' conceptions of assessment into account in order to succeed • Teachers do not believe in efficacy of large-scale tests
Pupil perspectives on assessment	• An assessment approach that focuses on test scores over effort can lead to pupils internalising these scores as fixed points • Pupils shape themselves as learners in response to the assessment approaches used • Feedback is a key influencing factor in pupils' perceptions of themselves
Cultural issues regarding assessment	• Bias is present in standardised tests • Identification of some SEN is linked to socioeconomic factors • Educational reform policies based on accountability measures do not raise standards for all children. Children from differing cultural backgrounds may be disadvantaged by these policies

2.6 Current challenges in the area of assessment

2.6.1 Differences regarding the purposes of assessment

Assessment is a highly contested area in educational circles (Newton, 2007; Black and Wiliam, 1999). There are a number of terms relating to assessment. The word assessment is based in the Latin root 'assidere', which means 'to sit beside' or 'assist in the office of a judge'. This captures two predominant theories about the purpose of assessment –it is used to assist a learner as they progress or it is used to evaluate and judge (Black, 2014). Some researchers argue that the term 'evaluation' should only be used in the context of the wider institution or system, others disagree with the notion of having predetermined norms or standards as targets for individual pupils, and others still assert that the teacher should not dominate or lead assessment, but that it should be a collaborative enterprise. O'Leary states that "a complicating factor in terms of assessment and decision-making is that key individuals or stakeholders in the educational system need to make different types of decisions" (2006, p.9). These are views that many have grappled with to try and bind them into a coherent system, up to the present day. Broadfoot and Black (2004) comment that a great deal of literature on assessment focuses on methodologies rather than questioning the validity of the approach or the suitability of its purpose. They state that "Perhaps the most important aspect of this topic is not the issue of what the specific purpose of any particular assessment activity is, but rather the extent to which the issue of purpose is made overt at all" (2004, p.10). They outline the tensions inherent in assessment policies which seek to meet outcomes-based accountability goals while encouraging life-long learning. They also question the merits of international assessment trends which emphasise quantitative approaches. They ask whether these approaches tend to reinforce outmoded notions of

curriculum content and student learning and speculate whether now is the time for the emergence of a new assessment paradigm born of the very different epistemologies and needs of the twenty-first century.

O'Leary (2006) offers another way in which to consider this issue. He separates assessment into classroom assessment and official assessment. Classroom assessment involves all the assessments that teachers and pupils engage with during normal teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Official assessment, on the other hand, refers to assessment that is used by teachers, schools, inspectors, policy makers and others to meet bureaucratic requirements. He outlines how classroom assessment is impacted by developments in theories of learning and development, whereas official assessment is effected by international comparative studies and the drive to increase standards. Biesta (2009) argues that there is a need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education, particularly in the light of a recent tendency to focus discussions about education almost exclusively on the measurement and comparison of educational outcomes. Biesta problematises the movement to improve education through testing by arguing that the aggregation and evaluation of data is not value free. He states that there needs to be greater debate about what is educationally desirable. Biesta also critiques the validity of these measures, asking "whether we are indeed measuring what we value, or whether we are just measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure" (2009, p.35). He argues that questions about what is educationally valuable have been replaced by the language of learning. He avers that this is an individualistic concept and a process term, and that what is being lost is "a recognition that it also matters what pupils and students learn and what they learn it for" (2009, p.39). He posits that education and assessment have three functions:

qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Each of these should be included in a composite response to the purpose of education and assessment.

2.6.2 Differences regarding the language of assessment

The area of assessment can be criticised for the interchangeable nature of the language that is used in the literature (Newton, 2007). This can lead to confusion in the terminology and purposes of various types of assessment. Table 2 outlines a number of these terms and where they lie in the assessment spectrum.

Table 2 Terminology utilised in assessment

Formative	Summative
• Assessment for learning • Qualitative • Authentic assessment • Embedded assessment • Learner-centred assessment • Dynamic assessment	• Assessment of learning • Quantitative • Quality assurance • Performance measuring • Accountability • System evaluation

Black (2014) argues that one might expect that any theory of pedagogy would include some way of clarifying the role of assessment. Yet he states that "assessment has received scant attention in the literature on pedagogy" (p.487). Black outlines a model of the role that assessment plays in pedagogy (2014, p.499):

A. First, clarify the aims; this often involves a balance between different priorities.

B. Plan the classroom activities which might best secure these aims.

C. Implement them in the classroom, through formative interactions.

D. Engage in an informal summative assessment designed to show up any weaknesses which will need attention if they will undermine future learning.

E. Engage in a formal summative assessment to give all stakeholders guidance to inform decisions about further choices to be made by or for each student.

Black and Wiliam (2009) define formative assessment as follows:

> "Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited" (p.9).

They believe that a greater understanding of this definition would help teachers to implement formative practices more effectively. They argue that summative tests can be used in a formative manner to move learning forward. Biggs (1998) agrees with this analysis and argues against creating dichotomies of assessment. He argues that there is a powerful interaction between formative and summative assessment and avers creating a synthesis of the two approaches. According to him, this would result in positive backwash from summative assessment, which would support the feedback from formative assessment.

Torrance (2014) believes that formative assessment is at a crossroads. He states that there are different theoretical justifications for the development of formative assessment and that its practice is often limited. Torrance describes how the literature on formative assessment outlines it as being a positive process, wholly focused on intended learning processes and outcomes. However, he disagrees with this: "My own view, on the contrary, is that all assessment is formative, of student

dispositions and self-identities as learners, as well as of knowledge and understanding, but not necessarily in a positive way" (2014, p.325). He believes that this is due to two differing philosophies of education underlying teachers' (and policy makers') approach to formative assessment: a behaviourist theory and a social constructivist theory. In another article (Torrance and Pryor, 2001), he outlines this difference more clearly by describing two approaches to formative assessment: convergent and divergent. In convergent assessment, the important thing is to find out if the learner knows, understands or can do a predetermined thing. Divergent assessment, on the other hand, emphasises the learner's understanding rather than the agenda of the assessor. Here, the important thing is to discover what the learner knows, understands and can do. Torrance and Pryor believe that this explains some of the confusion regarding the use of assessment methods. They argue that convergent assessment is based on a behaviourist theory of learning and can be seen as repeated summative assessment or continuous assessment, whereas divergent assessment is based on a social constructivist theory of learning and can be seen as accepting the complexity of formative assessment. Torrance (2014) argues for a transformative approach to assessment, the essential features of which comprise:

i) clarifying and thinking about the immediate task at hand: clarifying both 'task criteria' i.e. - what needs to be done to accomplish the task, and 'quality criteria' - i.e. what constitutes doing the task well;

ii) understanding the contingent nature of criteria and the fact that some can outweigh others in particular circumstances;

iii) meta-cognition-thinking about thinking and the transfer of over-arching criteria to other tasks and situations; for example, the coherence of an argument or the linking of conclusions to evidence...

iv) meta-cognition with respect to the nature of assessment and its legitimating role in the social order (p.337-8).

Similar to Torrance, Elwood and Murphy believes that there are two competing philosophies underlying this dichotomous approach to assessment: the legacy of psychometrics and the legacy of constructivism. They believe that this is largely responsible for the current tension between formative and summative approaches to assessment (2015). They argue that testing systems and exams such as PISA, as well as a move from nation-centric policy to global comparisons are part of the cultural script of the psychometric legacy. They argue that the constructivist approach "ignore the problematics of assessment as a socially constructed practice, value-laden and affected by the socially constituted nature of individuals in interaction with each other and within the assessment process" (2015, p.186) (see section 2.4.3 for further explanation). They assert that a sociocultural approach is necessary to break free from the dichotomous nature of assessment as it is framed currently. Elwood relates the sociocultural approach to a rights-based and equity one (2013; 2006). She states that a children's-rights framework to assessment based on three main children's rights principles of best interest, non-discrimination and participation would shift "the debates away from forms and types of assessment that dominate assessment research and policy domains to debates about social consequences and uses of assessment practice and action" (2013, p.217).

2.6.3 Differences regarding the nature of Assessment for Learning and formative assessment

Swaffield (2011) argues that AfL and formative assessment are not synonymous and states that they differ in six ways:

- Assessment for learning is a learning and teaching process, while formative assessment is a purpose and some argue a function of certain assessments;
- Assessment for learning is concerned with the immediate and near future, while formative assessment can have a very long time span;
- The protagonists and beneficiaries of assessment for learning are the particular pupils and teacher in the specific classroom (or learning environment), while formative assessment can involve and be of use to other teachers, pupils and other people in different settings;
- In assessment for learning pupils exercise agency and autonomy, while in formative assessment they can be passive recipients of teachers' decisions and actions;
- Assessment for learning is a learning process in itself, while formative assessment provides information to guide future learning; and
- Assessment for learning is concerned with learning how to learn as well as specific learning intentions, while formative assessment concentrates on curriculum objectives" (p.443).

Swaffield believes that, in England, the AFL approach has been misappropriated in national policies due to this confusion. She argues that the predominant portrayal of pupils in English educational assessment policy is "people to whom things are done" and that this is at odds when the intention of AfL (2011, p.446). This is an important insight for this dissertation's examination of the assessment approach contained in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*.

Newton outlines three overarching purposes to assessment in education: i) Judgmental level – standards-referenced judgement (grades, etc.); ii) Decision level – how assessment info is used (e.g. selection to higher education); iii) Impact level – intended impact on students (e.g. that they learn core skills) (2007, p.150). He notes

that "each of the three discrete meanings hold distinct implications for the design of an assessment system. This means that each of them needs to be addressed separately" (2007, p.150). He argues that the distinction between formative and summative assessment is "spurious" and contends that "the confusion that it has engendered has not been benign and, to some extent, has actually hindered the development of sound assessment practice" (2007, p.151). Newton summarises the argument as follows:

> " (1) the distinction between formative and summative is frequently prioritized in theoretical discussions (rather than, say, diagnostic versus summative, or formative versus evaluative); that is, the formative versus summative distinction is assumed somehow to be fundamental
>
> (2) people often seem to think that the distinction turns on the nature of the assessment event itself
>
> (3) it now seems to be generally accepted—at least within academic circles—that the distinction turns on the nature of the assessment purpose, i.e., the use to which assessment judgements will be put
>
> (4) summative assessment (but not formative assessment) is associated with a variety of different purposes" (p.155).

Newton argues that there is no clear distinction between the purposes of summative and formative. For him, the term 'summative' can only meaningfully characterize a type of assessment judgement, while the term 'formative' can only meaningfully characterize a type of use to which assessment judgements are put. Newton argues that in order to avoid confusion, "we need to use the language of assessment with greater precision. We may talk of a formative purpose, to indicate the use to which a result is put, but we ought not to talk of a summative purpose. Likewise, we may talk of a summative judgement, but we ought not to talk of a formative one" (2007, p.157).

2.6.4 Teacher understanding and the role of the pupil in assessment

The section in this chapter reviewing empirical research demonstrated that assessment approaches are only successful if teachers fully believe in them. Black et al. (2006) outline three practices that need to develop for the successful implementation of AfL approaches: 1) the learner must be actively involved in the learning, and that such involvement ought to take place in social and community discourse; 2) emphasis on giving comment-only feedback on written work, with the requirement that pupils respond to the comments by further work; 3) development of peer- and self-assessment. Harlen and James (1997) argue that it is essential to provide continuing professional development to teachers with both formative and summative assessment approaches. This should disentangle the two and provide teachers with guidance on the type of feedback from teachers which will increase pupil motivation and ownership of their learning. However, research in an Irish primary setting (Lyzaght and O'Leary, 2013) demonstrates the tension between the more traditional, teacher-led approaches to assessment and pupil-led approaches. This also highlights the potential difficulty of encouraging teachers to implement AfL in a way that changes the teacher-pupil relationship. More research conducted in an Irish context (Constant and Connolly, 2014) suggest that one area of progression would be to draft whole school policies regarding formative assessment. Such policies would "validate the implementation of formative assessment at all class levels and outline practices and procedures appropriate to varying ages and abilities" (Constant and Connolly, 2014, p.44).

While the effect of assessment on education systems and on teachers has been relatively well researched over the past one hundred years, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to the role of the pupil and pupil perspectives on

assessment. Reay and Wiliam (1999) argue that there is virtually no literature which engages with pupils' perspectives on assessment. Much of the research on assessment analyses pupil performance in tests and seeks to identify the causes of any increases or decreases in test scores. However, a child's time in school is a large influence on the development of their personalities and affects their future life possibilities and prospects. Bruner (1996) describes two aspects of Self: agency and evaluation. For him, agency is intrinsically linked with the manner in which a culture institutionalises concepts of selfhood. Crucial to this is evaluation, which is the manner in which a school assesses a pupil and how the child responds by evaluating him or herself (Broadfoot, 1996b; Bruner, 1996). Some recent research has demonstrated how a child's view of assessment can colour their perceptions of themselves as learners and lead to them developing a limited outlook as to what they can achieve in school and beyond. It appears that the key to avoiding this scenario is the language used when talking about assessment to pupils, and in the way that teachers inform pupils about the purposes of the tests that they are undertaking.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the literature on assessment in education. It has used five headings to demarcate the literature: Assessment in social and historical perspective; Changes in the practice and the philosophy of assessment; Assessment in the social world of the classroom; Review of some empirical research in assessment; and Current challenges in the area of assessment. The work of Foucault and Bourdieu was utilised to examine themes of power in the literature, focusing on

discourse, control and access. The main points that are of relevance to this dissertation are:

- There is confusion surrounding the various terms utilised in reference to assessment
- Different theories of learning lead to different emphases on the purposes and types of assessment.
- A postmodern perspective offers a critique of the objectiveness of assessment instruments
- What is and what is not assessed, the nature of assessment and how it takes place, as well as the purpose and effects of assessment all provide insights into what knowledge and skills are valued by a society
- Pupils' perspectives on assessment are widely overlooked in literature and policy
- Assessment practices influence pupil identity and achievement
- International comparative tests such as PISA are having an increasing influence on assessment policy in a variety of countries.

CHAPTER 3 LITERATURE REVIEW ON ASSESSMENT POLICY IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines assessment policy in primary education. It outlines literature that identifies emerging trends in assessment policy. Gillies states that, in policy analysis, it is important to recognise the aims of the modern politician, that educationalists must keep up the pressure, and that there is a need to challenge the prevailing discourse and expose its limitations (2008, p.425-426). Williams et al (2013) state that educational policy development is now influenced by networks of documents, events and bodies that transcend borders and hemispheres. This chapter outlines a theoretical perspective for critiquing educational policy. It investigates the role of various discourses in the development of educational policy. It then examines literature on the conceptualisation of educational policy in assessment. It also explores literature on the development and implementation of educational policy in assessment in a variety of jurisdictions. It pays particular attention to the United Kingdom and the United States as these have been seen to have an effect on educational policy in Ireland historically (Chapter 4). It also examines the influence of the OECD in the development of assessment policy in the last twenty years. The chapter examines the themes of power, especially discourse, access and control and refers to the work of Foucault and Bourdieu to develop these themes. As mentioned in section 1.2, Foucault and Bourdieu's work influences that of Stephen Ball. This chapter outlines theoretical perspectives to be used throughout the dissertation's analysis of policy based on the work of Ball.

3.2 Theoretical perspectives

Stephen Ball (1950 –)

This doctoral thesis examines the government strategy, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*, in regard to its theorisation and implementation of an assessment system in primary education in Ireland. Stephen Ball is a critical policy analyst whose role is "to examine the moral order of reform and the relationship of reform to existing patterns of social inequality, bringing to bear those concepts and interpretive devices which offer the best possibilities of insight and understanding" (1994, p.2). Ball is influenced by the work of Foucault and Bourdieu, especially in his conceptualisation of power and discourses. He offers two conceptual imaginings of policy that are useful to this dissertation: 1) education policy and the wider context; 2) tools for analysing policy.

3.2.1 Education policy and the wider context

Ball (2015) states that, in education today, we are subject to a technology of classification, selection and exclusion. He believes that the primacy of enumeration has come to dominate education policy making: "Numbers define our worth, measure our effectiveness and, in a myriad of other ways, work to inform or construct what we are today. We are subject to numbers and numbered subjects" (2015, p.299). Ball argues that what is being lost in UK education is "any kind of discourse of civic virtue or social ethics" (1994, p.144). The majesty of the market is advanced above all else. Ball argues that an 'Economy of power' runs through four essential circuits within the educational system: curriculum, assessment, pedagogy,

and organisation. He believes these are the four message systems of education (1994, p.1). Ball avers that policy as politics, as ideology "is apparently replaced by policy as rationality – efficiency replacing social justice" (1990, p.59). He outlines what he terms a New Right discourse whose fundamentals include parental choice, competition between schools and devolved organisation. He states that, in Britain, the market is being used as a disciplinary mechanism. Ball argues that the discourse of management is a key feature of the current reform of education. He argues that the promotion of self-management, such as devolved organisation and school self evaluation, articulates self-regulation with a "microtechnology of control" (1994, p.66). This technique aims to create a situation where school management internalises the judgement criteria provided by the government. This is a modern equivalent of Foucault's theory of disciplinary mechanisms. Furthermore, according to Ball, this microtechnology of control ramifies "the value and cultural changes set in train by finance-led decision making and competition" (1994, p.66). This is reminiscent of Bourdieu's explanation of habitus and gives an insight into the themes of discourse, control and access in assessment in primary education in Ireland.

In this discourse, assessment is more centralised and standardised. It is utilised as a means of differentiating between students and identifying poor schools, as well as providing the information system that will drive the education market (Ball, 1994). Assessment in this outlook aims to bridge the "neoliberal, free-market concern for the making of comparisons between schools and teachers, in order to facilitate informed parental choice, and the neo-conservative distrust both of teachers and of new teacher-based forms of assessment" (1990, p.52). Ball (Gewirtz, Ball

and Bowe, 1995) outlines how assessment in schools may be affected by a market-driven approach. In this approach assessment is recontextualised as 'performance indicators', which as well as providing information to allow consumers to make the best choice, also orient the provision of education towards certain goals and purposes. This could lead to a narrowing of the scope of schooling to exclude the social dimensions of education. In this view, particular groups of students are valued more than others, namely those pupils who perform well in the standardised or national tests. This is a reductive exercise as there is "no requirement for schools to publish information on the expressive, cooperative and community aspects of schooling, on levels of enjoyment, happiness, stimulation and challenge for teachers and students, on degrees of innovation and creativity in school approaches to teaching and learning" (Gewirtz et al., 1995, p.174). Such an approach can also lead to the commodification of schooling and the child as, through more importance being placed on national standardised exams, the emphasis changes to what the child can do for the school, as opposed to what the school can do for the child. This has significant implication for analysing the theme of access in this dissertations' understanding of the new literacy and numeracy policy in Ireland. However, the work of Foucault asks that we explore the underlying narrative in the development of a policy. While Ball's work offers some insights about a pan-national approach to policy critique by outlining emerging trends, Foucault's archaeological approach is influential in this dissertation in that it grounds the examination of emerging trends in the specific local context in which policy is enacted.

For example, Ball (1998) outlines five elements of transnational influence that can be used to examine educational policy:

1. Neoliberalism or the ideologies of the market

2. New institutional economics, including devolution, targets and incentives, e.g. School Improvement.

3. Performativity, which is an indirect steering mechanism replacing prescription with target setting, accountability and comparison.

4. Public choice theory.

5. New managerialism.

This chapter will later examine transnational influence on assessment policy in primary education (section 3.3). It will pay particular attention to the effect of the comparative assessments organised by the OECD on assessment policy in a number of jurisdictions. The Republic of Ireland is one such country that participates in these OECD tests. The section will refer to the work of Ball to examine trends in the development of assessment policy across a number of countries. However, the section also demonstrates how individual countries enact policies in culturally specific ways.

3.2.2 Tools for policy analysis

Ball argues that policy analysis is too complex for one theory, what is needed is "a toolbox of diverse concepts and theories" (1994, p.14). He offers two different conceptualisations of policy: a) policy as text; and b) policy as discourse (1994, p.15). Policy is neither one nor the other, but both.

a) policy as text: "A policy is both contested and changing, always in a state of 'becoming', of 'was' and 'never was' and 'not quite'" (1994, p.16). It is

important to understand the views of policy makers in conceptualising and developing the policy text. Ball offers three strategies to create a framework when interviewing policy makers: i) political; ii) ideological; iii) economic. Such a framework "leads to a dynamic consideration of education policy *in relation to* the political and ideological and the economic, and the political, ideological and economic *in* education policy" (Ball, 1990, p.9, italics in original).

b) policy as discourse: Discourse is a key theme of this dissertation. Foucault and Bourdieu both highlighted the need to examine not only what is said but what is unsaid in policy development. Ball asserts that "we need to appreciate the way in which policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercise power through a *production* of 'truth' and 'knowledge', as discourses" (1994, p.21). This dissertation examines *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* in such a fashion in the Chapter 6.

Ball distinguishes between first order and second order effects of policy. First order effects relate to changes on practice or structure. Second order effects refer to the impact of these changes on patterns of social access, opportunity and social justice (1994, p.26-26). According to Ball, an essential component of critical social research is analysing the context of political strategy. He argues that it is important to criticise the workings of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent (1994, p.26-27). Ball (1990) outlines three possibilities of educational change through policy developments:

i) Policy changes in education can be traced to ideological shifts and changing patterns of influence within governing parties, and institutions (1990, p.15).

ii) Correspondence between education and the economy – Education would be subject to and, in part, agent of a particular mode of regulation, and a particular hegemonic project (1990, p.9).

iii) The role of discourses – Discourses construct certain possibilities for thought (1990, p.18).

Ball calls these frameworks "a set of tools with which to begin to try to explain things" (1990, p.18). The following table summarises the key insights provided by Ball in analysing assessment policy and their use in this dissertation.

Table 3 Insights provided by Ball in analysing assessment policy

Key insight	**Use in dissertation**
Education policy and the wider context - discourse	• Literature review of assessment policy in education
Transnational influence on policy	• Literature review of comparative tests in education and their effect on assessment policy • Analysis of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*
Policy as text Three strategies for interviewing policy makers: i) political; ii) ideological; iii) economic	• Analysis of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* • Design and analysis of interviews with policy makers
Policy as discourse	• Literature review of assessment policy in education • Interviews with policy makers • Questionnaires with teachers • Focus groups with pupils
First order effects of policy	• Impact of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* on teachers' practice
Second order effects of policy	• Impact of assessment use outlined in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* on teachers and pupils
Three possibilities of educational change through policy developments: i) ideological shifts; ii) education and the economy; iii) discourses	• Literature review of education policy on assessment.

The literature review continues with a conceptualisation of education policy on assessment using Ball's description of three possibilities of educational change through policy developments: 1) Policy changes in education due to ideological shifts; 2) Correspondence between educational policy and the economy; and 3) The role of discourses.

3.3 Conceptualisation of education policy on assessment in the literature

3.3.1 Policy changes in education due to ideological shifts

Ball argues that "policy can no longer be 'thought' or 'thought about' within the limits of the nation state and national boundaries" (2009, p.538). Changes in educational policy due to ideological shifts need to be examined closely. Bourdieu outlined how education can reproduce the values of the dominant culture through notions of cultural capital and habitus. Foucault's theory of governmentality outlines how power relations are internalised by subjects and that these are not scrutinised or examined. This section highlights the importance of examining the underlying ideology which is influencing educational policy changes. Gewirtz et al. (1995) argue that researchers must allow for local differences, histories and idiosyncrasies. However they state that "the importance of the specifics of local circumstances should not be allowed to obscure general patterns and trends that are evident across settings" (p.180). Levin (2010) states that many efforts have been made to address education issues through policy at various levels. He argues that, when analysing these efforts, "one can only conclude that they have often been motivated more by untested assumptions or beliefs, or by issues currently in the public mind, than by evidence of value or potential impact" (2010, p.739). Changes

in educational policy on assessment have been motivated by results in comparative international tests, mainly organised by the OECD. There is clear evidence of policy makers reacting to these results, especially when the results have been negative (which will be reviewed in the empirical section of this chapter – 3.4.2). The assumptions underlying the PISA tests are not examined by policy makers or the wider public and they are seen as a true indicator of a country's educational performance (Eivers, 2010, Resnik, 2006). This has led to policy adjustments in education, including in the purpose and use of assessment.

Goldstein and Lewis state that international comparisons are "so fraught with difficulties that there are serious questions about its very legitimacy" (1996, p.3). Many of these difficulties were outlined in Chapter 2 (section 2.2.2). However, Broadfoot and Black (2004) comment that there is now a world trade in educational policies, especially with regard to assessment. They highlight the phenomenon of 'policy borrowing', where apparently good ideas from one country are taken and implemented by another. The poster nation of the PISA effect is undoubtedly Finland. Researchers have reported that policy makers from other European countries are now attempting to replicate Finnish policy to boost their PISA rating (Dobbins and Martens, 2012; Grek, 2009). Yet, Finnish authorities were surprised by their success. When the results were published, the Finnish government were about to redraft their policies, using Germany as a guideline (Grek, 2009). Rautalin and Alasuutari demonstrate how the Finnish government takes credit for positive aspects of the PISA report and disassociates itself from less complimentary elements. They argue that the government invokes PISA "when justifying the decisions made or to be made in Finnish education" (2009, p.543). Williams et al. state that educational policy also travels across countries and that these policies bring with

them conceptualisations of learning and assessment: “educational policy travels on a global scale carrying particular discourses and practices of educational change, innovation and improvement” (2013, p.792).

Lingard et al. (2013) argue that there has been a development of a ‘metapolicy’ in educational assessment around the world. They state that, as part of this globalisation of education policy, there is also a globalised educational discourse which “suggests that high-stakes standardised testing will drive up standards, and enhance the quality of a nation’s human capital and thus their international economic competitiveness “ (2013, p.540). They also note that these discourses manifest themselves in localised ways in various countries, what they term a ‘vernacular globalisation’ of education policy. Lingard et al. argue that the use of data from quantative comparative tests to improve education systems is an example of global panopticism. This is a Foucauldian term that refers to the use of data as a regulatory mechanism which has disciplining effects at a macro and micro level. Due to relatively poor results in the 2003 and 2006 PISA tests, France, Germany, Norway, and Turkey have undertaken reforms of their education systems (Dobbins and Marten, 2012; Grek, 2009; Skedsmo, 2011; Gur et al., 2012). Gur et al. state that, in the Turkish context, policymakers “outspokenly referenced the concepts, values, and skills borrowed from the educational discourse of a globalising world and the European Union” (2012, p.5). These reforms have uniformly consisted of an increased focus on outcomes. They have also concentrated on a narrow definition of success which is linked to achievements in literacy and numeracy. This is examined further in the section reviewing empirical research (3.4.2.1). Sahlberg sees these changes as part of a Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) (2011, p.175).

He outlines six features of this movement and their impact on education (2011, p.177-179):

(i) Standardisation: The belief amongst policy makers that setting clear and sufficiently high performance standards for schools, teachers and pupils will improve the quality of desired outcomes.

(ii) Increased focus on literacy and numeracy: Basic knowledge in literacy and numeracy are now seen as indicators of success or failure for schools, teachers, pupils and the system as a whole. Sahlberg notes the influence of PISA on this trend.

(iii) Teach for predetermined results: Approaches emphasising the achievement of standards are adopted. Experimentation, alternative approaches and risk-taking are minimised.

(iv) Transfer of innovation from corporate to the educational world: Educational policies are lent and rented from the business world, often facilitated by international development organisations.

(v) Test-based accountability policies: School performance is tied to the processes of accrediting, promoting, inspecting and rewarding or punishing schools. The success or failure of schools is determined by standardised tests and external evaluations.

(vi) Increased control of schools: Centrally mandated educational standards narrow the space for teachers to create optimal learning environments.

These are similar to Ball's five elements of transnational influence (1998) discussed in section 3.2.1. Sahlberg's GERM hypothesis is used to examine the

literacy and numeracy strategy in Chapter 6. The PISA effect has been recognised in many jurisdictions across the OECD. As referred to in Chapter 2, in 2014, over eighty academics signed a letter asking the OECD to postpone the next round of PISA tests (section 2.2.2). The influence of the GERM hypothesis and the PISA tests in Ireland is examined in Chapters 6 and 7.

Gewirtz et al. (1995) argue that the market solution gives politicians "all the benefits of being seen to act decisively and very few of the problems of being blamed when things go wrong" (p.1). In this scenario, the market weeds out the weak and rewards the strong. These authors state that the market solution entails a paradigm shift in educational policy in three ways: i) from principles of collective responsibility to power of individual/consumer choice; ii) replacement of professional control with managerial control; iii) diminution of the roles of the powers of the local state and the concomitant diminution of local democracy (p.2). These are similar to the features of GERM as outlined by Sahlberg. Under a market solution, performance indicators (tests) "are intended to provide the system of information and knowledge which is so important in any market, in allowing consumers to make the 'best' choices. But they also orient the provision of education towards certain goals and purposes" (p.3). A Foucauldian analysis demonstrates how performance indicators inculcate a sense of what is the appropriate manner of completing a task. Performance indicators also lead to the creation of a particular type of pupil as the pupil is comparing him/herself against standards. This leads to the internalisation of power relations. Bourdieu's theories also demonstrate how such performance indicators become arbitrators of cultural capital by designating what is or is not acceptable.

Gewirtz at al. (1995) argue that an emphasis on competition and standards have had certain effects on schools in the UK: i) Short-term and superficial solutions to problems; ii) many schools pass the buck of responsibility for the most socially and educationally vulnerable. This may lead to segregation by class in the school systems; iii) schools introduce practices that led to increased social segregation and provisional differentiation; iv) the market appears to be effecting a redefinition and a narrowing of scope of schooling to exclude the social dimensions of education; v) by promoting a view of schooling and children as commodities, the market may be generating a new 'hidden curriculum' of the school (p.156-7). A premise of these authors' analysis is "particular groups of students are being valued in the marketplace more than others" (1995, p.174). Gewirtz et al. state that in the UK "there is no requirement for schools to publish information on the expressive, cooperative and community aspects of schooling, on levels of enjoyment, happiness, stimulation and challenge for teachers and students" (p.174). The dissertation's themes of access and control are particularly important in this instance. Bourdieu argues that this could lead to a racism of intelligence. In Bourdieu's argument, the unequal distribution of cultural capital leads people to believe that they deserve to be in the position in which they find themselves. It is important to explore whether this emphasis on competition and standards in assessment policy is also present in the Irish setting. This dissertation explores this issue in later chapters (Chapter 6 and 7).

3.3.2 Correspondence between educational policy and the economy

Ball also posits there is a growing correspondence between educational policy and the economy. This is particularly true of assessment policy as this gives

an indication of what is valued in an education system and in society in general. Allais states that "recent national education policy documents from many different countries, as well as documents from influential international organizations, suggest that a new policy direction, sometimes referred to as a new education (or learning) paradigm, is emerging" (2012, p.254). She argues that policies which constitute this 'new paradigm' are "qualifications frameworks, outcomes-based curriculum reforms and competency-based training in the reform of vocational education" (2012, p.254). Allais links this new paradigm to a neo-liberal agenda. As an ideology, neo-liberalism argues for states to do as little as possible. "Reformers have attempted to lessen or remove differences between the public and the private sector and shift the emphasis from process accountability towards a greater element of accountability in terms of 'results'" (Hood 1995; Pollit 1998 cited in Allais, 2012, p.259). She also demonstrates that there are competing ideologies in an outcomes-based approach and can make neo-liberalist policies attractive to a broad range of people:

> On the one hand there is a child-centred 'psychological' conception of competence conception that can be traced back to Rousseau, which implies that all learners can reach their potential if they are freed from the constraints that inhibit their 'natural' capacity to learn. On the other hand, there is the notion of competence associated with 'post-Fordist' economic developments, which calls for flexible learners always willing to take up new training opportunities (Allais, 2012, p.260).

Carter (2010) offers a similar analysis. For her, "neoliberal global discourses on education and knowledge economy/global information society have co-opted humanist visions of active learning within democratic and collaborative environments to its own purposes of human capital development" (2010, p.230). She begins by explaining that neoliberalism is driving a rush to standards and

accountability in education. Neoliberalism has become common sense (p.225). She names the World Bank, OECD and World Trade Organisation as organisations complicit in this sprint, which effects policy at a national level – "privatisation, corporatisation, managerial intensification, increased surveillance and accountability, internal competition, and devolved responsibility" (2010, p.225).

However, Williams et al, (2013) are ambivalent about the ubiquitous nature of neoliberalism. Ball (20102) comments that neo-liberalism is "one of those terms that is used so widely and so loosely that it is in danger of becoming meaningless" (p.3). Apple (2004) outlines two differing views of neo-liberalism: neo-liberal inspired market proposals and neo-liberal, neo-conservative, and middle class managerial inspired regulatory proposals. He also notes that the neo-liberal emphasis of the market has been significantly mediated in countries with stronger histories of social democratic policies and visions of collective freedoms (e.g. Nordic countries). He avers that "any analysis of the current play of forces surrounding conservative modernization (should be) aware of the fact that such movements are not only in constant motion but once again we need to remember that they also have a multitude of intersecting and contradictory dynamics" (2004, p.27). I share Apple's, Williams et al. and Ball's view of neoliberalism in that it cannot be used as a catch-all term to explain all recent trends in educational policy development. However there are prevailing discourses associated with neoliberalism as identified by Allais and Carter that are relevant to my dissertation. Apple (2004) states that these prevailing discourses mean that common sense is being radically altered. This is one of the key themes of power that is being examined throughout the doctoral study. Foucault's archaeological method emphasises the importance of exploring the broader context in which a policy was written (1.2.1.1). This method explores the

origins of discourses and also the relations between them. Allais uses such an approach to outline how neoliberalism employs the language of different ideologies in an outcomes-based approach to make it attractive to a broad range of people. Bourdieu's notion of habitus represents the unspoken or unexamined influences in educational policy (1.2.2.1). Habitus creates an environment where certain opinions or thoughts are valued more than others and become the dominant discourse. This doctoral study examines if elements of a neoliberal agenda are influencing factors in developing assessment policy in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (Chapters 6 and 7).

In US, Darling-Hammond and Falk found that, due to high-stakes testing, "Instruction has begun to mimic not only the content but also the limited formats and low cognitive demands of tests" (1997, p.52). Ball is highly critical of the system in the UK. UK schools were judged on raw scores as opposed to value added methods. Ball states that "the best schools are not those which achieve most in terms of student learning but those which are able to sift and select their intake most rigorously. Hence it is of vital importance who controls the indicators, for what purpose indicators are used and whose interests the indicators serve" (1994, p.112). The burgeoning link between education and the economy can weaken the social goals of education. Gewirtz et al. (1995) state that, in the UK, *"The emphasis seems increasingly to be not on what the school can do for the child but on what the child can do for the school*" (p.176, italics in original). An over-emphasis on standards or a reductive approach to the aims of education can mean a re-orientation in the dynamics of schools. Gewirtz et al. (1995) argue that "The sense of what education is and is for, the nature of the social relationships of schooling, teacher-student and

student-student relationships are potentially all changed by the forces and micro-practices of the market" (p.177). The transfer of innovation from the corporate to the educational world is one of the features that Sahlberg identified as being part of the GERM movement. This dissertation examines the economic influences in the development of the *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* strategy, as well as identifying the discourses surrounding its evolution (Chapter 6). The role of discourses in educational policy development on assessment is examined in the next section of the current chapter.

3.3.3 The role of discourses

Policy as discourse "allows an exploration of how the objects, the subjects and the concepts of the public (and private) space are shaped as well as of how actors' responses to policies themselves are socially constructed" (Grimaldi, 2012, p.448). Grimaldi (2012) notes that the policy process empowers some subjects who use specific technical language. This can give these subjects greater authority and status. Lingard et al. (2013) and Robert (2012) also note this phenomenon and critique the role of 'expert groups' in policy formation. The advice from these groups is used to make "the decision appear 'natural', while presenting it as the implementation of principles which are acknowledged as neutral and universal (be they scientific, technical or legal) and not as a matter of political choice" (Robert, 2012, p.427). Grimaldi argues that "Policies and the wider discourses culturally shape the fields within which actors enact their strategic conduct, contributing to the definition of both the possibilities of thought and the rules of the game" (2012, p.451). Sellar and Lingard (2013) highlight the role of the OECD in global

governance in education. They argue that the OECD has increased its agency through intrastructural governance, which is a product of international networks, and through epistemological governance, which demonstrates its capacity to shape the views of key stakeholders. The authors highlight the importance of local difference in the development of various countries' interpretation of global education policy.

Williams et al. (2013) describe a move away from government towards forms of polycentric governance where "policy is produced through multiple agencies and multiple sites of discourse generation" (p.793). They highlight a set of relations and discourses in the Australian context, which led to new educational policies. These interactions include the Australian curriculum, the OECD, the Australian Council for Educational Research, the UK national curriculum, the Scottish curriculum, key competencies, an employability skills framework, and the US partnership for 21st century skills, amongst others. These arguments are reminiscent of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (section 1.2.2.2). Those with greater access to the language and process of policy making are deigned to have greater authority. This leads to the marginalisation of other groups who may not have the language or the status that can affect the development of a policy. This will be explored further in the Chapter 6's analysis of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*.

Ball argues that, in the UK, the discourse of 'management' is "a key feature of the current reform of education" (1994, p.65). Self-management "articulates self-regulation with a microtechnology of control and ramifies the value and cultural changes set in train by finance-led decision making and competition. In other words, it is a disciplinary practice" (p.66). Self-management is "a mechanism for ensuring

the delivery of the National Curriculum, and it ties classroom practice, student performance, teacher appraisal, school recruitment and resource allocation into a single tight bundle of planning and surveillance" (p.71). As a result of this, "it becomes possible to blame the schools for the faults and difficulties inherent in or created by the policies" (p.80). Sahlberg also believes that self management of schools is an aspect of the GERM movement. This aspect of power is an important theme of the doctoral study. An important aspect of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* is the introduction of mandatory standardised testing in primary schools. Schools are encouraged to use this information to develop School Improvement Plans. A Foucauldian analysis argues that the introduction of self-management of schools is a disciplinary mechanism of the state. The state is exercising its control by ascribing the information to be gathered and the manner in which it is to be used. School management and teachers are instruments of the state, exercising power through the accumulation of this information. This gives rise to a particular type of power relation between teacher and pupil, management and teacher, and Department and management, and is considered further in the findings and analysis chapters (Chapter 7, 8 and 9).

3.4 Literature on the development and implementation of educational policy on assessment

This section explores the literature on the development and implementation of educational policy on assessment. The first subsection outlines some analysts' views on key trends emerging in the policy development process. These are then related to the work of Foucault and Bourdieu and their relevance to this dissertation

is outlined. The second subsection investigates empirical research undertaken in the implementation of assessment policy.

3.4.1 The role of consultation and 'spin' in the policy development process

Foucault's notion of governmentality offers an analytical framework for examining policy formation, which focuses on an archaeology of knowledge. It investigates the limits and forms of the sayable; the limits and forms of conservation; the limits and forms of memory; the limits and forms of reactivation; and the limits and forms of appropriation. A key element of this is the role of discourses. Discourses are extremely influential as they create the context in which the policy is developed. An example of a discourse that is prevalent in the development of educational policies at present, including those on assessment, is the notion of a consultative approach. Gillies (2008) is critical of the current practice of policy development in a number of countries. He states that there is an increased focus on consultation (p.423). This could be seen as "good democratic practice, a creative response to the crisis of democratic legitimacy triggered by low election turnouts, encouraging 'policy ownership', or in hegemonic terms as an exercise in 'discourse capture' (Trowler 2003, 132–3)" (p.423). In this view, participation on the government's terms, on issues of the government's choice, helps to establish that agenda as a shared one. Gillies (2008) states that it is common for consultation to take the form solely of focused questions on specific aspects of a policy proposal, often dealing with how the policy is to be implemented rather than examining the policy's actual rationale. Gillies does not believe that this represents true consultation. He argues that the agenda is pre-set by the government, which means

that people cannot legitimately respond. For Gillies, "the public opinion being sought has already been discursively shaped. What emerges could reasonably be described as more echo chamber than debating chamber politics" (2008, p.424).

Gillies (2008) states that recently, "There emerges a concern not just with government and its practices but also with the presentation of government" (p.416) and ponders how does this effect education policy. He outlines how "government officials will attempt to promote a particular perception of a phenomenon with a view to influencing how the media in turn then report this to the public" (p.418). This leads to direct and indirect spin on the policy document. Gewirtz et al. (2004) argue that "spin is not simply 'done to' a policy, but is also something which 'makes up' a policy" (p.327). They stress that, in evaluating policies, "we need to see spin as an important object of analysis in its own right and an object which has real effects on educational and social practices" (p.339). Gillies (2008) agrees with this analysis. He argues that spin not only works on policy, but works within it, as government officials are conscious of how it will be received by the media and the public while they are developing it. He states that government spin "seeks to render visible the effects, and render invisible the costs" (2008, p.419). It does this in three main ways: i) cosmetic packaging and selective emphasis so that the effects, or even costs, of some political initiative are presented in a positive way; ii) through omission, which means that where there are costs or where there have been no effects resulting from some governmental action, then there is silence so that there is neither spectacle nor text; and iii) by obscuring or hiding costs, where the focus is put on the effects of some other issue so that the costs of the former become submerged or invisible (2008, p.419). The role of consultation and spin in the development of policy are extremely relevant to this dissertation. The dissertation

investigates the development of the *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* strategy, which includes changes to assessment policy in primary education in the Republic of Ireland. Foucault would recognise the notion of governments exercising control of policy development through setting the remits of the consultation process. He sees this as a social control mechanism, which is an aspect of governmentality. Chapter 6 examines the policy development of the literacy and numeracy strategy and includes discussion of the consultative and spin element of the process.

3.4.2 Review of empirical research on assessment policy implementation

This subsection examines some empirical research on policy implementation in a variety of jurisdictions. This research was selected for review as it focuses on assessment policy and offers important lessons for policy implementation in Ireland. It will examine three themes in the literature: 1) policy change regarding high stakes assessment; 2) exam data as a technology of governance; and 3) policy change regarding assessment for learning practices.

3.4.2.1 Policy change regarding high stakes assessment

Dobbins and Martin (2012) address whether international student comparisons, particularly PISA, have changed the dynamics of French secondary education policy. The authors postulate that together with the high level of youth unemployment, the EU's Lisbon Strategy and the resulting focus on the economic value of education, the PISA study belongs to a bundle of factors which contributed to the national debate on the crisis of the education system. They have observed two

distinct developments in France since PISA 2006: i) the increased interest in international comparative assessments and a resulting development of a culture of international comparison; and ii) PISA and related comparative assessments have apparently facilitated the development of a stronger 'reform advocacy coalition'. French educational policy makers adopted reforms similar to Finland in order to perform as well as that particular country in comparative tests.

Gur et al. (2012) also examine the effects of PISA on education policy, this time in Turkey. After poor performance in PISA in 2003 and 2006, educators, policy makers and journalists used these results to emphasise that students in Turkey were performing badly. The government officials made use of the national PISA results to justify their call for a comprehensive reform of the Turkish education system. The authors state that, while there have been several reforms of Turkish education in the past, this reform is unique. The reason is because "policymakers outspokenly referenced the concepts, values, and skills borrowed from the educational discourse of a globalizing world and the European Union to express the need for a curriculum change" (Gur et al., 2012, p.5). Like France, Turkish officials implemented reforms similar to Finland in order to improve their performance in international tests.

Ertl (2006) states that poor results in PISA 2000 "can be regarded as a watershed in the discourse on education in Germany" (p.621). He demonstrates how these results damaged Germany's self-confidence and its belief in the efficiency of its education system. This led to the Ministry of Education introducing education standards and their regular evaluation. This was justified by the Ministry by reference to countries which were successful in PISA. Centralised quality control of the 16 educational districts (Länder) was also implemented. Traditionally areas of

curriculum selection and assessment were left to the professional judgement of the teacher. However, Ertl argues that these policy developments break "with this tradition and aims to build a new guiding principle for educational control which also entails a new role for the curriculum" (2006, p.625).

Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2012) outline how high-stakes testing was introduced in Australia in 2008. They argues that the situation now shows "some signs that the approach to accountability through testing runs the risk of repeating the unintended consequences experienced in other countries, including the United States and England" (p.65). Some of the consequences include the narrowing of the curriculum, higher order thinking skills are neglected, and time is spent on coaching the tests. Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith assert that testing can only provide limited data. They argue for "a modest recognition of what these tests can achieve and communicate about student learning. A related message is for a richer and comprehensive set of achievement indicators for student learning" (2012, p.75). They also believe that the learner should be central to any assessment reform policy and note that, in Australia, "there has been a pervasive silence around the rights of the child/student and the ways in which they have been positioned by testing and accountability priorities" (p.76).

Lingard and Sellar (2013) examine the impact of the National Assessment Programme in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) on three states in Australia: Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. These states negotiated performance targets on NAPLAN for reward payments in respect of a national agreement to improve literacy and numeracy in 2009. Queensland set unambitious targets, met them and was rewarded. New South Wales created targets that combined literacy and numeracy scores, obfuscating the evidence, and met their targets and was

rewarded. Victoria set ambitious targets and failed to meet them. This resulted in negative comments in the media, a review commissioned by the Premier, a Report on how to improve performance, and the introduction of Teaching and Learning Audits and State-wide targets for improvement on NAPLAN.

Takayama (2013) highlights how the global educational assessment movement was mediated in a Japanese context in 2007. He argues that there has been a marked shift in government to governance in the Japanese national government from the late 90s onwards. This shift has been characterised by a demand for national assessments, expanded school choice and financial and administrative devolution. However, Takayama argues that global policy was mitigated by the Japanese Ministry for Education to assuage the harsher elements of economic rationalisation. In response to a perceived lowering of standards in PISA 2003, national assessments were introduced. The Ministry justified national assessments as a means to assure educational quality across the nation and hence to achieve equal educational opportunity. However, the Ministry also included a learning conditions element and then highly regulated the disclosure of test results. Takayama calls this a Japanese inflection of the global model. This is consistent with Lingard et al.'s argument about the vernacular globalisation of education policy in section 3.3.1.

Skedsmo (2011) outlines the introduction of the national evaluation system in the Norwegian education system in 2005. She categorises this as a shift in the Norwegian educational policy from the use of input oriented policy instruments towards a more output oriented policy. Previously there had been no focus on testing whereas the new model introduced standardised tests. Skedsmo conducted surveys with 540 principals and analysed documents. She found that evaluation

seems to be used to hold the school leadership and teachers accountable for school's practices. Skedsmo also found that, based on the perceptions of the principals, there seem to be discrepancies between policy intentions and evaluation practice.

3.4.2.2 Exam data as a technology of governance

Hardy (2015) examines the situation in Australia utilising a Bourdieuian approach. He examines the array of practices arising from strong policy pressure for improved student results in national literacy and numeracy tests resulting in the National Assessment Programme in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Hardy demonstrates how these assessments are located in a social context and that they have an impact on the students' and teachers' senses of identity. He argues that the field of schooling in Australia is now dominated by the logics of enumeration, as there was increased practising for the tests, an aligning of the curriculum with NAPLAN testing objects, a focus on results (with results published on a comparative website). He avers that "not only were teachers 'informed' about NAPLAN through ongoing meetings, including regular whole-school staff meetings, they were also clearly 'formed' as practitioners whose work and learning were actively and overtly oriented to respond to these demands" (p.356).

Piattoeva (2015) outlines how Russia introduced a country-wide standardized examination in 2009. She states that this examination also operated as an instrument for ensuring compliance with national curricula by shifting the focus to measurable outcomes and efficiency. She outlines how results are used to evaluate teachers as well as administer monetary rewards. They are also utilised as performance indicators when measuring the effectiveness of regional educational administration.

Piattoeva argues that these examinations represent "a pervasive means to mould education and society at large without constant and direct state regulation" (2015, p.330).

Roberts-Holmes (2015) investigates this phenomenon through a Foucauldian lens in an early childhood setting in the UK. She argues that there has been a narrowing of early years assessment, along with increased inspection and surveillance. She suggests that this governance has encouraged a functional 'datafication' of early years pedagogy so that early years teacher's work is increasingly constrained by performativity demands to produce 'appropriate' data. Roberts-Holmes avers that "early years teacher's pedagogy has increasingly narrowed to ensuring that children succeed within specific testing regimes which interpret literacy and numeracy in very particular ways" (2015, p.303). The research focused on 20 teachers, the majority of which said that they were now under pressure to produce data for inspections. She describes how a reductive approach to literacy and numeracy meant that some children had been excluded from arts-based lessons to receive intensive phonics booster classes in order to meet standards. Roberts-Holmes states that "Data itself had come to partly represent the teacher's pedagogical focus and a means by which to measure their competence and ability" (2015, p.307).

3.4.2.3 Policy change regarding assessment for learning practices

Black and Wiliam (2005) explore the main assessment traditions in four countries – England, France, Germany and the United States. They found that, in England, all national curriculum subjects are assessed by teacher judgement at the

ages of 7, 11 and 14, and in addition there are formal tests for English and mathematics at ages 7, 11 and 14, and for science at 11 and 14. However, the exact nature of the teacher judgements was never described fully and, in effect, this formative assessment approach became another summative assessment technique. In France, a system was introduced of testing all students in alternate years at the ages of 8 and 11, and every year in all subjects for students at age 16. This differs to England in that the tests are seen to be an aid to teaching. The teacher has no role in assessing the student summatively, which leaves them free to concentrate on learning. The German system utilises examinations in primary school based on which teachers can recommend appropriate lower forms of secondary schools. Black and Wiliam comment that there appears to be substantial faith in the usefulness of regular testing both to motivate students and to provide useful information to teachers. Each school district in the United States has considerable autonomy in determining policy. The authors state that there are two features of education in the US that mitigate against the introduction of formative assessment: 1) the importance placed on grades, both as an indication of the progress a student makes at school, and as 'currency' for applications to higher education institutions; and 2) the response to increases in testing for accountability purposes

Carless (2005) outlines how, in Hong Kong, assessment practices are very resistant to reform initiatives regarding assessment for learning. He argues that professional development for teachers must go beyond 'delivery models' comprising of workshops or courses. He outlines some practices to encourage assessment for learning: develop school assessment policies; focus on feedback to inform students of their strengths and weaknesses; opportunities for peer assessment; share the goals of learning with students; use assessments that probe higher-order thinking skills.

Carless notes that a "thread running through these principles is that they are focused on teaching and learning, rather than traditional concepts of assessment as measurement" (2005, p.42). The negative factors of implementing policy change in Hong Kong include:

- The dominance of competitive examinations, allied to a simplistic view of assessment as testing amongst many stakeholders;
- An associated lack of deep understanding of assessment issues by principals, teachers and parents;
- Lack of time, capacity and the will to engage with myriad issues in teaching, schooling and educational reform in which AfL is just one strand.

Carless argues that teachers need to understand the principles of assessment for learning in order to implement it, and that these principles required some form of congruence with their own beliefs.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter outlined a theoretical framework for analysing educational policy, highlighting the work of Ball. It then examined literature on the conceptualisation of educational policy, using Ball's strategy of examining educational policy change through the lens of ideological shifts, education and the economy, and discourses. It returned to the key themes of power in assessment, namely access, control and discourse throughout the review and highlighted their intersection of the dissertation's theoretical perspective based on the work of Foucault and Bourdieu. It continued by exploring literature on the development of

educational policy, with particular focus on consultation and 'spin'. It also offered a review of some empirical research of the implementation of assessment policy in a variety of jurisdictions including the UK, US, Australia, Japan and Hong Kong. The key insights from the literature which are to be considered in examining *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* are as follows:

- Changes in educational policy on assessment have been motivated by results in comparative international tests, mainly organised by the OECD.
- Reforms in assessment policy have uniformly consisted of an increased focus on outcomes. They have also concentrated on a narrow definition of success which is linked to achievements in literacy and numeracy. Sahlberg sees these changes as part of a Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM).
- There are competing ideologies in an outcomes-based approach and neo-liberalist policies can make this attractive to a broad range of people.
- The policy process empowers some subjects who use specific technical language.
- Consultation and spin limit the possibility of policy by framing the discussions through which the policy is developed.
- Global education policies can be mediated in the local context.

CHAPTER 4 ASSESSMENT POLICY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND FROM 1831 TO 2010

4.1 Introduction

Educational policy in Ireland regarding assessment has changed considerably since the inception of the national school system in 1831 (Parkes, 2010). This dissertation uses insights from Foucault's archaeological approach to frame its investigation of policy formation (section 1.2.1.1). A Foucauldian approach highlights the need to examine the precursors to current policy. Any new policy does not simply supersede pre-existing policies and practices; it engages with them and is influenced by them in its development and implementation. Bourdieu also emphasises the influence of doxa in policy formation and practice (section 1.2.2.1). This refers to the concepts and language that are unchallenged in education settings and that are taken for granted in policy formulation. A Bourdieuian approach stresses the need to explore the origins of these taken for granted assumptions when examining policy formation. This chapter examines educational policy regarding assessment in Irish primary schools. It uses an historical investigative approach to examine how assessment policy has developed in Ireland since the introduction of the national school system in 1831. It identifies themes that relate to present discourses in assessment policy. The chapter begins by giving an overview of assessment policy in Ireland in two chronological eras: 1831 until 1960 and 1960 until 2010. It then offers a conceptual analysis of how international influences effected policy changes in assessment in the past fifty years. It finishes by examining some empirical research on policy development in Ireland.

4.2 Chronological overview of assessment policy in primary schools in Ireland: 1831–1960

4.2.1 Primary education and assessment in Ireland, 1831 – 1922: The introduction of the national school system until independence

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Ireland was part of the British Empire. Primary education was quite fragmented with a variety of charities and religious orders providing schooling throughout the country (Hislop, 1987). A letter from the chief secretary of Ireland, E.G. Stanley to the Duke of Leinster set out the conditions under which government aid would be given to a new national board of education and outlined the basis on which the board would support new national schools. This became known as 'the Stanley letter' and it led to the introduction of the national school system of primary education in Ireland in 1831 and to the establishment of schools in most villages around the country (Hyland, 1987). This system was based on the principle of combined literacy and moral instruction with separate religious instruction. It was hoped that children from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds would complete their schooling together (O'Donoghue and Harford, 2011). However, the manner of local school management meant that, within a matter of years, the national school system had become de facto denominational in practice (Parkes, 2010). This system also established a National Board which centralised the expenditure of public money for the purposes of education, as well as a structure of inspectors to examine national schools (Hislop, 1987). The role of the inspector was an evaluative one: to "ascertain the advancement of education among the children, noting the proportion of children who can read fluently; what progress they have made in writing and arithmetic; whether any be taught geography, grammar, book-keeping, and mensuration; whether girls be

taught sewing or knitting" (Hyland, 1987, p.117). Atkinson states that, on the recommendation of an inspector, "individual teachers would be fined, suspended or dismissed" (1969, p.94).

In the mid 1800s concerns were being expressed about the national school system. These included inadequate teacher pay, substandard accommodation, poor pupil attendance and disappointing academic standards. Hyland states that these concerns were raised at a time when the British government had become "increasingly concerned about the need for economy and efficiency in the public service generally" (1987, p.120). This led to commissions being set up to examine primary education in England and Scotland, leading to the introduction of payment by results. Hyland argues that the "Treasury was anxious that a similar review be undertaken of the Irish national educational system" (1987, p.120). A Royal commission was established to examine Irish primary education in 1870. This became known as the Powis Commission and has been described as a 'watershed' in the history of Irish primary education as it gave official recognition to the denominational management structure of the national system (Parkes, 2010). The Powis Commission states that "the progress of children in the National Schools of Ireland is very much less that it ought to be" (Hyland, 1987, p.121). It also responded to the climate of concern about standards and a lack of teacher accountability by introducing payment by results in 1872 (Walsh, 2005; INTO, 1996, Atkinson, 1969), recommending "That to secure a better return for outlay and labour of the National system, each Teacher, besides a fixed class-salary, should receive an addition according to the number of children whom the Inspector, after individual examination, can pass as having made satisfactory progress" (Hyland, 1987, p.121). The obligatory subjects for examination were reading, writing and

arithmetic, which in turn led to them being prioritised above other subjects. Teachers' salaries were calculated on the basis of pupil performance in these tests (Walsh, 2005; INTO, 1996). This dissertation examines the role and purpose of assessment in Irish primary education currently, with relation to *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. It is an important historical point to note that policy change regarding assessment in Irish primary education was initiated due to a concern for falling standards and economic factors, concerning the need for greater efficiency in the public service, in the 1870s. These reforms resulted in a system of increased testing in Irish primary schools. I examine whether there are parallels with the current situation in Chapter 6. The rigid nature of the payment by results examination system meant that local factors or children's interests were ignored as detailed programmes were laid out for each subject in each grade. For example, these stipulations were given to inspectors when they were evaluating pupils' performances in third class:

> 13. "Reading – Distinct articulation and proper grouping of words should be regarded as essential in this class"
>
> 14."Spelling - ...One word misspelled for every ten words dictated will involve failure"...
>
> 16. "Arithmetic - ...Five sums should be given. The correct solution of any two, including Long or Short Division, will merit a 'No. 2' pass; for a 'No. 1' pass, a sum in Compound Addition must also be correctly worked by the pupil" (Hyland, 1987, p.132).

This in turn created a climate where the dominant teaching style was mechanical and characterised by routine and repetition. Hyland states that, under this system, "the role of the inspector was strictly that of an examiner" (1987, p.130). The payment by results system encouraged rote learning and neglected other aspects of teaching and learning (Parkes, 2010; Walsh, 2005; INTO, 1996, Hyland, 1987). The developing awareness of child-centred philosophies of education by Froebel and

Pestalozzi in the late 1800s led to a growing call for change in assessment practices and pedagogy in general in primary education (Walsh, 2005; INTO, 1996, Hyland, 1987).

During the 1890s the system of payment by results was abolished in England and Scotland. Another commission was established to investigate primary education in Ireland. This commission is known as the Belmore Commission and is seeded in a child-centred philosophy of education (Hyland, 1987). This commission compiled a comprehensive review of national and international best policy and practice between 1896 and 1898. The commission argued that "The present system, which consists largely in the study of books, is one-sided in its character; and it leaves some of the most useful facilities of the mind absolutely untrained" (Hyland, 1987, p.147). It proposed a revised system of education to provide "an all-round training to the faculties of the children, and...lay a solid foundation for any system of higher education" (Hyland, 1987, p.148). In 1900 a Revised Programme for primary education based on the recommendations of the Belmore Commission was introduced and was a fundamental change from its predecessor. Representatives of the Commission travelled to Great Britain, mainland Europe and the US to gather evidence for the development of the Revised Programme (Walsh, 2005; INTO, 1996). Payment by results was abolished and the methodology was also transformed from that of a didactic and subject-driven style to a heuristic and child-centred method. The concern to make the school a pleasant place was in line with the recommendation that learning should be linked to the child's experience. A broader range of subjects were included in this Programme and another shift in emphasis was that these subjects were to be taught in an integrated manner when possible, breaking

with the tradition of compartmentalising knowledge, which was seen as unnatural for the young child. There were no formal examinations, which left assessment at the discretion of each teacher (Hyland, 1987). The introduction of the Revised Programme demonstrates how policy changes can impact on the lives of children as pupils in schools. Under the Payment by Results scheme, infants were not a high priority as the success of the older pupils yielded a higher profit for the teacher (Walsh, 2005). However, the Revised Programme placed infant training at the core of the curriculum. The impact of assessment policy on primary school pupils is a key consideration of this dissertation. The reprioritisation of teaching and learning for infants based on this policy change demonstrates how a policy can impact on pupils in schools around the country. The Revised Programme did lead to improvements in primary education but there were problems with its implementation. These included the fact that the curriculum was so wide that comparatively useless technical subjects were sometimes introduced; teachers found themselves teaching subjects of which they knew little; there was a lack of finance to purchase equipment and provide training, and it entailed a top-down nature of the development (Walsh, 2005; INTO, 1996, Atkinson, 1969). Teachers felt little ownership of the reforms and the lack of training to familiarise them with the new methodologies led to a failure to implement the recommendations of the Belmore Commission in their entirety. The notion of teacher ownership of educational reform is also of importance in the context of the current assessment policy change in Ireland.

4.2.2 The primary education and assessment in Ireland in the first years of independence: 1922 - 1960

The Revised Programme was in place until the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. The next forty years were marked by cultural nationalism. The INTO states that, "rooted in a strong ideology of cultural nationalism and propelled by the achievement of political independence, curricular policy was intimately linked to cultural and political objectives" (1996, p.7). The First national programme of primary instruction was introduced in 1922 and the main thrust was in placing an emphasis on the Irish language, history and culture. It criticised the preceding programme on two points: "The programme contained altogether too many obligatory subjects...(and) The Irish language...was placed in a subordinate position on the programme" (Hyland and Milne, 1992, p.91). The Irish language was to be taught for one hour every day and used as the teaching-medium for infant classes, while "a 'national tone' would be introduced to certain other subjects" (Atkinson, 1969, p.160). Walsh argues that "The emphasis in the curriculum in this period was on a linguistic and cultural revival and on a moralistic and literary content, leading to a narrowing of the wide curriculum that had been in use from 1900-1922" (2004, p.6). Highlighting the importance that the Irish language played during this period, a Primary Certificate Examination was introduced in 1929 testing Irish, English and Mathematics. This was optional to begin with but was made compulsory by Eamon de Valera in 1943 (INTO, 1988). De Valera outlined his reasons for making the Primary Certificate compulsory in a speech to the Dáil where he stated:

> "I do not care what teachers are offended by it, I say that it is right that the State should inspect the schools; see what the teacher is doing during the day and how he is teaching. I am less interested in the teacher's method of teaching than I am in the results he achieves, and

> the test I would apply would be the test of an examination" (Hyland and Milne, 1992, p.111).

The introduction of this examination led to a more didactic teaching style, especially in older primary school classes. Similar to the effects of the payment by results era, the Primary Certificate Examination led to an emphasis on rote learning and repetition (INTO, 1996). This again demonstrates the affect of assessment policy changes on the practices of teachers in primary school and the environment in which the pupils learn. The next section will explore the development of assessment policy in Irish primary education from 1960 to 2010.

4.3 Chronological overview of assessment policy in primary schools in Ireland: 1960–2010

Coolahan notes a "striking lack of policy or public concern for the national school system" in the first forty years of the state (1989, p.27). Successive Ministers for Education took a hands-off approach to the education system (O'Donoghue and Harford, 2011; Coolahan, 1989; Ó Buachalla, 1988). There was a general sense that the role of education in Ireland was to develop a sense of Gaelic culture, as well as promoting moral growth (Farren, 1995, p.52). O'Donoghue and Harford contend that the state began to take a more proactive, strategic role in educational policy formation in the 1960s, the stimulus of which "was largely government commitment to economic expansion" (2011, p.328). A key factor was the government's invitation to the OECD to report on the state of the education system. The resulting document published in 1965, *Investment in Education*, had a profound influence on educational policy as it linked, for the first time in Ireland, educational policy with economic growth (Coolahan, 1989, p.32). Coolahan identifies a number of positive

changes in the national school system at this time: the lowering of class sizes, the abolition of corporal punishment, improvements in the provision of education for children with special educational needs, and the establishment of Boards of Management (Coolahan, 1989; Coolahan, 1981). Teachers had also become frustrated with the limiting nature of the Primary Certificate Examination and argued for its abolishment. This Certificate was abolished in 1967 at a time when it became accepted that primary education in Ireland needed to be reformed for two main reasons: i) developing understandings of children and child development; and ii) a need to align the education system with the needs of an expanding economy (Walsh, 2005).

A new curriculum, *The Primary School Curriculum*, was introduced in 1971. Walsh outlines the cyclical nature of curriculum development in Ireland thusly: "the 1971 curriculum was a radical shift from the existing system in operation and returned to the child-centred, heuristic and discovery-learning ideals of the 1900 Revised Programme" (2005, p.264). The abolition of the Primary Certificate Examination was the last state mandated test in primary education until the introduction of standardised testing in English Reading and Mathematics at two stages of the child's career at primary school in 2007. In 1968 the Department of Education introduced the School Record Card System to replace the Primary Certificate. This contained assessments by the teacher of pupils' attainment in various subjects. In contrast with the Primary Certificate, the teachers were entrusted with the design and administration of these tests: "The standard reached by the pupil should be indicated by one of the following terms: very good, good, fair, weak. The Department relies on the teacher to give an impartial assessment in each

case" (Hyland and Milne, 1992, p.141). The 1971 Primary School Curriculum outlined a number of methods that teachers could employ to assess their pupils' learning but the ultimate decision was left to the teacher. Indeed, many teachers used standardised tests during this time to inform their teaching and decide which children were in need of learning support (INTO, 2010). However, the implementation of the 1971 Curriculum was hindered by the recession in the 1970s, which caused major cutbacks in spending on education. Moreover, many parents were confused by the new principles underpinning the curriculum and there was inadequate communication with post-primary schools to ensure continuity in education upon transition (Walsh, 2005). This led to the establishment of the Primary Education Review Body in 1990 and the beginning of a number of changes in education policy in the 1990s.

In 1999 a Revised Primary School Curriculum was introduced, which is based upon and develops the principles of the 1971 Curriculum. Again there was no formal assessment format required by the Department at this point. A number of assessment tools were outlined and exemplars of good practice were provided. Assessment has been described as the missing component of the pedagogy-curriculum-assessment triad in Ireland (Hall, 2000). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment published *Assessment in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools* in 2007. It was felt that this was required to increase primary school teachers' awareness of assessment methodologies. This was preceded in 2006 by a Departmental circular mandating the introduction of standardised testing at two stages of a child's primary school career. The Department also required that the results of standardised tests be available for inclusion in Report Card Templates.

The circular promised a national professional development programme in assessment for learning for teachers over a number of years. The first stage commenced in 2007, focusing on standardised testing (DES, Circular 138/2006). Due to cutbacks in education the full programmes of professional development in assessment has yet to be initiated. Looney (2006) notes that the NCCA, the Department's advisory body on curriculum and assessment, argued against introducing standardised tests as a requirement at two stages as it would create an assessment hierarchy with standardised tests at the top. The introduction of standardised tests at two points in primary education was proposed at the National Education Convention in 1993 but was rejected (Hall, 2000). The next section examines reasons why this changed by offering theoretical conceptions of the development and changes in assessment policy in Ireland over the past fifty years. This is followed by an examination of some empirical research into educational policy in Ireland. The current section demonstrated some cyclical changes regarding developments in curriculum. There are also cyclical developments regarding Department mandated assessment in primary school, which are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4 Cyclical development in mandated assessment by the Department of Education in primary school

Time span	Mandated assessment
1872 - 1900	Payment by Results (examinations in reading, writing and arithmetic)
1929 - 1967	Primary Certificate Examination (examinations in Irish, English and Mathematics; compulsory from 1943)
2007 - present	Standardised tests (English Reading and Mathematics; compulsory at two stages in a child's career at primary school, increased to three stages in 2011)

4.4 Theoretical conceptions of assessment policy in primary schools in Ireland

O'Sullivan (2009) argues that the underlying principles in Irish education policy have changed since the 1960s. He avers that Irish education has moved from a theocentric to a mercantile policy paradigm. He notes a change in emphasis in the goals of education from responsible citizenship and religion to the language of consumerism and accountability. He identifies a change in "the use of a different repertoire of concepts, words, appeals and justifications in speaking about the educational process and in making recommendations for practice" (p.123). O'Sullivan argues that these changes have resulted without advocacy. Comparing to the UK, he states that there has been "no equivalent of the Black Papers on education, Callaghan's Ruskin speech, Thatcher, Hayek or the Education Reform Act" (2009, p.128). He states that there was no 'new right' education policy but many of its themes (consumer rights, performance indicators, devolved budgets, quality and efficiency) "were successfully inserted into Irish educational discourse" (p.128). Hall (2000) disagrees with this argument. She shows how the 1992 Green Paper on Education was dominated by market theory, stating that it had "a much narrower conception of assessment which it largely equated with testing" (p.86). She states that there was "overwhelming opposition from many sectors of Irish society to what was perceived as an instrumental and technical orientation to education" (p.87). This was emphasised in the National Education Convention of 1993 which rejected standardised testing at ages 7 and 11 (p.88).

Limond (2010) argues that educational policy makers in Ireland are overly influenced by policy developments in the UK. He describes this as a 'post-colonial overhang'. He avers that decisions taken by British politicians in the nineteenth century shaped the current system of Irish primary education. He states that the changes implemented in the 1920s were as a reaction against the British influences in what preceded education in Ireland before independence. Limond avers that the Payment by Results system (which was abolished in 1898) has had a lasting impact on education in Ireland to the present day. He argues that, even after this system's abolition, "the culture of Irish national and intermediate schools continued to stress memorisation, the principal faculty the system had required and inculcated" (2010, p.453). He asserts that this system has led to Irish people continually judging educational achievement through quantitative means. He argues that "the *mechanics* of the payment-by-results system proved easier to abolish than the *attitudes* to learning it inculcated" (2010, p.457) and offers the Leaving Certificate and CAO system as an example. He states that much of educational policy since the 1920s has "at least indirectly, been influenced by educational and social change in Britain" (2010, p.450). He argues that this is not a mutual occurrence as there are no examples of a significant flow of educational practice or policy from Ireland to Britain. Limond states that the introduction of free secondary education in Ireland in the 1960s was influenced by "optimism and belief in the transformative social and economic power of education associated with the UK Labour government" (2010, p.454), and that the 1971 primary school curriculum was influenced by the British Plowden report. He contends that the tendency for Irish educational reforms to follow developments in Britain accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s and was increasingly affected by a neoliberal conception of education. He states that "Irish

education has taken the same 'neoliberal turn' since the late 1990s that was discernible in the UK from 1988" (2010, p.456).

O'Sullivan argues that an analysis of programmes and policies targeting the disadvantaged reveals an understanding of the person that is predominantly psychologistic and atomistic. "This individualism, aetiological, ontological and methodological in nature and consistent with the mercantile paradigm, persists alongside the acknowledgement of complex, social, economic and cultural influences on disadvantage. Yet, people are projected in a psychologistic/atomistic fashion, devoid substantially of a social and particularly, of a cultural dimension" (p.134). O'Sullivan states that policy development in Ireland is based on populism. By choosing language that appears neutral and unbiased, policy masks the underlying philosophical perspective. O'Sullivan argues that the state does not want to explore different possibilities regarding educational policy: "Such is the populist orientation of the state to society that, rather than involve people in a generative process for change, there is a refusal to challenge them through the presentation of different possibilities for the future development of education" (2009, p.137). Looney (2006) notes that debate in Ireland in education surrounded the issues of equity and resourcing rather than standards. She does note, however, that the issue of accountability in primary education is beginning to become more dominant – "the waves of assessment-led reform that have swept across much of the developed world in recent decades are only now beginning to lap at the shores of the Irish republic" (2006, p.347).

Conway and Murphy (2013) agree that there is an increased accountability agenda in Irish education. They aver that "indicative of the increased emphasis on accountability in Irish education are the Whole School Evaluation reports, based on inspectors' evaluations of individual schools, which have been published on the DES website since 2006 (McNamara et al. 2011; Sugrue 2011)" (p.14). They state that the most important influence on accountability directions in education is neoliberalism. "Neo-liberalism's principles of choice, competition, individualism, privatisation, deregulation and the power of the free market (Dale 1999; Hursh 2009; Cochran-Smith, Piazza, and Power 2013) have underpinned the expansion and design of accountability systems worldwide (Rizvi and Lingard 2010)" (2013, p.17). They contest that Sahlberg's GERM framing device for educational policy change worldwide (as outlined in Chapter 3) is "informative in the case of Ireland, where policy is moving very clearly towards the dominant global education reform agenda focused on standardisation and high-stakes testing for teachers, students and to some extent for teacher education programmes" (2013, p.19). They conclude that "In Ireland, over the last three years, we have seen a move towards GERM in terms of the scope, intent and intensity of accountability mechanisms" (p.29). Chapter 6 examines the context in which *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* was developed and investigate its content regarding assessment.

O'Leary (2006) and Hall (2001) argue for a balance in assessment policy in Ireland between the different purposes of assessment. O'Leary (2006) distinguishes between what he terms 'classroom assessment' and 'official assessment' and he also stresses the need to identify priorities for both classroom assessment and official assessment (as outlined in section 2.6.1). Classroom assessment involves all the

assessments that teachers and pupils engage with during normal teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Official assessment, on the other hand, refers to assessment that is used by teachers, schools, inspectors, policy makers and others to meet bureaucratic requirements. O'Leary (2006) and Hall (2001) argue that pupils are the most important users of assessment information, and that the key purpose of assessment should be helping pupils identify how to improve their learning. O'Leary asserts that "a key component (if not the key component) of having a balanced system is that we put a plan in place that will ensure that all teachers become highly skilled in classroom assessment" (2006, p.15). Hall (2001) argues in a similar manner with reference to assessment policy in relation to reading and avers that "pupils' progress needs to be assessed in a way that furnishes worthwhile evidence that can be used by learners themselves and by all those seeking to support their development" (p.40).

At policy level, O'Leary (2006) states that high quality assessment information needs to be available to inform decisions about achievement standards and about targeting resources where they are most needed. Hall (2001) argues that any developments in assessment policy in reading need to be grounded in the notion of formative assessment. She contends that:

> If the function of assessment is seen exclusively in terms of the needs of politicians and bureaucrats then pupils and teachers feel under surveillance and the information generated from the process of assessment will not be perceived by teachers and learners as useful. If, however, the purpose of assessment is to provide rich data on pupil performance, to encourage better teaching and promote higher standards, then teachers are more likely to see its professional and pedagogical relevance while learners are more likely to see it as directly benefiting them" (2001, p.41).

O'Leary calls for a common format for recording summative assessment information; the development of a set of norm-referenced and criterion-referenced

standardised tests; and the continuation of the system of national assessments using representative samples currently in place for reading, Mathematics and Gaeilge in primary school. He argues that there should be no mandated national testing as it has "little to offer in educational terms, has poor consequential validity, and is open to argument about what the outcomes mean in terms of real achievement" (2006, p.18). He notes that there is a "tension" evident in Departmental documents that support classroom assessment as a priority and those preoccupied with accountability. Hall (2001) recognises the usefulness of standardised tests for assessing reading ability but she also highlights the importance of miscue analysis, cloze procedures, reading conferences, portfolios, profiles, observational records, and interaction. She emphasises the importance of "what the reader does rather than how the reader stands in relation to others" (Hall, 2001, p.48). She argues that continuing professional development for teachers, so that they can use assessment information formatively, should be a priority.

4.5 Empirical research on primary education assessment policy in Ireland

Fitzpatrick et al. (2014) conducted research with 960 adults in Ireland (teachers: 75%; parents: 23%) to ascertain their views on what the priorities for primary education should be, besides literacy and numeracy. They found that the most frequently cited priorities focused on helping children to develop dispositions and skills for life; offering a broad curriculum and nurturing children's psychological well-being. The study questions the increased concentration on literacy and numeracy in primary schools and problematises the drive to increase standards through testing. The authors state that "curriculum subjects are only as important as

the opportunities they afford for children to develop important life-skills and dispositions in relationship with others" (p.13). The authors suggest that policy makers should pay greater attention to children's social and emotional development in future curriculum changes, and that there needs to be a greater coherence and alignment between the hidden and intended primary curriculum in future primary developments.

Ó Breacháin and O'Toole (2013) also question the increased focus on literacy and numeracy in the Republic of Ireland, especially through the guise of standards, as is contained in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. They state that the revised 1999 curriculum offers a balanced approach to education with recognition of the role of language and the arts. However, they are concerned that the focus on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of other educational objectives in Ireland at present threatens the holistic ethos of the curriculum. They offer an analysis of the literacy and numeracy strategy, stating that it contains 'mixed messages. Ó Breacháin and O'Toole are especially critical of the strategy's reduction of the role of the Arts and state that the policy presents "a significant threat to the holistic nature of the Irish curriculum" (2013, p.404). They also critique the use of PISA tests as indicators of educational quality as they do not recognise the changed landscape and profile of the pupils in Irish schools. They also criticise the increase in standardised assessment from two to three times in primary schools, in spite of evidence of potential negative outcomes of a focus on standardised testing. Ó Breacháin and O'Toole suggest that, rather than looking to empirical research about how best to improve children's attainment, "the main drivers behind the publication of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy were political, with the

need of the new government to be seen to respond to the PISA results" (2013, p.413).

McNamara et al. (2011) examine the notion of school self-evaluation in Ireland and compare it with our Icelandic counterparts. They note that "School inspection (external) and school self-evaluation (internal) are seen as both interrelated and integral to school improvement and reform policies in most countries" (2011, p.63), while asserting that the emphasis placed on each varies according to national contexts. They argue that, in Ireland, there appears to be a significant emphasis on the external shaping of evaluations, whereas external steering may be much less important in Iceland in enabling self-evaluation. Rather the process is based on the attitudes of school staff and, in particular, the development of more democratic, collaborative and participative forms of leadership that contribute to teacher empowerment around self-evaluation. Research involving teachers and principals from 38 primary schools in Ireland as well as six inspectors found that the inspectors were critical of the lack of use of regular testing and 'hard data' on which to base improvements (p.71). McNamara et al. also found that school leaders were unconvinced about the value and practicality of self-evaluation, and that they could not see a practical way of resourcing or supporting it in their schools. McNamara et al. also report that Irish teachers were equally as sceptical as the principals on the issue. These researchers also present data from Iceland where the emphasis for self-evaluation has from the beginning been on student-centred accountability, as opposed to a simple response to the government mandate. They found that there is a clear emphasis on teacher ownership in Iceland and that the school community is learning a collaborative approach to problem-solving and teachers engage in evaluations by their own choice.

Hall and Kavanagh (2002) examine primary assessment policy in Ireland and note how some groups, particularly parents were "urging the government to institute a more formal and transparent system of school accountability" (p.262). They explore how these various interest groups conceptualise assessment in relation to the primary school. They state that different groups hold differing views on the purposes of assessment and the types of assessments that pupils should undertake. Hall and Kavanagh content that "the differences stem from holding either outmoded or more contemporary notions of assessment and, in turn, learning" (2002, p.264). They found that for teachers the most important purpose of assessment is to provide information about pupil learning so future learning steps can be effectively planned. However, teachers' accounts of their assessment practices did not suggest that learners themselves play a significant role in the process. They contend that "teachers place more emphasis on furnishing information that informs their teaching decisions than information that informs individual pupils' learning decisions" (2002, p.266). They found that national policy makers differ from teachers and differ amongst themselves in how they conceptualise assessment. For example, a politician interviewed by the researchers displayed a strong concern about resource issues and the implications for those children needing extra support. He viewed assessment as a means to secure objective information to make decisions on the allocation of resources. However, two inspectors with the task of designing and overseeing national policy documents and an NCCA official exhibit a more nuanced conception of assessment, including discussing its role in whole system evaluation as well as an emphasis on assessment for learning. Hall and Kavanagh found that measurements of achievement, such as standardised tests, matter to parents. They state that parents "show undue faith in the power of tests" (2002, p.269). A key

insight of Hall and Kavanagh's in relation to my dissertation is how "purposes of assessment are so frequently interpreted in relation to the needs of the interviewee or the interviewee's group (teacher, parent, politician) rather than the direct needs of learners" (2002, p.269).

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter proffered a chronological overview of assessment policy in Ireland in two time periods: 1831 to 1960 and 1960 to 2010. It continued by outlining a theoretical conception of assessment policy in primary education over the past fifty years. This highlighted the growing influence of international agencies and an accountability agenda. The chapter concluded with an examination of empirical research on policy development regarding assessment in Ireland. The archaeological approach to examining assessment policy in Ireland since 1831 demonstrates a cyclical pattern to mandated testing in primary education. This resulted in Payment by Results in 1872, the introduction of the Primary Certificate in 1929, and the introduction of compulsory standardised testing in 2007. It is interesting to note that both the Payment by Results method and the Primary Certificate were abolished as they resulted in the narrowing of the curriculum, an emphasis on rote learning and repetition, and did not take children's learning needs or styles into account. This chapter also demonstrates how trends highlighted in the review of literature on assessment policy are influencing policy development in Ireland. These trends include: 1) Changes in educational policy on assessment have been influenced by results in comparative international tests, mainly organised by the OECD; 2) Reforms in assessment policy are increasingly influenced by economic factors and

have consisted of an increased focus on outcomes, usually in literacy and numeracy; 3) Irish educational policy is influenced by other countries, especially Britain; 4) Tension and confusion exists amongst stakeholders regarding the purposes and practices of assessment in primary school. These trends will be explored further in the document analysis and findings and analysis chapters (Chapters 6-9).

CHAPTER 5 RESEARCH DESIGN

5.1 Introduction

The importance of research design before undertaking research at any level cannot be overstated. Deciding upon a research design causes the researcher to clarify their view of the world, how knowledge is created, and how data is constituted and presented (Mertens, 2010; Creswell, 2009). A researcher could delve into their project without completing a review of the methodology beforehand, but this would invariably lead to more questions than answers at the end of their work. This chapter explores the research design employed in my doctoral project. It consists of four sections: Background to the research questions; Research philosophy; Research methodology; and Ethical issues and limitations of the study.

5.2 Background to the research

In 2011, the Irish government published *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life: the national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people 2011-2020* (DES). The strategy contains targets to improve literacy and numeracy levels by 2020. It also includes a range of measures to support such improvements such as capacity building in schools; closer parent-school links; continuing professional development; and greater transfer of information at transition stages in the child's education. Furthermore, it includes the stipulation that, for the first time, schools should report results in standardised tests in literacy and numeracy to the DES on an annual basis. The strategy has been called a seminal

document in Irish education by a number of commentators (Conway and Murphy, 2013; O'Brien, 2012).

Hall and Ozerk assert that "what is and what is not assessed, the nature of assessment and how it takes place, as well as the purpose and effects of assessment all provide insights into what knowledge and skills are valued by a society" (2010, p.387-8). This implies that the literacy and numeracy strategy recently enacted by the Irish Government is not neutral and at its core contains a particular view of the purpose and the methodology of assessment. My research project aims to investigate the development of the strategy. It also explores teachers' views on assessment and the methodologies that they employ. Finally, it aspires to document the perspectives of primary school pupils about the nature and role of assessment. The dissertation specifically examines the idea of power in assessment at primary school by exploring the areas of access, control and discourse. It does this by utilising a theoretical lens based on the work of Foucault and Bourdieu, which was outlined in Chapter 1. This theoretical lens pays especial attention to Foucault's notions of archaeology, genealogy and governmentality (1991a, 1991b, 1989, 1975), and Bourdieu's explanation of habitus and capital (2003, 1997). This chapter continues with an outline of my research philosophy.

5.3 Research philosophy

5.3.1 Research paradigms

The arena of knowledge formation is highly contested. Ophir and Shapin summarise this by stating "(a) division in the map of knowledge flows from

placement in physical and social space: on the one side, immediate experience; on the other, reliance on authority and trust" (2005, p.251). Decisions on how knowledge is created influence the researcher's methodologies and analysis. My dissertation is influenced by the work of Foucault, as outlined in Chapter 1. Foucault's genealogical approach underscores the importance of investigating concepts and procedures in an effort to ascertain their underlying assumptions (section 1.2.1.2). Foucault's work has influenced this dissertation's need to examine ontological and epistemological factors when deciding on a research design. As my dissertation examines the nature and purpose of assessment in primary school, it includes questions of an ontological and epistemological nature. This consists of examining the value judgements that are made in deciding assessment policy and making choices between a variety of assessment practices; exploring the theory of learning upon which assessment practices are founded; and ascertaining how practices and policies interact with one another and with preceding practices and differing philosophies of education and learning. Mertens (2010) outlines how researchers have different views of knowledge and how it is created. This is based on differing opinions on axiology, ontology, epistemology and methodology. She describes four paradigms, each of which has implications for the research design employed, as they contain "certain philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking and action" (Mertens, 2010, p.7).

i) Postpositivist: This belief system includes the conviction that "the social world can be studied in the same way as the natural world" (Mertens, 2010, p.10). Researchers argue that a reality does exist but that "it can be known only imperfectly because of the researcher's human limitations" (Mertens, 2010, p.14).

ii) Constructivist: This system is grounded in interpretative understandings (Mertens, 2010, p.16). Constructivist researchers postulate that "knowledge is socially constructed by the people active in the research process" (Mertens, 2010, p.16).

iii) Transformative: In this paradigm, researchers "explicitly position themselves...with the less powerful...to bring about social transformation" (Mertens, 2010, p.21). It maintains that what is considered legitimate knowledge should be examined "from a prism of cultural lenses and...power issues" (Mertens, 2010, p.32).

iv) Pragmatic: This belief system espouses the value of a common sense approach. It is guided by a view of effectiveness, which is used as "the criteria for judging value of research" (Mertens, 2010, p.36).

Knowledge construction is fundamental to my interest in studying assessment and education policy, and I agree with the Transformative view that "real change comes through organised social campaigns" (Mertens, 2010, p.25). My research is particularly influenced by Foucault's archaeological and genealogical methods as well as Bourdieu's notion of habitus to create a theoretical lens to explore the notion of assessment in primary school in Ireland. Postpositivists criticise this paradigm as being little more than "fervent beliefs or feelings of personal enlightenment" (Phillips and Burbules, 2000, p.3). But I agree with Biesta when he argues that this is "not a...relativist position but...has a distinct ethico-political motivation", which he describes as "a concern for the other" (2001, p.33). Such research will utilise qualitative, as well as quantitative, methods and describe contextual and historical factors (Mertens, 2010, p.11). This is the approach that I have chosen for my dissertation as my study examines the historical development of assessment (Chapter

2) and of assessment policy (Chapter 3), as well as outlining the historical development of assessment policy in Ireland (Chapter 4). This dissertation is keenly aware of contextual factors which impact on the development and implementation of assessment policies and practices, which have been described in previous chapters. It utilises these insights further in the chapters relating to the findings and analysis of the data gathered as part of this doctoral study (Chapters 6 – 9). The next section outlines the approaches which I chose to gather the data.

5.3.2 Approaches to research

Researchers can use different methodologies when they are gathering data. The methodologies that are chosen will lead to differing results in the field and depend upon the researcher's view on knowledge. Creswell (2009) describes three approaches to research: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. While researchers from the different paradigms would use these approaches as they see fit, there are stronger associations between some of them (Mertens, 2010).

a) Quantitative: This is an attempt to understand the world through numerical evidence. It is can be descriptive or experimental. In this approach, "the researcher tests a theory by specifying narrow hypotheses and the collection of data to support or refute the hypotheses" (Creswell, 2009, p.16). Findings are usually displayed with graphs and charts. This would align with a postpositive paradigm.

b) Qualitative: Qualitative research seeks to discover the meanings held by participants. The researcher is an instrument and "seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of the participants" (Creswell, 2009, p.16).

Knowledge is created through the interactions between the researcher and the participants. Findings contain rich descriptions. This is an approach that is used by researchers in the constructive or transformative paradigm.

c) Mixed methods: This approach uses elements of quantitative and qualitative. These could be employed concurrently or as a follow up data collection exercise, for example a qualitative interview to supplement a quantitative survey, or vice versa. The researcher bases the inquiry on "the assumption that collecting diverse types of data best provides an understanding of a research problem" (Creswell, 2009, p.18). This approach is used by researchers from all the paradigms.

This doctoral project utilises a mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the area of assessment in primary schools. The method chosen is a concurrent model so that the researcher "converges or merges quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem" (Creswell, 2009, p.14). I have chosen this model as I believe that collecting diverse data provides the best opportunity of understanding the research problem (Creswell, 2009, p.18). The area of assessment in primary schools is complex as it impacts on all of the stakeholders in education. Assessment can be seen to operate at a micro-level – in the classroom. In each classroom in the country, assessment tools and practices impact on the pupils and their concepts of themselves, while they also influence decisions that teachers make regarding timetabling and curricular choice (see Chapter 2). Assessment can also be seen to operate at a macro-level – both nationally and internationally. There is interplay between a number of international institutions that affect policy development in Ireland. Furthermore, policy makers also hold differing views on the purposes of assessment

and the underlying assumptions on its role in education (Chapters 6 and 7). I believe that this area is too complex to be examined effectively through the exclusive use of either quantitative or qualitative means. I believe that a mixed methods approach is the best solution to gathering a variety of data on this complex topic. In so doing, I propose that the data collected will afford me the ability to triangulate between them and to identify trends which may emerge. This adds to the significance and reliability of this study. The manner in which the data are analysed is outlined in detail in the subsequent section. As a mixed methods study, the study is design, and the data is analysed, in an eclectic manner. The research design is based on two of Creswell's (2009) design strategies: sequential exploratory and concurrent transformative. The sequential exploratory design is used to explore a phenomenon and involves an initial phase of qualitative data collection and analysis followed by a phase of quantitative data collection and analysis. The data analysis is grounded in a phenomenological approach based on the literature review. However, as the research gathering process occurred over a number of years (from 2013 to 2015), the data collected impacted on the development of interview protocols and the questionnaire tool, as well as influencing the codes by which they were analysed. The survey employs a concurrent transformative design regarding analysis in which theory is built from interviews, document analysis and questionnaire data. This design strategy consists of the use of a theoretical perspective reflected in the purpose or research questions of the study to guide all methodological choices. The chapter continues with an examination of the research methods utilised in the study.

5.4 Research methodology

5.4.1 Research questions

This doctoral project has three major research questions (outlined in detail in section 1.1.2). The first question aims to explore the epistemology and compromises of the national literacy and numeracy strategy. The second question seeks to examine teachers' assessment practices and identify how these have been influenced by the national strategy. Finally, the third question aspires to study children's perspectives of themselves as learners and their view of assessment. This chapter continues with a description of the quantitative and qualitative methods utilised, as well as how the data is collected and analysed. It investigates issues surrounding research with children and it also outlines some ethical implications and limitations of the research.

5.4.2 Quantitative methods

5.4.2.1 Design of questionnaire survey of teachers' assessment practices and beliefs

The use of surveys of teachers' assessment practices and beliefs attempts to add a larger contextual background to the qualitative methods and ascertain any trends that are emerging in assessment practices in relation to the national strategy. According to Phillips and Burbules, the use of a quantitative approach such as surveys "does not attempt to describe the *total reality* about, say a classroom; rather, it seeks to develop *relevant* true statements" (2000, p.38, italics in original). Surveys "gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions" (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p.83). Youngman states that the

prime source of surveys "must be the working hypotheses and the literature survey" (1984, p.157), and this is the source employed in the development of the survey for this research.

The survey devised for this project is divided into four sections. The first enquires about biographical information; the second examines teachers' knowledge of assessment policy in their primary schools; the third investigates teachers' assessment practices; and the fourth enquires about Continuing Professional Development and Assessment. There are four different methods of attitude scaling outlined by Oppenheim: Bogardus, Thurstone, Likert and Guttman (1992, p.188). To study attitude patterning or explore theories of attitudes, Oppenheim states that the Likert procedure is "probably the most relevant" (1992, p.189). This is the scale utilised in this research. Oppenheim also states that Likert scales will "effectively separate people within the same group" (1992, p.200). This characteristic is beneficial to this study as it aims to analyse any varying uses of assessment procedures. Munn and Drever outline the different types of questions that can be contained in a survey: open; closed; ranked responses; scaled responses (1999, p.25-26). The survey utilised in my project includes a variety of question types.

The question of sampling to identify a research base of participants is important to consider when administering a survey. There are a number of different approaches to sampling, both probability and non-probability. The survey uses non-probability based purposive sampling, where researchers handpick the cases in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality (Gillham, 2008; Cohen and Manion, 1994). Cohen and Manion (1994) describe the importance of avoiding leading or complex questions, as well as arranging the contents of the survey in such a way as to maximise co-operation. Gillham avers that six A4 pages is a maximum

length (2008, p.57), while Munn and Drever argue for an upper limit of 15 to 20 questions (1999, p.21). Gillham states that the main ethical requirement for surveys is that "you should make the *purpose* of your research clear to those involved and obtain their consent to use the information they disclose, protecting confidentiality as appropriate" (2008, p.26, italics in original). An information letter about the survey was sent to all principals and teachers of the schools involved (Appendix 1). Some of the questions in the survey used in the doctoral study are based on the national survey of assessment practices by the INTO in 2008. Questions 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 ask similar questions regarding teachers' understanding of assessment policy in their schools, the administration of standardised tests, and their views on the purposes of standardised tests. The responses to these questions from both surveys are compared and contrasted to examine areas of consistency or change. This enables the project to document any changes and consistencies in the past number of years (Knight, 2002). It utilises the simple descriptive approach to maximise the number of respondents (Mertens, 2010, p.177).

Commentators espouse the need for piloting of the instrument to examine whether the content needs to be modified; to investigate whether it works as intended; and to identify any difficulties in the analysis stage (Gillham, 2008; Munn and Drever, 1999; Cohen and Manion, 1994; Oppenheim, 1992). Three reasons for piloting are to see whether people can complete the questionnaire in a reasonable time, to identify problems with questions, and to encourage thought about the analysis of data (Knight, 2002, p.95). This took place in May 2013 with two teachers who are not included in the study sample. The teachers completed the survey individually with me present. I asked both participants to explain their

thoughts as they were reading and answering the questions to ensure that the questions were as concise as possible and that they were an appropriate instrument to collect data relevant to this study's research question. The phraseology of some questions was clarified and edited to ease understanding as a result of the piloting.

The finalised survey is four A4 pages in length. It contains 18 questions which are a mixture of open and closed questions, some of which employ Likert scales. The surveys were administered between January and February 2014. Twelve primary schools in the Cork area were identified, which were a mixture of urban and rural schools (7 urban and 5 rural schools respectively). These schools were chosen as I had a contact teacher in each of them who would deliver the surveys to the teachers on staff and be responsible for their safe return to me. 301 surveys were delivered to teachers around the Cork area. 144 completed surveys were returned, resulting in a response rate of 48%. As there is only one administration of the survey instrument, internal consistency is calculated to determine reliability. Mertens states that statistical packages for computers calculate a reliability coefficient, such as Cronbach's coefficient (2010, p.382). The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) is employed in this instance. The survey measures teachers' assessment practices so concurrent validity is utilised (Mertens, 2010; Knight, 2002). The survey is analysed using inferential statistics to determine whether sample scores on assessment differ across teacher background. An ordinal scale of measurement is employed in the survey (Mertens, 2010). Knight (2002) argues that data analysis is continuous. He states that "(i)t begins with the research design and the research capture and it continues as repeated thinking about meanings that might be identified in the data" (Knight, 2002, p.176). The project uses this method to

decide upon units of coding as the research develops. A sample of the survey can be found in Appendix 2.

5.4.3 Qualitative methods

The qualitative aspect of the project consists of a phenomenological approach. The project aims to explore the impact of the literacy and numeracy strategy, in particular the use of assessment, on teachers and pupils. A phenomenological approach is suitable as it describes "the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p.51). The qualitative aspect of the research takes the form of document analysis of the literacy and numeracy strategy and assessment policy, interviews, a focus group and participant-produced drawings.

5.4.3.1 Document analysis

Ball argues that policy analysis is too complex for one theory and that what is needed is "a toolbox of diverse concepts and theories" (1994, p.14). He offers two conceptualisations of policy: policy as text; and policy as discourse (section 3.2.2). I will use these conceptualisations of policy to outline the research design of the policy analysis. Chapter 6 offers a document analysis of the policy elements regarding assessment in the draft plan, *Better literacy and numeracy for children and young people* (DES, 2010) and in the published version, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* (DES, 2011). It examines the assumptions on assessment and learning contained within them and compares and contrasts these documents and

notes any differences. It examines submissions from a number of key stakeholders, representatives of which were interviewed as part of this doctoral study. These include the INTO, the NCCA and the Teaching Council. Throughout the document analysis reference will be made to Foucault's archaeological and genealogical method and Bourdieu's theory of habitus and capital.

5.4.3.2 Interview

Data for this doctoral study was gathered through interviews with primary school pupils and high profile interviewees. The primary school pupils were interviewed in a focus group setting, which is described in the next section. The high profile interviewees consist of policy makers who were involved to varying degrees in the development and implementation of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. Table 5 outlines the names and roles of these interviewees, as well as the date on which they partook in the interview and its duration.

Table 5 List of high profile interviewees

Name	Role	Date of interview	Interview duration
Ms. Sheila Nunan	General Secretary, INTO	8th May 2013	42 minutes
Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc	Director, Teaching Council	9th May 2013	59 minutes
Dr. Peter Archer	Director, ERC	14th June 2013	64 minutes
Dr. Harold Hislop	Chief Inspector, DES	11th July 2013	56 minutes
Mr. Edward Murtagh	Assistant Chief Inspector (retired), DES	22nd August 2013	55 minutes
Mr. Ruairí Quinn, TD	Minister for Education and Skills (2011-2014)	19th February 2014	33 minutes
Dr. Sarah FitzPatrick	Deputy Chief Executive Officer (Primary Education), NCCA	25th July 2014	90 minutes
Ms. Jan O'Sullivan, TD	Minister for Education and Skills (2014-present)	27th March 2015	23 minutes

This section continues with an explanation of my approach to interviewing for this doctoral study. A qualitative interview "gives the informant the space to express meaning in his or her own words and to give direction to the interview process" (Brenner, 2006, p.357). This is contrasted to a quantitative approach, where the interviewer attempts to extract pre-existing knowledge and attitudes. In a qualitative stance the interviewer gives more of him or herself to the process and can be seen as fellow travellers on the road of discovery (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The high-profile interviews and the focus groups with pupils are semi-structured and utilise open-ended questions. Brenner (2006) outlines four theoretical assumptions underlying interviews: cultural anthropology, cognitive anthropology, cognitive science and developmental psychology. My interview technique falls into the cultural anthropology camp as the goal is to "understand the shared experiences, practices, and beliefs that arise from shared cultural perspectives" (Brenner, 2006,

p.358). Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the interviewer needs to be "knowledgeable about the interview topic, and to be familiar with the methodological options available, as well as to have an understanding of the conceptual issues producing knowledge through conversation" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.16). Knight underscores the importance of an interview schedule as "the set of prompts itself amounts to a theory, explicit or tacit, of the subject being investigated" (2002, p.62). The interview schedule for the high profile interviews is included as Appendix 3.

Brenner explains that an inductive or deductive approach can be utilised (2006, p.360-361). My approach is deductive as I am working from a theoretical perspective about teaching, learning and assessment as outlined in Chapters 1, 2 and 3. Cohen and Manion identify four types of interviews: structured, unstructured, non-directive, and focused (1994, p.273). Mertens (2010) adds semi-structured to this list. I use semi-structured interviews as these are guided by the researcher's literature but contain space for the participant to create new avenues of inquiry. I follow the interview procedures outlined by Cohen and Manion: decide the purpose of the research; translate general goals into detailed and specific objectives; prepare the interview schedule; decide the question format and response mode; construct the questions; set up and conduct the interviews; code and score the data; analyse and interpret data (1994, p.284-286).

The researcher is the instrument of data collection (Mertens, 2010; Eisner, 1998). As a researcher I am seeking to investigate the creation of the literacy and numeracy strategy; understand how the practice of teachers in assessment compares with the best practice as outlined in the research; and determine the impact on children as learners. The qualitative approach utilises dependability and

confirmability (Mertens, 2010; Creswell, 1998). This is achieved through triangulation of the data; prolonged engagement; member checks; and peer debriefing (Mertens, 2010). Informed consent is sought from all participants and the data collected is only used in the ways described to the participants (Knight, 2002, p.142). Consent was sought from the high profile interviewees for the use of their names and titles (Appendix 4). The high-profile interviews and focus groups with pupils were recorded on audiotape. The participants were given an opportunity to respond to, or elaborate on, points raised during the interviews at a later date.

Knight states that piloting should show "whether the prompts are useful and, perhaps more important, good pilot interviews can identify topics that need to be added to the list but which had been missed by the literature review" (2002, p.66). For the high-profile semi-structured interviews, the questions were piloted with the project supervisor in autumn 2012. The focus group approach with pupils was piloted with members of the researcher's own school community in May 2013 and is described in the next section. Triangulation involves checking information that has been collected from different sources. In this project, triangulation entails checks between the interviews with two focus groups of pupils, elicitation on the meanings of the pupils' drawings, and the results of the teacher survey. Rival explanations are explored to determine the convergence or non-convergence of data (Mertens, 2010, pp.258-259).

The data analysis of the interviews is theme-oriented and based on the literature review. Knight avers that qualitative data are "easier to categorise and make sense of if you know what you are looking for, and easier still if the research was designed explicitly to look for that and that alone" (2002, p.182). He outlines two stages of analysis: coding the data and reflecting upon interpretations of the data

(Knight, 2002, p.182). For Knight, data analysis of qualitative data is "a continuing, sensemaking toing and froing between the data, the categories, the emerging stories, and the literature" (2002, p.186). Creswell (2009) lists the following stages in qualitative data analysis which will be utilised in this research: a) organise and prepare the data for analysis; b) read through all the data; c) begin detailed analysis with a coding process; d) use coding to generate a description of the setting or people as well as the categories or themes for analysis; e) advance how the descriptions and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative; and f) make an interpretation of the data (p.185-190).

5.4.3.3 Focus group interviews with primary school pupils: data collection and analysis

A focus group interview is utilised in this doctoral project to elicit the perspectives of pupils. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis state that "Focus groups have...allowed researchers to explore the nature and effects of ongoing social discourse in ways that are not possible through individual interviews or observations" (2005, p.902). Vaughn et al. give five reasons for utilising focus groups: i) they offer variety and versatility to both qualitative and quantitative research methods; ii) they are compatible with the qualitative research paradigm; iii) they offer opportunities for direct contact with subjects; iv) they offer distinctive advantages for data collection by encouraging interaction and support for participants; and v) they offer utility (1996, pp.14-20). These reasons match the underlying paradigm of this project as it utilises a mixed methods approach and seeks to understand pupils' perspectives on assessment. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis

highlight three overlapping domains where focus groups predominantly occur: pedagogy, politics, and qualitative research practice (2005, p.888). This research is at the intersection of these three areas.

Scott comments that, usually, parents respond for children in surveys and questionnaires (2000, p.99). For her, "the best people to provide information on the child's perspective, actions and attitudes are children themselves" (2000, p.99). Scott identifies a number of problems that may arise when conducting research with children. These include the language being used, the stage of cognitive ability, the fear of adult sanction, and issues of confidentiality and ethics (2000, p.100). However, she argues that by age 11, most children are fully able to articulate (2000, p.102). She outlines three aids to interviewing: routing, visual aids and prompts (2000, p.106). Routing is needed to ensure that children are asked appropriate questions. Visual aids are helpful if there are vocabulary problems. Prompts are essential when inadequate answers are given due to a lack of communication skills. The study includes visual aids through the use of three assessment tools that the pupils have encountered in primary school: spelling book, mathematics assessment book and standardised tests. Scott highlights the importance of clarity in instructions with young children. According to her, researchers have to "ensure that questions really do measure the desired concept; that the questions are unambiguous, and that children interpret the questions in the way the researcher intended" (2000, p.107).

Vaughn et al. cite Krueger (1988) in outlining how to summarise key ideas after the focus group interviews and before analysis begins:

1. Find the big ideas

2. Consider the choice and meaning of words

3. Consider the context

4. Consider the consistency of responses (1996, p103).

The focus group approach was piloted in May 2013 in the researcher's workplace. This pilot consisted of five sixth class pupils. The questions elicited detailed and thoughtful responses and the visual aids (three assessment tools) were an excellent stimulus for conversation. In gathering focus group data to be analysed in this dissertation, the study draws on convenience sampling of two schools, one urban and one rural (other than the researcher's workplace). It consists of focus groups of five children in each school who are selected by random sampling once consent is received. Consent was received from both parent and pupil after information letters were distributed to all of the class (Appendices 5 and 6). The interviews took place in June 2014. One interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, whereas the other interview was 40 minutes approximately in duration. Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes how the subject of research is influenced and acted upon at various levels: microsystem (interactions in the immediate setting); Mesosystem (interactions between settings in which a person participates, e.g. home/school); exosystem (events that occur which affects what happens to the person without their participation); and macrosystem (social institutions). This approach is employed when analysing the data collected during the focus group interviews. The focus group interview also asks questions regarding national assessment policy (see interview protocol in Appendix 7).

Although there are limitations to this sample in that the results cannot be generalised beyond the given population pool (Mertens, 2010, p.325), it is hoped that by interviewing pupils in two schools comparisons can be made. Credibility is

addressed by engagement with the pupils through a variety of means including participant-produced drawings and interviews. Transferability is addressed through the use of multiple cases (Mertens, 2010, pp.256-262). The data is analysed in the same manner as the interview data.

5.4.3.4 Participant-produced drawings

Participant-produced drawings is a research technique that is employed in this dissertation to gather data with pupils. This method has become increasingly popular with researchers in the social sciences (Hogan and Pink, 2012; Ganesh, 2011). Hogan and Pink state that "it is pertinent to note that these approaches are part of a trend in social science and humanities research that focuses on the experiential, the sensory, and ways of knowing, being and remembering that cannot necessarily be articulated in words" (2012, p.232). Ganesh (2011) outlines how this method can be used as a descriptive or analytical tool in research. As a descriptive tool, the drawings can be utilised to elicit individuals' understandings of a specific idea or construct. As an analytical tool, produced drawings can be used to compare an individual's changes over time. The drawings produced by the pupils for this dissertation are used as a descriptive tool to elicit the pupils' understandings of and feelings toward assessment in primary school. The drawings are also used in this study as an instrument to assist and develop contributions during the focus group. Ganesh (2011, p.223-4) describes an approach to make sense of drawings, which is utilised in this study:

- Open coding – broad theoretical categories

- Axial coding – compare for cross-cutting concepts
- Image elicitation interviews – to confirm researcher's interpretations of the drawings

Noth argues that "what pictures depict is very often already a symbolic sign whose interpretation requires cultural knowledge" (2011, p.304). Banks (2001) also argues that the social context in which the image is created is of vital importance when interpreting the image. Banks (2001) distinguishes between the internal narrative of the image and the external narrative. The internal narrative is related to the content of the image whereas the external narrative refers to the social context that produced the image. The internal narrative of the drawings is analysed using visual salience and pragmatics. The visual salience of a figure, its foregrounding, or its position in the centre, correspond to the importance in pictorial meaning. Visual pragmatics deals with the way pictures are used and the effects which they have on their viewers (Noth, 2011). The external narrative of the images are analysed through image-elicitation interviews with the pupils. By discussing the drawings with the participants, the researcher's interpretations gain added validity (Ganesh, 2011). Ganesh states that when drawings are analysed in context, along with other sources of data such as author descriptions of the drawing or image-elicitation interviews, "the validity of the inferences that one can make from such data is enhanced, as the inferences will not rely solely on the researcher's interpretations" (2011, p.238).

Ganesh states that participant-produced drawings have the following qualities: "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" (2011, p.238). In this study, the ten children were asked to complete drawings on assessment at the start of the focus group interviews. The pupils had received information letters about the nature of the focus group interview prior to the interviews taking place. The pupils were asked to draw their thoughts about assessment or how it made them feel. They were instructed to complete the activity in a short period of time (2 – 3 minutes). Some pupils asked whether they could write responses instead of drawing them and this was accepted. These drawings are analysed in Chapter 9.

5.4.4 Research with children

There have been shifts in the notions of childhood in recent years. In the early 1900s, Swedish reformer, Ellen Kay, argues that the twentieth century should be the 'century of the child' (Prout, 2003, p.11). Children became seen as "a point of intervention and an investment in the future" (Prout, 2003, p.11). A number of commentators have noted how education became more concerned with economic advancement in Ireland since the 1960s (O'Brien, 2012; Gleeson, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2009 – see section 4.3). In analysing the literature on children's role in society, Kjorholt identifies the concept of the 'competent child', which is "a paradigm shift, replacing earlier concepts of children as vulnerable, dependent and in need of care" (2005, p.152). She cautions that public policy regarding children must be examined "in accordance with the social practices that are constructed and the social and moral space within which these practices are constructed" (2005, p.164). Kjorholt et al.

expand upon this point by stating that market-orientated discourses can construct young people as consumers (2005, p.175). This doctoral research aims to understand primary school pupils' perspectives on assessment. In so doing, it is cognisant of the impact of assessment policy and practices on pupils' conceptions of themselves as learners. This dissertation also examines the context in which assessment policy is developed. Wider societal influences – both national and international – impact on policy formation at a macro-level. At a micro-level, the level of the classroom, the policies are implemented through the relational dimension of the teacher-pupil relationship as well as the peer relationships within the particular class.

Morrow and Martin state that "the methods that we use, the research populations and subjects that we study, and crucially the interpretation of the data collected, are all influenced by the view of children that we take" (1996, p.99). James et al. (1998) offer four approaches to child study: i) the socially constructed child; ii) the tribal child; iii) the minority group child; iv) the social structural child.

i) The socially constructed child: Social constructionists argue that childhood does not exist in a finite form, an approach based in hermeneutics. Children inhabit a world of meaning created by themselves and through their interactions with adults. In this perspective, childhood is not formed by natural and social forces (p.26-28).

ii) The tribal child: This approach has a commitment to children's social worlds as real places and is based in ethnography. In this perspective, the child's world is unfamiliar and needs to be revealed through research (p.28-30).

iii) The minority group child: Based on the politicisation of childhood, this approach assigns children as a minority group. It is based in an indictment of the

social structure and an accompanying ideology which deprives some people of freedom (p.30-31).

iv) The social structural child: This viewpoint holds that children are a feature of all social worlds and is based in a pragmatic approach. Childhood is instanced as a social phenomenon (p.32-33).

This doctoral study utilises the social structural child approach. Childhood is seen being influenced by social institutions, such as the school. Analysts in this category are interested in "the experience of childhood...often in terms of its interrelationships with other categories in the society" (James et al., 1998, p.207). This is of particular relevance to this doctoral study as it seeks to examine the impact of the national literacy and numeracy strategy, and its methods of assessment, on the pupils. James et al. argue that childhood has moved "to the forefront of personal, political and academic agendas" (1998, p.5). They highlight the rise of childhood agency in areas affecting their lives as children, and they see an interesting dichotomy underlying it. At the same time as there is a dynamic towards autonomous children, there are also social practices emphasising children's separateness and difference. This is demonstrated in the rise in surveillance and social regulation of children (James et al., 1998, p.7). Craig argues that the view of childhood in research has changed from only having rights to protection from harm to also having rights of autonomous action and social and political participation (2003, p.39).

This doctoral study supports children's rights to autonomous action and participation by including them as participants through the focus group interviews. The NCCA stated in their submission to the draft literacy and numeracy plan that the

voices of learners are "conspicuously and somewhat ironically absent from the document" (2010, p.14). This dissertation includes children as participants via the focus group interviews. James et al.'s (1998) assertion about the social regulation of childhood is similar to a Foucauldian perspective. Foucault (1975) argues that the examination is a disciplinary technique that creates a particular type of person through the process of comparison and normalisation (section 1.2.1.2). The types of assessments used and the purposes to which they are put have a profound impact on children's self identities in their formative years. The development of a variety of pathologies of childhood is reviewed in Chapter 2 (section 2.5.4). Labels such as slow learner, ADHD and learning disability can mask underlying problems with the educational system and create the disability as teachers and other pupils react as if it were a constant presence (McDermott, 2001). This dissertation is concerned with the impact of assessment procedures on primary school pupils and seeks to ascertain the views of some children on this matter. Any form of research with children involves ethical decisions as children can be seen as vulnerable members of society. This issue will be explored in the next section, as well as a number of other ethical concerns and some limitations of the doctoral project.

5.5 Ethical issues and limitations of the study

This section will highlight three concerns in the project: i) children, their ability to participate in research, and informed consent; ii) ethical interviewing; and iii) limitations.

5.5.1 Children, their ability to participate in research, and informed consent

The importance of children participating in decisions that affect them is outlined in the United Nations Charter on the Rights of the Child (Article 12). This has led a number of researchers to explore the methodology and ethics of research with children (Gallagher et al., 2010; Warming, 2005; Morrow and Martin, 1996). Many have stated that there is no such thing as one 'authentic' child perspective, but that social and cultural contexts should be represented (Warming, 2005; Eide and Winger, 2005; Christensen and James, 2000). Morrow and Martin argue that children are seen as different to adults in three ways: they are, to greater and lesser degrees, vulnerable, incompetent, and powerless (1996, p.96).

The question of when research can commence with young children is a contested one. Eide and Winger (2005) state that qualitative interviews can be used with children from the age of 3 years, once the questions are open and guiding. Scott (2000), on the other hand, states that it is possible to conduct interviews with children from the age of 7, as long as they are semi-structured and visual aids are utilised. This study includes 6th class pupils who are aged 11 to 12. Vaughn et al. (1996) state that children can participate in focus groups from the age of 6 years. Some common principles underlying good interview technique with young children are a good relationship between researcher and child; patience from the researcher; being focused and routing the conversation; relevance to the child's experience; and reflecting on the child's comments (Morrow and Martin, 1996; Scott, 2000; Eide and Winger, 2005). A number of researchers stress the importance of utilising a variety of methods of data collection, including drawings and photographs, as it can alleviate literacy difficulties or communication problems (Christensen and James, 2000; Clark, 2005; Warming, 2005). The research methodology acknowledges the

importance of these strategies by using routing, prompts and visual aids, as well as simplified language (Scott, 2000).

Morrow and Martin (1996) state that there are generally two preoccupations with research with children: informed consent and protection of research participants (p.94). They assert that consent often lies with the parents and that children are "to a large extent seen as their parents' property, devoid of the right to say no to research" (p.94). Gallagher et al. (2010) argue that the challenge of informed consent cannot be solved by adopting special 'child-friendly' techniques, because the principle of informed consent itself is problematic. They argue that in a school-based setting, problems of consent include the fact that the child might be afraid to state that he or she does not understand, and the researcher may not have the time and space to get to know individual participants (p.475). James et al. state that informed consent may be difficult to attain as children are "subject to sets of power relations, at home and at school, which may lead to a practical compliance through the fear of sanction" (1998, p.187).

Gallagher et al. (2010) advocate attaining consent through a signed form. They cite advantages of this method, such as the ability for the child to reflect before they agree to participate and the aid to researchers in record-keeping (p.477). Cohen and Manion offer the following advice: "First, researchers consult and seek permission from those adults responsible for the prospective subjects; and second, they approach the young people themselves" (1994, p.352). For the research, consent will be sought beforehand from the parents, teachers and principal, and then from the pupils. The pupils and parents will receive letters of information detailing the purpose of the study (see Appendices 5 and 6 for Letters of information and informed consent to parents and pupils regarding the focus group interviews).

Vaughn et al. state that "it is essential that the researcher clearly identify the topic to be discussed and limit the range of topics and ideas. It is better to limit the scope of the focus group to a specific topic than it is to attempt to accomplish too much" (1996, p.38). An interview protocol for the focus group has been developed and piloted successfully with 6th class pupils (Appendix 7).

5.5.2 Ethical interviewing

The interviewing relationship is fraught with issues of power (Marshall and Rossman, 2011; Seidman, 1991). Seidman states that there is a spectrum of opinion regarding participants' right to edit material ranging from co-ownership to an acknowledgement that the participants knew why they were being interviewed (1991, p.75). He advises that any sensitive material concerning participants be shared with them. I followed this model during the research gathering stage. Marshall and Rossman outline some advantages of high profile interviews as valuable information can be gained and a broad view of policy development can be created. They acknowledge the difficulties of access and that the interview structure may have to be adapted based on the wishes of the person interviewed. However, they also argue that it is important to seek their perspectives on the formation of policy to establish a comprehensive picture (2011, p.156). I have received consent to interview eight high profile individuals (listed in the chronological order of the interviews): Ms. Sheila Nunan (General Secretary, INTO), Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc (Director, Teaching Council), Dr. Peter Archer (Acting Director, ERC), Dr. Harold Hislop (Chief Inspector), Mr. Edward Murtagh (retired Assistant Chief Inspector), Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairí Quinn, TD, Dr. Sarah Fitzpatrick

(Deputy CEO [Primary], NCCA), and Minister for Education and Skills, Ms. Jan O'Sullivan, TD. Each was given the interview protocol before the scheduled interview, and they received a transcript afterwards and had the right to amend it. The participants do not have the right to alter any of the interpretations in the study.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) outline seven stages of interviewing: thematising, designing, interview situation, transcription, analysis, verification, and reporting. For the authors, ethical issues arise at each stage. They describe the stages as "tools" to be employed to think through in advance value issues, as opposed to "the final moral authority" (2009, p.70). For these and other authors (Creswell, 1998; Eisner, 1998), the interviewer needs to make an array of ethical issues on the ground. I propose to utilise these guidelines in my project. To achieve the greatest amount of validity and minimise the amount of bias from the interviewer, Cohen and Manion advocate "careful formulation of questions so that the meaning is crystal clear; thorough training procedures so that an interviewer is more aware of the possible problems; probability sampling of respondents; and sometimes by matching interviewer characteristics with those of the sample being interviewed" (1994, p.282).

5.5.3 Limitations

Bell warns that, when using surveys in small studies, "it is dangerous to use percentages without the associated numbers" (1993, p.142) as it might inflate the claims made about the responses. This study aims to avoid this danger by stating clearly the number of respondents. Mertens (2010) also outlines the problem of the generalisability of data. Cross-referencing the data with the 2008 INTO survey, and

the qualitative data should enable the research to identify trends. The project also has feasibility issues pertaining to access to the significant personnel for the high-profile interviews. Failing to document their views on the creation of the national strategy could lead to bias in the analysis. Eight interviewees have been successfully contacted for interview. The project is also seeking an acceptable response rate in the survey. Mail surveys are employed as research shows that, in small scale surveys, response is higher than Web-based approaches (Shih and Fan, 2008 cited in Mertens, 2010, p.178). Concerning research with children, Scott identifies as a problem of school-based interviewing that children may be influenced by the proximity of classmates (2000, p.105). Martin and Morrow believe that the school setting also problematises research as children may not feel they are in a position to dissent "because most (if not all) tasks and activities in school are compulsory" (p.101). Gallagher et al. (2010) disagree with the notion that participants are rational and independent, as they are "subject to peer group dynamics, relationships with parents and teachers, and institutional hierarchies" (p.479). The focus group interviews in this project occur in a room other than the pupils' classroom and an informal environment is created to alleviate these fears.

This doctoral study received approval from the Social Ethics Research Committee (SREC) at University College Cork (UCC) on 17th May 2013 (Appendix 8).

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter offered a description of research paradigms and approaches, and presented the reasoning as to why a transformative paradigm and mixed methods approach are to be utilised. A comprehensive discussion of the quantitative (survey) and qualitative (document analysis, interview, focus group and participant-produced drawings) followed, and this section included explanations of the sampling and data analysis procedures which are employed. The chapter also highlighted a number of issues regarding research with children, and outlined how vulnerable participants in the research are protected. It concluded by identifying ethical issues and limitations inherent in the project. The dissertation now continues with document analyses and the findings and analysis chapters of the data which were gathered over the course of the study.

CHAPTER 6 DOCUMENT ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY EDUCATION ASSESSMENT POLICY IN *LITERACY AND NUMERACY FOR LEARNING AND LIFE*

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the assessment aspect of the national strategy, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* (DES, 2011). It utilises Ball's two conceptualisations of policy: policy as discourse and policy as text (1994) to investigate the development of the strategy (see section 3.2.2). The first section, policy as discourse, examines how truth and knowledge are produced as discourses in the Irish primary education setting. It investigates the influence of national stakeholders in education, international agencies, and the effect of research in the area of assessment on the policy. It is conscious of Foucault's archaeological approach to social policy (1989), where policy co-exists and interacts with previous policies, and is changed in the process. Foucault's idea of governmentality cautions that one should examine how a policy came into being in the first place (1991a; 1991b). He argues that there are discourses that give legitimacy to each political act. These discourses limit what can be thought or spoken in the policy development process by creating the construct in which the policy is to be developed (section 1.2.1). It is also cognisant of Bourdieu's notions of habitus and doxa. These create an environment where certain opinions or thoughts are valued more than others and become the dominant discourse (section 1.2.2). This leads to a situation where policy makers may not even know that they are reproducing these dominant ideas (1977). This section also includes analysis of comments from the Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairí Quinn, TD, who was in office when the strategy was being developed and implemented; Dr. Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector and a

prime architect of the strategy; and Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director of the Teaching Council.

The second section critiques the actual document itself, in particular its section on assessment. It refers to the draft strategy, *Better literacy and numeracy for children and young people* (DES), which was published in 2010, and compares and contrasts this with the finalised version. It analyses a number of national organisations' and agencies' submissions to the DES regarding the draft plan. These organisations and agencies are chosen as they are influential stakeholders in Irish primary education and representatives of these bodies were also interviewed as part of this study. They include the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and the Teaching Council. The chapter continues with an examination of policy as discourse.

6.2 Policy as discourse

6.2.1 The discourse of consensus in policy making

Ball avers that policies exercise power through "a *production* of 'truth' and 'knowledge', as discourses" (1994, p.21). For him, discourses are not only about "what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority" (p.21). Gleeson states that, in Ireland, there is a "prevailing *ad hoc*, fragmented approach to policy-making in general and the adoption of a consensus approach" (2009, p.57). The notion of consensus in policy-making is problematic, however. Ozga (2012) argues that discourses can be identified at a European level, where she identifies 'soft governance' strategies, such as the use of data and

inspection in education policy. She asserts that these discourses bring a shift in governing practices in education from within the nation-state to governing "through networks of new actors, along with individual self-governance, informed by constant self-evaluation of performance, steered through the benchmarking and competitive performance regimes of transnational organisations" (2012, p.442). For Ozga, this engagement with transnational organisations requires "imposed consensus" (2012, p.444). Gillies agrees with this analysis, stating that "as the agenda, the objects of the consultation exercise and the nature and composition of those groups to be consulted, are often pre-set by government, the public opinion being sought has already been discursively shaped" (2008, p.424) (see section 3.4.1).

In outlining the development of the policy, Hislop states that "In November 2010, the Department of Education and Skills launched a national consultation on a literacy and numeracy strategy. The response was overwhelming: almost 480 detailed written submissions and a number of oral submissions were received... The extent of the response demonstrated the genuine interest that people within and beyond the educational system had for this issue" (2011, p.8). While it is undeniable that there was a high level of interest, Hislop fails to mention that the consultation was in response to the publication of a draft strategy, *Better literacy and numeracy for children and young people*. The Department had set the agenda for the consultation and narrowed its parameters considerably by using this approach. Section 6.3 examines the notion of consensus in the development of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* in more detail.

6.2.2 The discourse of the accountability agenda in Ireland

O'Sullivan states that "a pervasive weakness of Irish policy discourse is its failure to theorise the nature of educational change in recent times" (2009, p.137). This section aims to offer insight into the nature of the educational change that occurred in Ireland in 2011 on the publication of the national strategy, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. This includes a number of reform initiatives across the education sector. Conway and Murphy state that "whether systemic reforms bring coherence and/or result in the displacement of desirable educational goals due to the exigencies of accountability is one of the central dilemmas in education reform" (2013, p.30). This section explores the rise of the accountability agenda in Ireland at the current time and demonstrate its effect on education policy.

Gleeson states that the production of human capital and the promotion of social inclusion have been the two key reference points of Irish educational policy since the 1960s, and outlines the Irish state's involvement with the OECD as facilitating the introduction of the human capital paradigm into the educational sphere (2009, p.38-40). O'Brien argues that the state's stance on the economic value of education is "dynamically consistent with EU (e.g. European Commission, 2006), OECD (e.g. OECD, 1996) and The World Bank (e.g. World Bank, 1998) policies" (2012, p.544). He continues by explaining that this rationalisation is justified by views such as a lack of alternatives or a dearth of financial resources. O'Brien avers that "these views themselves presuppose the education-economy relation, particularly the *a priori* higher status of the economic sign and education's value therein" (2012, p.546).

A striking example of the rationalistic view of education is displayed in the OECD's 2011 Economic Survey of Ireland. It comments that to "preserve its strengths in human capital, Ireland needs to ensure a high quality of education" (p.28). It argues that there are limited accountability mechanisms and that "authorities should set up mechanisms to systematically evaluate teachers' and schools' performance, and make the latter public once adjusted for socio-economic background" (p.29). This is a view that is very influential in government policy. The former Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairí Quinn, T.D., presents a similar view, "The challenge for Irish education in the current climate of constrained resources and population growth is to address the simultaneous demands for greater accountability and greater quality" (2013, p.10).

6.2.3 The discourse of PISA

Hislop notes the impact that PISA 2009 had on politicians, the media and the wider public. He states that:

> "In 2010, we had a unique opportunity to galvanise the political and educational systems and the wider public into tackling long-standing issues and challenges in Irish education. The formulation of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy was designed to harness this energy for the long-term improvement of the educational system" (2011, p.7).

The impact of PISA 2009 on the educational landscape in Ireland has been noted by a number of commentators. Conway and Murphy state that, "in relation to accountability, the response to PISA 2009 reflected an endorsement of the 'rising ride' of accountabilities focused on compliance with regulations in teacher education, but also encompassed a systemic move towards attainment of results-type

accountability for schools in relation to literacy and numeracy" (Conway and Murphy, 2013, p.28).

Ireland has since performed well in PISA 2012. At the time of PISA 2009, many felt that those results were somehow skewed and not representative of the true outcomes in Irish education. The Chief Inspector, Dr. Harold Hislop, notes as much in a speech to the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS), stating "Independent international investigations of the Irish outcomes in PISA 2009, have shown that the degree of decline in the Irish maths and reading scores is almost certainly exaggerated by fundamental weaknesses in the underlying methodology used in the calculations of trends in PISA" (2011, p.6). Yet he continues by stressing that standards have in fact fallen, despite these investigations: " However, let me be perfectly clear: the PISA data show that the performance of Irish students' in the reading and maths tests has declined in the decade since 2000" (2011, p.6). This has proved to be misjudged in light of the results of PISA 2012, which saw the levels of achievement in Ireland return to pre-2009 levels.

6.2.4 The discourse of the benefits of reform – raising standards

The Director of the Teaching Council, Tomás Ó Ruairc, argues that the educational landscape in Ireland has changed. However, he believes that the discussion should be about "quality assurance – not quality assessment or evaluation; and where we will talk about how the Teaching Council and the Inspectorate can most effectively provide assurance as to **how** other stakeholders assure quality of teaching and learning, rather than the detail of **what** they do" (2013, p.2, bold in original). Ó Ruairc notes that many in the educational system are unsure about these

changes and question the rationale behind them. Ó Ruairc believes that the responsibility for quality assurance ultimately rests with the teachers, and that teachers should develop a higher sense of professionalism: "Quality assurance **does** make perfect sense if you view it as a dynamic whose initial impetus may come from external agents, but which must become self-sustaining and self-correcting if it is to cope with the unknowable challenges of the future" (2013, p.5, bold in original).

However, Ó Bréacháin and O'Toole (2013) outline a danger that the current focus on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of other curricular areas could thoroughly undermine the broad and holistic ethos of the 1999 Revised Curriculum. FitzPatrick et al. found that "the narrative for change at primary should include and go beyond literacy and numeracy to ensure the holistic ethos of the curriculum is an important entitlement for today's children in future primary developments" (2014, p.14). They call for a revision of traditional, content-based curriculum subjects towards a better alignment with the needs of today's primary school children beginning with a more explicit focus on life-skills, and children's social and emotional development. Section 6.3 analyses the approach in the development of the literacy and numeracy strategy.

Conway and Murphy offer an instructive historical example in terms of the impact of high-stakes Examination for Primary Certificate in Ireland administered to all sixth class primary school students from 1943 to 1967. They cite Madaus and Greaney (1985) who describe the impact of the examination as a narrowing of the taught curriculum, increasing of retention practices, and the marked resistance among teachers to the examination (Conway and Murphy, 2013, p.30). The cyclical

approach to mandated testing is outlined in Chapter 4. On both occasion in Irish history when testing was introduced, it resulted in negative effects (see section 4.2 and 4.3). Sloane et al. urge that the government exercise "due caution in building a system of accountability based solely on measures of student performance" (2013, p.39). They argue that static student performance measures are poor indicators of school performance and tend to reflect input characteristics (i.e., student enrolment characteristics) of schools as much as they do actual school quality capture factors outside of school control more than actual processes facilitated by schools. They aver that an increase in testing result in both financial and psychological costs and state that the government "needs to be extraordinarily careful should it choose to go down this particular road as a measured response to political pressure from OECD and European agencies; for it is highly unlikely to improve the lives, or the learning, of teachers and their students" (2013, p.65).

Ó Bréacháin and O'Toole argue that "these developments in Irish educational policy present a significant threat to the holistic nature of the Irish curriculum" (2013, p.404). Looney notes that "the role of assessment as a *tool for reform* is rarely discussed with debate generally confined to assessment as the *object of reform*" (2006, p.350, italics in original). This dissertation examines the role of assessment as outlined in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* as a tool for reform in Irish primary education in section 6.3.

6.3 Policy as text

In analysing policy, Ball asserts that questions need to be asked about "whose values are validated in policy, and whose are not" (1990, p.3). This section analyses

the area of assessment in primary education in the draft plan, *Better literacy and numeracy for children and young people*, the submissions of the NCCA, INTO and the Teaching Council in response to the draft plan, and the national strategy itself – *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. It is cognisant of the literature review on assessment policy (Chapter 3).

6.3.1 Document analysis of primary assessment in **Better literacy and numeracy for children and young people: a draft national plan to improve literacy and numeracy in schools** ***(DES, 2010)***

The draft plan, *Better literacy and numeracy for children and young people*, was published in 2010. It sets out an agenda for reform of the Irish educational system, stating that "good is not good enough" (DES, 2010, p.10). The document states that "We have to be very clear about the priorities that guide our decisions about the content of curricula...We have to say clearly to teachers that we want them to emphasise the development of literacy and numeracy above all other aspects of the curriculum" (DES, 2010, p.25). The document does not clarify who constitutes the 'we' in this quote, but implies that it does not include teachers. The document also argues that "*Curricula should state clearly the skills and competence that ought to be expected of learners at five points in their development*" (DES, 2010, p.25). It does not provide any research to support either of these claims. The document relates literacy and numeracy levels with succeeding in society and meeting future work-place requirements. It also raises the issue of international comparisons, stating that Finland sets the benchmark for literacy performance, and that Canada, Australia and New Zealand also feature consistently amongst the higher-performing

education systems. The document states that "It is clear that we must take every possible initiative to improve literacy outcomes for young people in Ireland so that students in Irish schools perform at least as well as the highest-performing students in other developed countries" (2010, p.11). The document does not state the rationale behind this belief, nor does it offer any critique of these international tests. These international tests have been criticised for a number of reasons (Chapter 2). These include that concerns in the dimensionality and item response scaling of comparative tests (Eivers, 2010, Wiliam, 2008, Goldstein, 2004). The acceptance of these tests without critique is one aspect of what the literature reviewed states is a trend, which sees assessment being used to control and drive curriculum and teaching, and to evaluate the larger institution of education (section 2.2.2). International research demonstrates that a number of countries have changed their education policies regarding testing for literacy and numeracy as a result of PISA (Dobbins and Marten, 2012; Grek, 2009; Skedsmo, 2011; Gur, Celik and Ozogulu, 2012). Ireland can also be added to this list as the draft plan introduces target setting into Irish primary education:

- "increase the percentage of primary children performing at Level 3 and Level 4 (the highest levels) in the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading by at least 5 per cent at both second class and sixth class by 2020
- reduce the percentage of children performing at or below Level 1 (minimum) in the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading by at least 5 per cent at both second class and sixth class by 2020" (DES, 2010, p.12).

It does not provide research evidence to support the assumption that target setting raises standards.

The document acknowledges the importance of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers. It commits to providing high-quality continuing professional development opportunities for teachers so as to enable them to maintain

and enhance their pedagogical understanding and skills (2010, p.15). It identifies the key topics for teachers' professional development as reading skills, enabling teachers to give feedback to children on their progress, and "the effective use of assessment data to identify priorities and actions in respect of the provision and outcomes in literacy and numeracy, and to track and improve the achievement of individual students and under-performing groups" (2010, p.17). The document continues by stating the actions to be taken to achieve these goals. Regarding initial teacher education (ITE), it states that there will be adequate time for developing student teachers' understanding and ability to apply current knowledge regarding assessment. It also states that all trainee teachers will successfully complete mandatory units on assessment and reporting (2010, p.19). For teachers currently working, the strategy states that the DES will "Provide access to approved professional development courses of at least twenty hours' duration in literacy, numeracy and assessment every five years for primary teachers" (2010, p.20). As this provision is for access only, there is to be no obligatory CPD for teachers in the area of assessment. Researchers in an Irish context have highlighted the urgency for CPD for primary teachers to develop their assessment skills (Constant and Connolly, 2014; Lyzaght and O'Leary, 2013; O'Leary, 2006; Hall, 2001). The only focused CPD in the area on assessment in recent years has concentrated on the administering, scoring and recording of standardised tests.

The section on assessment offers a primarily cognitive-rationalist approach (see section 2.3.2). It states that:

> ""Gathering and using assessment data also needs to take place at the level of the school, where principals, teachers and boards of management can use this information to identify how well they are providing for the literacy and numeracy needs of individual students and groups of students in the school and how best they can improve

> the learning in the school. We also need to have assessment data to inform national educational policy for literacy and numeracy and identify ways of improving the performance of the school system. Our collection and analysis of information about students' learning in literacy and numeracy need to be improved significantly" (DES, 2010, p.39).

It asserts that "Good practice in assessment means using a variety of assessment methods in order to provide a full picture of a learner's achievement....teachers set tests or devise tasks to assess the progress students have made and to inform planning for how the next stage of learning should be structured and organised" (DES, 2010, p.39). In this outlook, the teacher is the agent in the assessment process. The pupils do not have a role to play in deciding assessment instruments or partake in a shared approach to assessment. The literature review notes the debate amongst researchers about the nature and purpose of assessment (see 2.6.1 and 2.6.2). The draft plan does not acknowledge this debate or offer its theoretical perspective on assessment. A subheading asks "How is assessment evidence used at primary level?" This section concentrates on the uses to which the results of standardised tests are put in primary schools (DES, 2010, p.40). There is no detail on any other aspect of the range of assessment methodologies that could be used to gather assessment data (as outlined in Chapter 2). The draft plan does not acknowledge that the objectivity of standardised tests are criticised by many researchers (MacRuairc, 2009; Lin, 2002; Paris, 1998; Goldstein, 1996). Research has also demonstrated that standardised tests can result in a narrowing of the curriculum or teaching to the test (Lin, 2002; Paris, 1998; Broadfoot, 1996b; Gray, 1996). The draft plan does not acknowledge these concerns or offer a failsafe to ensure that this does not happen in the Irish scenario.

The document proposes a new scheme entitled *School Like Ours* to examine how pupils are performing in schools of similar contexts. It states that standardised

tests do not take account of school contextual factors so it would be inappropriate to compare all schools. However, the proposal does include the use of standardised tests so that schools can compare themselves with "matching" schools. The literature review highlights research in Australia after a comparative website (MySchool) was introduced into primary education containing literacy and numeracy scores for individual schools as part of an accountability reform movement in education (Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2012). The researchers found that "the publication of these results was a claim to support parental access to information about the quality of schooling and the results themselves became codes or indexes for the quality status of individual schools and education systems more generally" (2012, p.67). The document argues that this proposal is not about publishing league tables but about giving "a national picture of each year of primary education in different kinds of schools" (DES, 2010, p.41).

The draft plan contains proposals to develop national standards in literacy and numeracy and include clear learning outcomes in curricula (DES, 2010, p.44). It also seeks to ensure that schools assess the literacy and numeracy achievement of students at fixed points, the principal reports aggregated data on student achievement in the school to the board of management, and provide continuing professional development opportunities on the interpretation and use of achievement data to inform teaching and learning (DES, 2010, p.44-5). It also requires schools to ensure that students are assessed at the end of second, fourth and sixth class in primary school (this is an addition of a third testing point at fourth class). Pages 45-46 contain details about the use to which standardised tests will be put in the new strategy. It does not include a definition of assessment, a review of formative and summative approaches, or an elaboration on the theory of learning on which these

actions are based. These proposals are similar to aspects of the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) outlined by Sahlberg (2011 – see section 3.3.1). The GERM movement has six features: 1) standardisation; 2) increased focus on literacy and numeracy; 3) teach for predetermined results; 4) transfer of innovation from the corporate to the educational world; 5) test-based accountability policies; and 6) increased control of schools. The subsequent sections analyse submissions in relation to the draft plan and the finalised national strategy.

6.3.2 Submissions regarding the draft plan

This section investigates three submissions based on the draft plan: those by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), and the Teaching Council. These are chosen because they are influential stakeholders in primary education and have played an historic role in the development and implementation of policy in Ireland. Representatives of these agencies and organisations are also interviewed as part of this doctoral study (see Chapter 7). This current investigation focuses on these three submissions' views on the role of assessment in the draft strategy. The NCCA, INTO and Teaching Council all welcome the strategy and its timeline for consultation. The NCCA welcome "the spirit in which the plan invites dialogue and discussion so that its strategies can be refined and developed more fully" (2010, p.6). However, it is noteworthy that, as the state's agency for curricular and assessment development, the NCCA was not consulted when the draft strategy was being developed. The NCCA, INTO and Teaching Council raise a number of points to be developed within the strategy. This dissertation examines three of them relating to

assessment: 1) definition of terms, 2) the drive to raise standards, and 3) the approach to assessment within the strategy.

6.3.2.1 Definition of terms

The NCCA identifies areas in need of further clarification as follows:

- "definition of terms
- discourse about learning
- the capacity of testing to promote and sustain reform
- assumptions about progress and change, especially the impact of pre-service education and continuing professional development (CPD)
- the role of schools and teachers in the ambition for continuous improvement
- systemic issues relating to the plan's overall strategy" (2010, p.7).

It argues that definition of terms is important as "their significance resides not only in the terminology that is explicitly defined but also in the assumptions implicit in language used to talk about curriculum, assessment, and how educational change happens" (NCCA, 2010, p.9). The INTO also asserts that the draft strategy does not explain the theory of learning on which it is based. It states that it is "concerned that the overall thrust of the draft plan represents a simplistic and technical view of education rather than recognising that education is a complex non-linear process" (2011, p.2). It also argues that the draft plan does not sufficiently recognise the socio-cultural context in which learning takes place. The Teaching Council does not express concerns about the theories underpinning the draft plan. It does, however, caution against the increased allocation of time for literacy and numeracy at the expense of other curricular areas (2010, p.4). The INTO states that "There appears to be an assumption in the draft plan that an increase in assessment and testing will

lead to improvements in children's achievement in literacy and mathematics" (p.2011, p.3). The next section explores this further.

6.3.2.2 The drive to raise standards

The NCCA, INTO and Teaching Council do not believe that increased testing will lead to a rise in literacy and numeracy standards. Both the INTO and Teaching Council urge the DES to learn from the lessons of the educational systems in the UK and the USA, and not to create an emphasis on testing or league tables. The INTO also argues that continuous testing takes time away from teaching, leads to teaching to the test, and takes time away from student learning (2011). The Teaching Council argues that "providing extra time for literacy and numeracy will not achieve the desired outcomes unless it is accompanied by a change in the way the time is used" and it calls for further research in this area (2010, p.12). The NCCA comments that "a *relentless focus* on literacy and numeracy must be balanced with a concern for children's learning more generally" (2010, p.47). The Teaching Council cautions against putting too much weight on the value of assessment of learner outcomes. It contends that "there is a danger that greater emphasis on assessment of learning outcomes may lead to a rigidity of curriculum" (2010, p.15).

6.3.2.3 Approach to assessment in the strategy

The INTO opposes the proposal to include an extra point of mandated testing in the primary school cycle, arguing that the current system is proficient. The INTO also states a concern that the information tabulated for *Schools Like Ours* could lead

to the creation of league tables. It states that "The purpose of assessment at school level is to inform the teaching and learning process. Any other use of assessment distorts the process of assessment and leads to high stakes testing which has a negative impact on teaching and learning" (2011, p.11). The NCCA avers that the draft plan confers little agency on the learner. It states that "The voices of learners are, in fact, conspicuously and somewhat ironically absent from the document" (2010, p.14). It notes the absence of the learner in the section on assessment: "The overarching emphasis of the tabulated actions is on processes of assessment of learner achievement through standardised tests and the use of evidence from those tests to report to others, to self-evaluate for schools, and to plan for improvement both of the school and of learner instruction" (2010, p.37). The NCCA also calls for reflection on whether putting a programme of evidence-gathering in place will bring about the required level of change to the way in which assessment evidence is used to support learning. It also argues that it is important "to reflect too on whether the kinds of evidence gathered are sympathetic with the aims of the curriculum, whether the data gathered will be used wisely and effectively, and whether gathering the data from tests will not simply become an end in itself" (2010, p.38). The next section explores the finalised literacy and numeracy strategy.

6.3.3 Document analysis of primary assessment in **Literacy and numeracy for learning and life: the national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people 2011-2020** ***(DES, 2011)***

In his preface to the strategy, the then Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairí Quinn, TD, states that ensuring that all young people acquire literacy and

numeracy skills is one of the greatest contributions that we can make to achieving social justice and equity in our country" (2011, p.5). Research on the drive to increase standards from a social justice and equity perspective in other countries is reviewed in Chapter 2 (section 2.5.4). A number of researchers have found that accountability based measures, such as increased testing, has a negative impact on minority or disadvantaged groups (Klenowski, 2009; McCarty, 2009; Lee and Wong 2004). The strategy seeks to address "significant concerns about how well our young people are developing the literacy and numeracy skills that they will need to participate fully in the education system, to live satisfying and rewarding lives, and to participate as active and informed citizens in our society" (DES, 2011, p.7). It states that there were almost 480 written submissions in response to the draft plan. The strategy expressly states that representatives of business, industry and enterprise "emphasised the importance of raising standards to the levels achieved in the highest performing countries in order to continue to grow our indigenous knowledge economy and continue to attract high-value jobs through inward investment" (2011, p.8). This statement allied to the fact that there is no mention of the views of representatives of the arts or cultural organisations support Gleeson (2009) and O'Sullivan's (2009) assertions that there is an increasingly economic rationale behind educational policy decisions. The strategy responds to the NCCA's criticism in their submission by giving a robust definition of literacy and numeracy (2011, p.8). However, Ó Bréacháin and O'Toole highlight an area where the literacy and numeracy strategy may lead to confusion about its true purposes:

> "the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy provides significant levels of 'mixed messages'. For example, the Strategy purports to present a broad, non-utilitarian definition of 'literacy', embracing the notion of multiple literacies (critical literacy, digital literacy etc), rather than as a set of technical skills to be acquired. However, the

> aims of the strategy present a somewhat different conceptualisation. The word 'literacy' is quickly replaced by the word 'reading' and concerns shift to performance on national and international standardised tests indicating a rather narrow understanding of the term" (2013, p.403).

The strategy espouses a holistic view of education: "All learners should have an opportunity to engage in a broad, balanced and fulfilling curricular experience that supports all aspects of their development – not just the academic dimension but the social, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, and physical dimensions as well" (DES, 2011, p.43). However, the strategy argues that literacy and numeracy are "core skills" and that "their development must be safeguarded, sometimes by delaying the introduction of some curriculum areas and always by ensuring that the teaching literacy and numeracy is integrated across the curriculum" (DES, 2011, p.44). It makes a number of references to the importance of literacy and numeracy skills to the economy, for example, the need for our children to have "world-class literacy and numeracy skills will be essential for the rebuilding of our economic prosperity and ensuring the well-being of our society" (DES, 2011, p.15). The strategy retains the draft plan's proposal to improve outcomes at primary school by:

- Increase the percentages of primary children performing at Level 3 or higher (i.e. at the highest levels) in the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading by at least 5 percentage points at both second class and sixth class by 2020 (DES, 2011, p.17)
- Reduce the percentage of children performing at or below Level 1 (i.e. minimum level) in the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading by at least 5 percentage points at both second class and sixth class by 2020 (DES, 2011, p.18).

Hislop argues that "There is no doubt that the targets in the Strategy are ambitious. Nonetheless, I believe that they are realistic and provide a key focus for moving forward as well as a reference point for monitoring progress" (DES, 2011, p.10).

Regarding CPD for teachers, the strategy acknowledges the importance of providing high-quality continuing professional development opportunities for teachers in order to enable them to maintain and enhance their pedagogical understanding and skills, and requiring teachers to undertake professional development courses throughout their teaching careers (DES, 2011, p.30). There is a more expanded explanation of how teachers should develop literacy and numeracy skills than that which was contained in the draft plan (DES, 2011, p.31). It also stresses that teachers need CPD to enable them to "use a continuum of well-considered assessment approaches to determine the next steps in learning and in planning approaches to teaching" (DES, 2011, p.32), which is a development from the draft plan. The actions to achieve these goals include significant changes to ITE. This includes providing adequate time for courses and learning experiences that will develop and assess all student teachers' understanding and ability to apply current knowledge, strategies and methodologies in the use of assessment for formative, diagnostic and summative purposes, especially in literacy and numeracy" (DES, 2011, p.34). However, similar to the draft plan, practising teachers will only be provided "access" to professional development courses of twenty hours' duration in assessment (DES, 2011, p.36).

The strategy retains the draft plan's call for a learning outcomes approach where the curricula should state clearly the skills and competences expected of

learners at six points in their development (DES, 2011, p.45). The NCCA and INTO unsuccessfully argue against this proposal in their submissions. It also retains the direction to increase the time allocation for literacy and numeracy, despite the forebodings of the NCCA, INTO and the Teaching Council. The strategy states that the process of assessment should "begin at the level of the individual student to enable the teacher to adjust instruction to suit the needs of individual learners and to inform them and their parents about the progress that they are making" (DES, 2011, p.73). This is more in line with a socio-cultural theory of learning and marks an adjustment from the draft plan. The document also outlines the need for assessment data at the level of the school and at national level to improve performance. The strategy differs from the draft plan by highlighting both Assessment for Learning (AfL) and Assessment of Learning (AoL) approaches. In describing AfL approaches, it states that "the most effective teachers use assessment information on the progress that their students have achieved to date, they share this information with their students, and they use this information to plan the next steps in their teaching and their students' learning" (DES, 2011, p.74). It asserts that AoL data can come from "teachers' informed judgements, the students' performance on tests or tasks constructed by the teacher or school, the students' performance on standardised assessments" (DES, 2011, p.74). These are descriptors of AfL and AoL approaches in the literature, as described in Chapter 2 (2.4.1 and 2.4.2). The strategy does not comment on the debate about the underlining theoretical nature of assessment. The overview of AfL and AoL is followed by a section on standardised tests, which the strategy states are "scientifically constructed" (DES, 2011, p.75). It argues that these tests can compare a child's achievement with his/her peers and demonstrate the rate of progress that he/she makes over time. The strategy argues

that there are shortcomings in how teachers use the information and how it is reported to parents. It states that "some of this may be attributed to shortcomings in initial teacher education and to the lack of focus on assessment in teachers' continuing professional development" (DES, 2011, p.76). The proposal for *Schools Like Ours*, which was criticised by the INTO, has been removed from the strategy. It retains that primary schools should report aggregated data from standardised tests to the DES (DES, 2011, p.79). The strategy mandates that ITE courses include mandatory modules to enable teachers to:

- "inform the planning of subsequent steps in students' learning of literacy and numeracy, i.e. *assessment for learning* (AfL) approaches
- monitor effectively learners' achievement in literacy and numeracy, i.e. *assessment of learning* (AoL) approaches
- document students' learning in literacy and numeracy and report to parents, other teachers and other professionals as appropriate
- identify specific learning needs" (DES, 2011, p.80).

The actions for serving teachers ensure that they only have "access" to CPD in these areas (DES, 2011, p.80). The strategy calls for schools to use assessment data to develop three year whole school improvement plans. It also provides for "guidance on how best standardised assessment data may be aggregated, tracked over time and interpreted to support robust school self-evaluation" (DES, 2011, p.82). The strategy retains the draft plan's proposal to add a further mandated testing stage in primary education (4th class).

6.4 Conclusion

In relation to Sahlberg's six GERM features (2011), the literacy and numeracy strategy can be analysed as follows:

(i) Standardisation: The belief amongst policy makers that setting clear and sufficiently high performance standards for schools, teachers and pupils will improve the quality of desired outcomes.

This is evident in the strategy through the setting of targets for primary education to achieve by 2020.

(ii) Increased focus on literacy and numeracy: Basic knowledge in literacy and numeracy are now seen as indicators of success or failure for schools, teachers, pupils and the system as a whole.

This is present also as the strategy emphasises literacy and numeracy as core skills that should be prioritised above other areas.

(iii) Teach for predetermined results: Approaches emphasising the achievement of standards are adopted. Experimentation, alternative approaches and risk-taking are minimised.

This element is not present in the strategy. However, the strategy's emphasis on target setting, as well as the mandated reporting of standardised tests to Boards of Management and the DES, and the increased number of compulsory standardised tests in the primary cycle may result in a narrower conception of education amongst teachers. There may be a danger of what Taylor Webb (2006) outlines as a "choreography of accountability", in which teachers generate performances of their work in order to satisfy accountability demands (2.5.1).

(iv) Transfer of innovation from corporate to the educational world: Educational policies are lent and rented from the business world, often facilitated by international development organisations.

This is not present in the strategy. It does not highlight the need for parental choice in types of schools, similar to the UK experience. It also avoids the linkage of funding with results in national assessments, such as the USA model.

(v) Test-based accountability policies: School performance is tied to the processes of accrediting, promoting, inspecting and rewarding or punishing schools. The success or failure of schools is determined by standardised tests and external evaluations.

This is an element that is contained in the strategy, albeit in a low stakes manner. The aggregated results reported to the DES will not be published and the comparative *Schools Like Ours* proposal from the draft plan was omitted.

(vi) Increased control of schools: Centrally mandated educational standards narrow the space for teachers to create optimal learning environments.

The strategy calls for a new curriculum based on learning outcomes, which will be implemented in the coming years. Research is needed to ascertain the strategy's impact on teachers' methodologies.

Lingard et al. (2013) argue that there has been a development of a 'metapolicy' in educational assessment around the world, and note that these discourse manifest themselves in localised ways in various countries (3.3.1). They term this a 'vernacular globalisation' of education policy and it is apparent in

Takayama's research (2013) in Japan. This demonstrates that global policy was mitigated by the Ministry for Education to assuage the harsher elements of economic rationalisation (see 3.4.2.1). Overall, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* demonstrates some elements of a response to accountability trends in educational policies. It also shows how some of the more severe elements of this (publication of league tables, funding based on results) have been avoided in the Irish primary education context.

CHAPTER 7 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF HIGH PROFILE INTERVIEWS

7.1 Introduction

This doctoral project examines the nature of assessment in primary school, with particular focus on *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* (DES, 2011). A key focus of this dissertation is analysing the discourse used in discussion about assessment in Irish primary schools. It also aims to examine to locus of control in the use of assessment. This chapter consists of an analysis of eight interviews which I conducted with a number of high profile policy makers in education in Ireland (listed in alphabetical order by surname): Dr. Peter Archer, Director of the Education Research Centre (ERC) (PA); Dr. Sarah FitzPatrick, Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (SF); Dr. Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector (HH); Mr. Edward Murtagh, retired Assistant Chief Inspector (EM); Ms. Sheila Nunan, General Secretary of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) (SN); Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director of the Teaching Council (TÓR); Ms. Jan O'Sullivan, TD, Minister for Education and Skills (2014-present) (JO'S), and Mr. Ruairí Quinn, TD, former Minister for Education and Skills (2011-2014) (RQ). The interviews were conducted between May 2013 and March 2015, and they lasted approximately one hour per participant, except for the interview with Minister O'Sullivan, which lasted 20 minutes and Minister Quinn, which lasted 30 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured in format. Each participant responded to the same initial set of questions and a conversation followed on the various topics (see Chapter 5). I identified seven themes emerging from these interviews: a) Role of assessment in primary school; b) Reforms in Irish education; c) Using assessment methods for target setting d) Policy development process; e) Effect of PISA on the

development of the strategy; f) The role of the teacher in enacting reform in assessment; and g) The role of the pupil in assessment. I will now outline the various perspectives of the participants and note where these views converge and diverge.

7.2 Role of assessment in primary school – an ongoing area of tension

All of the participants acknowledge the vital role that assessment plays in education. Much of the current literature on assessment examines its various functions: formative, summative, diagnostic, and evaluative. This literature offers critiques of approaches based predominantly on any one approach at the expense of the others (see Chapter 2). These functions are increasingly considered under the terms Assessment of Learning (AoL) and Assessment for Learning (AfL), which is the terminology utilised in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. The types of assessment methodologies that are given precedence in an education system demonstrate the view of knowledge that is held by the policy-makers. The literature also shows that this impacts greatly on teaching and learning as it can lead teachers to prioritise certain approaches.

7.2.1 Assessment for Learning (AfL) and Assessment of Learning (AoL)

The interviewees are cognisant of the terms AfL and AoL and offer their views on what constitutes best practice in assessment. Much of the research points to positive effects of AfL approaches to learning, however the extent of this has been questioned (see 2.4.1 and 2.5.1). Mr. Ó Ruairc states that assessment is "*part of a*

continuum with three parts in total – the other two of which of course are teaching and learning". Dr. Archer comments that "*assessment in primary school is a handmaiden of the other two elements: curriculum and pedagogy*". Minister O'Sullivan offers a definition composing of both AfL and AoL:

> "I think the primary role of assessment is to improve learning so that as you assess you give feedback to the children and their parents and you learn from the assessment and you move on and proceed with better learning after that. I suppose another function of assessment is to gather information that is useful in policy making so that you get pictures of what is happening in the schools and then you can use that information for making future policy, for determining what needs to be changed in terms of the approach to teaching and learning".

Each of the other participants also outline the difference between AoL and AfL and each spoke in some detail about the differences between the two. Each participant highlights the central role of AfL for effective teaching and learning and is hopeful that this is the model of assessment that will grow in Irish education both at primary and post-primary level. Mr. Murtagh states that "*the most important function in my mind is using assessment to inform the teacher and the pupil at the child's precise stage in development in learning what the child can do and what the child needs to do next in order to progress to the next stage in learning and attainment*". Both Dr. Hislop and Dr. FitzPatrick describe assessment as being a conversation or an engagement with the learner. A focus on the child is a key aspect of AfL approaches (Black and Wiliam, 2009 – see 2.4.1 and 2.6.1).

The participants also highlight the importance of the AoL or summative role of assessment. A large element of this importance is using the information for reporting and evaluating purposes, both at a school and national level (see 2.4.2). Dr. Hislop believes that this data can be used to advance a "*quality agenda*",

involving assessment, self evaluation and inspection running properly together. This is a point which is examined in a later section (section 7.3). A number of participants emphasised the fact that summative assessment procedures, such as standardised tests, should not be given significance in and of themselves (PA, SN, TÓR). They highlight the importance of using this information to inform teaching and learning. The Director of the Teaching Council, Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc comments that:

> "*If we as a Council are saying to the profession that we want them to improve what they are doing the whole time, well they can't know what they need to improve if they don't have a sense of how well they are achieving what they set out to do. So insofar as it feeds into quality teaching and learning, it is critically important.*"

Mr. Edward Murtagh contends that the purpose of evaluative assessment, which is to assess schools and education systems, is "*the one that is emphasised in the literacy and numeracy strategy*".

7.2.2 Tension between purposes of assessment

Many participants acknowledge the tension between AfL and AoL (PA, SN, HH, EM, SF). Ms. Nunan states "*Assessment...has become very linked to accountability... From a state's perspective, certainly a European level, probably at worldwide level now, there's the whole notion of linking accountability to pupil performance and teacher performance*". Dr. Hislop acknowledges this concern and states that "*what you need to be careful to do is not to use that then in a way of ranking or judging schools*". Mr. Ó Ruairc also recognises the concerns raised by Ms. Nunan but he believes that there is a different agenda from the Department:

> "The primary focus of Assessment for Learning, of gathering stats and data, should be to inform school development at the local level. Yes I would be aware that there is also the provision that the data in aggregate be afforded onto the Department, but I think that should not be seen as a threatening thing because it's essentially about the Department gathering evidence to see what impact are its policies having".

This tension is examined in the literature review (2.6) and it is worth summarising the points here. A number of researchers criticise the dichotomous approach to assessment, which separates it into two sections (AfL and AoL) in apparent competition with each other. Some argue that this is due to the differing epistemologies underpinning the approaches – that a behaviourist theory or a psychometric perspective underpins AoL whereas a constructivist theory underpins AfL. Others argue that AfL does not exist in and of itself, rather it is a function of assessment. The literacy and numeracy strategy has been criticised for not presenting a clear definition of terms or outlining its theoretical position on the nature of learning or assessment (see 6.3.2.1). Although the literature demonstrates the differing thoughts about the nature and purpose of assessment in primary education, the national strategy does not engage in this discussion or acknowledge it in its presentation of the assessment approaches to be utilised. Foucault's archaeological method aims to demonstrate how the discourse could not be other than what it is (see 1.2.1.1). In examining the limits of and forms of the sayable, the dichotomous structure of AfL and AoL is accepted by the policy makers and appears in the literacy and numeracy strategy. These are constructs that the participants use to explain a learner-centred approach that will also evaluate the system. Although presented as existing harmoniously in the policy, the policy makers acknowledge that there exists an inherent tension. By acknowledging the tension, the policy

makers demonstrate the limits and forms of conversation and of memory. The reasoning underlying the tension according to the policy makers is the use of assessment for system accountability as well as to support learning. This is a common understanding amongst them and emphasises the manner in which AfL and AoL are seen as the accepted definitions of assessment in policy-making circles.

This tension highlights the confusion that arises over the various purposes of assessment, especially when one tool (e.g. standardised tests) are used for more than one function (assist teaching and learning, and to evaluate systems). This confusion is exacerbated by the fact that assessment has been traditionally an underdeveloped aspect of primary education (HH, SN, PA). This is highlighted in the literature review of assessment policy in Ireland which demonstrates that policy implementations in assessment and CPD for teachers in Ireland have predominantly focused on standardised tests (see 4.3). Dr. Hislop emphasises this point when reflecting on the publication of the *Revised Primary School Curriculum*:

> "I think it's quite clear that when the 1999 curriculum was developed, the elements of the objectives of the curriculum, or the content of the curriculum if you want to call it that, were very clearly delineated...But actually assessment was very underdeveloped. And it was underdeveloped at the time simply because the NCCA council structures could not manage to get any agreement on the detail of what assessment should look like"

Both Ministers for Education and Skills that were interviewed argued that, historically, assessment was seen as a method to rank or judge pupils and that many parents have this understanding of assessment. Limond (2011) believes that the enduring strength of this idea is a cultural artefact of the Payment by Results era and argues that "the *mechanics* of the payment-by-results system proved easier to abolish

than the *attitudes* to learning it inculcated" (p.457) (see 4.4). Foucault argues against the teleological view of history, which displays history as a story of progressive refinement demonstrating humanity's generational improvement (1989 – see 1.2.1.1).

Utilising Foucault's discontinuous analysis of discourse in social theory displays that there is a cyclical approach to mandated testing in Ireland (4.2 and 4.3). Both of the previous mandated testing regimes resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum, a focus on repetition and rote learning and neglected other aspects of teaching and learning. The lack of acknowledgement of the results of previous testing systems in the national strategy and amongst policy makers is disconcerting. A number of policy makers state that teachers have a more developed understanding of assessment than this and that they prioritise the child's learning in their practice (SN, HH, TÓR, SF). However, both Dr. Hislop and Mr. Ó Ruairc argue that teachers may not necessarily have the correct language to describe their assessment strategies and may have difficulty in analysing assessment data to devise the next steps in the learning process. This again displays the limits and forms of the sayable, of conversation and of conversation (1.2.1.1) as assessment is posited as having a correct language. The literature review of assessment (2.6) demonstrates that this is a highly contested area. All of the participants highlighted the importance of the AfL approach to improve teaching and learning in Ireland. Dr. Archer argues that developing teachers' understanding of AfL is a priority area. He states it is "the ultimate, in theory, expression or manifestation about using assessment to facilitate effective pedagogy. It seems to me that that's an area or discipline with a lot of untapped potential". The national literacy and numeracy strategy contains a number of reforms of assessment in primary school, which are analysed in section 7.4. This

is part of a reform agenda, which is described by a number of participants (HH, EM, TÓR) as linking the literacy and numeracy strategy to a wider realignment in teaching and assessment, which includes changes in the Junior Cycle at second level. This reform agenda is discussed in the next section.

7.3 Reforms in Irish primary education – a quality agenda beyond literacy and numeracy

Both Dr. Hislop and Dr. FitzPatrick identify that *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* contains reforms for Irish education that go beyond literacy and numeracy. Dr. FitzPatrick comments that "*it's an unfair title perhaps for a strategy that reaches into very significant issues*". Irish education is now being examined under a 'quality agenda' (RQ, HH, SN, TÓR). Dr. Hislop outlines the Inspectorate's position thusly:

> "I think what the literacy and numeracy document did was that it actually set out an agenda which went a good bit beyond literacy and numeracy to be honest with you. There have been many policy documents from the Department and in the education sector that tackle individual issues...What *Literacy and Numeracy* tried to do was to say, "you should look at the education system as a whole and there are a number of interlinked actions that you should take and they need to have a coherence travelling together". The big areas in it are: early childhood...; teacher education...; curriculum change...; and to see assessment as a proper part of the landscape as well. And that is really what the chapters amount to – you have early childhood, you have teacher education, you have curriculum, you have assessment. Except that assessment is tied up again into a coherent quality agenda, so it involves assessment, self evaluation and inspection running properly together. And the value of the document was that it set out a programme of overall reform over a ten year period.

7.3.1 A quality agenda in Irish education

This quality agenda has led to changes in pupil assessment, school evaluation (through School Self Evaluation), and Departmental inspections in the past five years. It also includes target setting and the obligation of every school to report their aggregated scores in standardised tests to the DES for the first time in Irish primary education. Ball states that, in Britain, the market is being used as a disciplinary mechanism. He argues that the discourse of management is a key feature of the current reform of education (3.2.1). He avers that the promotion of self-management, such as devolved organisation and school self evaluation, articulates self-regulation with a "microtechnology of control" (1994, p.66). This technique aims to create a situation where school management internalises the judgement criteria provided by the government. This is a modern equivalent of Foucault's theory of disciplinary mechanisms (see 1.2.1.2). In this discourse, assessment is more centralised and standardised. It is utilised as a means of differentiating between students and identifying poor schools, as well as providing the information system that will drive the education market (Ball, 1994).

Assessment in this outlook aims to bridge the "neoliberal, free-market concern for the making of comparisons between schools and teachers, in order to facilitate informed parental choice, and the neo-conservative distrust both of teachers and of new teacher-based forms of assessment" (1990, p.52). Ball (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995) outlines how assessment in schools may be affected by a market-driven approach (3.2.1). In this approach assessment is recontextualised as 'performance indicators', which as well as providing information to allow consumers to make the best choice, also orient the provision of education towards certain goals and purposes. This could lead to a narrowing of the scope of schooling to exclude

the social dimensions of education. The interviewees were asked about what they believed were the reasons behind the quality agenda in Irish education.

7.3.2 Reasons for the quality agenda

Ball (1990) outlines three possibilities of educational change through policy developments: i) Policy changes in education can be traced to ideological shifts and changing patterns of influence within governing parties, and institutions; ii) Correspondence between education and the economy – Education would be subject to and, in part, agent of a particular mode of regulation, and a particular hegemonic project; iii) The role of discourses – Discourses construct certain possibilities for thought (see 3.2.2). The development of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* displays elements of all of these three possibilities. The participants outline a number of reasons for this reform agenda in the interviews. These include: 1) employment and the economy; 2) educational standards; and 3) trust in the educational system.

7.3.2.1 Employment and the economy

Minister Quinn equates the need for change in the education system with employment opportunities. He states that "*The vast bulk of long-term unemployed have poor literacy skills, functionally illiterate*". Mr. Ó Ruairc states that the need for reform is also grounded in the economic crisis. He believes that there was "*a sense of hubris, of arrogance" in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger years, where we believed "we had it cracked as a country. We had the best education system in the*

world". He believes that the crisis has made us go back to the drawing board and we should ask why we are doing what we are doing:

> "We had the best education system in the world, we had a Leaving Cert that was internationally recognised, we had it made as a country, and all of a sudden we were the black sheep of the family, we couldn't fund our public services on our own any more. Our state,...we proved incapable of governing ourselves. That's not a pleasant thing to hear or to say, but perhaps we did need to hear and did need to say. So that for me drives that sense of whole system reform, you know the time for piecemeal tweaking of the plumbing system here and there was, certainly if it wasn't gone long ago, it is long gone now. And I think that, for me again on a personal and professional level, was one of the most attractive and empowering parts of aspects of the job or the work of the Council".

This accountability is also linked to resources. Mr. Murtagh states that "*We live in an era when tax payers expect a public service and public institutions to be accountable when they are delivering services that tax payers are paying for*".

The overt linkage of the primary education system to the economy was criticised in a number of submissions in response to the draft plan (see 6.3.2). This has been a feature of education policy in Ireland since the 1960s (see 4.3 and 4.4). It results in limits of the sayable as it defines education in a certain manner and expects a particular set of results from the system. It also limits appropriation as certain groups have more access to this type of discourse. Research demonstrates the impact of high stakes assessment on education and the use of assessment data as a technology of governance (see sections 3.4.2.1 and 3.4.2.2). This includes a particular definition of educational standards to assess educational systems, based on standardised national assessments.

7.3.2.2 Educational standards

Research shows that a drive to increase standards is a part of the educational landscape in a number of countries over the previous decade (see 2.5.1 and 3.4.2). The conceptualisation of standards in education can give an indication as to the underlying habitus or dispositions (1.2.2.1). The focus on standards in the literacy and numeracy strategy is based on Departmental inspections, the results of standardised national assessments in Maths and English Reading (NAMER), and the results of PISA 2009 (Chapter 6). Dr. Archer comments that NAMER showed no improvement in thirty years, despite the increase in resources:

> "in relation to numeracy, in addition to the absence of observed improvement, dating back to the first surveys of mathematics achievement back in the 1970s, it was clear that there were problems in the teaching and learning of maths. Kids in our schools do some aspects of maths extremely well, and other mathematical skills to do with reasoning and problem solving stuff not so good".

The NAMER and PISA tests can be seen as having a symbolic capital in policy making circles (1.2.2.2). They have a value beyond what they measure. The prioritisation of this data leads to education system in particular ways. These types of tests are criticised by a number of researchers (see 2.3.3). They have the potential to reward those with similar cultural capital to the test designers. The Director of the Teaching Council, Mr. Ó Ruairc, maintains that there is always a need to improve practice in Irish education – "*even if everything is hunky dory we would be saying to the profession we want to continuously improve*". Mr. Murtagh makes a similar comment when describing the necessity of the strategy, "*good is often not good enough*". This could lead to the charge, which is supported by Ms. Nunan, that there is an element of reform for its own sake:

> "I don't believe that there isn't any school who wouldn't particularly have a focus on literacy and numeracy. Whether or not this is aligned with the targets in this particular strategy. It can become very sexy for the Department to have a literacy and numeracy strategy quite frankly."

The targets also conceptualise the purpose and use of assessment in a particular way, which is analysed in 7.4. It is interesting to note that a system aiming to increase standards through testing was also introduced in Ireland in the mid 1800s as a result of a concern over the economy and a desire to increase efficiency in the public service (Payment by Results – see section 4.2.1). Foucault's notion of governmentality (1.2.1.3) is worthy of consideration in the current instance. He argues that discourses limit what can be thought or spoken in the policy development process by creating the construct in which the policy is to be developed. This interview data demonstrates that some Irish policy makers are concerned predominantly with quantitative indicators of quality in the system. This approach limits what is valued by setting boundaries on both the content to be assessed and the manner in which the assessments take place. There is an international movement to reform educational systems based on quantitative and comparative tests (see 3.3). The influence of this movement, and the PISA tests in particular, on the development of the literacy and numeracy strategy are reviewed in section 7.6.

7.3.2.3 Trust in the educational system

Linked to the notion of standards is the imperative to ensure that there is trust among the public in the educational system. Ms. Nunan argues that this agenda is a political one – "*it seems to me it's a strong political agenda that is coming through to say we will judge our teachers by the standardised scores in the country*". Ms.

Nunan comments on the message that the reforms are giving teachers about a potential lack of trust in their judgement. The importance of communicating the reform agenda clearly was also discussed by the other participants. Mr. Murtagh states "*I think that teachers need reassurance that the assessment information gathered won't be used in that particular way*". They felt that it was predominantly the Department's responsibility to communicate need for the reforms. Dr. Hislop acknowledges that a fault of the communication of the strategy was that all of the links with other initiatives, such as Junior Cycle Reform, school self evaluation and reforms in inspection, were not communicated clearly. Dr. Peter Archer states that there is a "*mismatch*" between the DES, on the one hand, stating that they have faith in the teaching profession and, on the other, the fact that they are asking for results from standardised tests to be sent in to them. Dr. Archer argues that "*after a few years it will become apparent to teachers that what the Department is looking for is not threatening or hardly threatening at all*". Minister Quinn calls it "*a different way, a better way, an enhanced way of doing what you were always doing*". Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc recognises that these changes require "*professional conversations, CPD and so on in terms of how the tests are introduced, how they are conducted, and in a register of language appropriate to the children, and then to parents, what all of this means*". He continues by acknowledging that

> "There is a fear I think that kids are so alert to nuances, and in the absence of a clear communication as to what is being done with this or why we're doing this, they hear about exams, they have other siblings doing the Junior Cert or the Leaving Cert, and their framework of reference will lead them to think that this is a high stakes test. Whereas if they get reassurance from parents and teachers: "look, this is what you're doing, this is why we're doing it, and it will only travel as far as your parents, and it's not a case that your parents are going to punish you if you fail the test, it's only a case of working out what have you learned, what have you not learned so we as teachers can improve or change what we're doing, if this proves to be the case".

This is an area of ongoing need and could lead to the development of problems such as those outlined above. The reform agenda has led to changes in Irish education, culminating in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*, a document that, according to Dr. Hislop, tries to say "*you should look at the education system as a whole and there are a number of interlinked actions that you should take and they need to have a coherence travelling together*". The strategy does omit the draft plan's proposal for a comparative website, *Schools Like Ours*, which demonstrates the DES' awareness of some of the concerns amongst stakeholders regarding the use of standards to measure the system.

7.3.3 Possible effects of the quality agenda

Many participants mention the positive effects that may arise as a result of the strategy. These include an increase in standards, a more knowledgeable teaching profession, and a greater sense of engagement in literacy and numeracy amongst the wider community (EM, HH, TÓR, RQ, SN, SF, JO'S, PA). Some of the participants (SN, SF, PA, EM, TÓR) have identified the issues or concerns that such changes could evoke: i) there may be a narrowing of the curriculum; ii) some teachers may teach to the test; iii) the relationship between school staff and the Board of Management could be altered due to the reporting of results of standardised tests to the Board; iv) education may begin to be seen as the technical management of outcomes. A number of empirical studies have examined how some jurisdictions are introducing educational policies including changes to the use of assessment approaches in recent years (Jager et al., 2012; Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2012 – see section 2.5.1). These studies have found that the introduction of state-based

examinations lead to a discernible teaching to the test effect. This is true even in situations where the exams are low stakes for schools and teachers as there are no sanctions linked to them, and are low stakes for pupils as exam grades are based on outcomes of exit exams. When exams are introduced on a state-wide level, teachers narrow the curriculum to concentrate on those items included in the exam. This includes a tendency to leave aside topics relevant to everyday life and a failure to consider the interests of the pupils in the class. It also led to time spent on coaching and practice. Testing also occurred which was deemed to be high stakes as the results were published and were used as a tool for control and to encourage parents to select schools based on this information. As well as producing the narrowing of curriculum effects outlined previously, these exams also led to higher order thinking skills being neglected and a growth of a testing industry. Dr. Hislop is adamant that the changes are attempting to assist teachers and schools. He is insistent that the situation in some states in the USA, where there is "*a backwash effect where the good purposes for which the original assessment instrument was designed are in fact negated by the misuse*", will not come to pass in Ireland. Dr. Archer and Dr. FitzPatrick are equally as optimistic that Ireland will not follow the USA. Dr. Archer believes that "*the current crop of policy makers...have learnt from the bad experiences of other systems in terms of league tables and added value and that kind of stuff*". Dr. Archer argues that the model of accountability in Ireland is "*based on concepts of collegiality and mutual respect and working towards shared goals*".

Chapter 6 demonstrates how the reform agenda present in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* contains some, but not all, of the rationalising international reforms identified by Sahlberg (see 3.3.1). This data allied to these interviews show that there is a localised interpretation of global educational reform –

indicative of an Irish vernacular globalisation of education policy (3.3.1). At present the Irish version of these reforms does not contain comparative league tables or the linkage of funding with test results as is apparent in other countries. However, Ms. Nunan contributes a note of caution about the reform agenda. She asserts that "*Teacher judgement needs to be relied on and I think if you're going to rely on a standardised score, you're kind of giving a message about the value of teachers' judgement and the trust in teachers' judgement*". The next section examines the purposes of assessment techniques the literacy and numeracy strategy.

7.4 The purpose of assessment techniques in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* – whither a balanced approach?

As outlined in the previous chapter, both the draft plan and the finalised strategy contain target setting measures involving one assessment tool – standardised tests. This section outlines the various purposes that the policy makers considered for assessment whilst developing the strategy. It is divided in three parts: 1) using assessment for AfL purposes; 2) using assessment for target setting; 3) using assessment as a discourse of management.

7.4.1 Using assessment for AfL purposes

All of the participants highlighted the need to develop AfL approaches in Irish education (see section 7.2). Chapter 6 outlines the description of AfL which is contained in the national strategy. It stresses the importance of ITE and CPD to develop these approaches. However, it contains only a provision of "access" to this

CPD for current teachers. When asked why a formative assessment target was not chosen as well, for example, 'that all pupils will have a pupil conference in later primary school', some participants felt that the question of resourcing such formative assessment practices and the fact that teachers were not professionally aware or competent in the area to utilise them properly meant the DES was reluctant to include these as specific targets (SF, EM). However, when mandatory standardised testing was introduced in 2007, it was accompanied by CPD in the administration and recording of these tests (see 4.3). Other participants felt that this should be a school-based practice and not a Department led initiative (EM, TÓR). Mr Ó Ruairc comments that

> "you could argue that an over emphasis...on targets of Assessment for Learning could be counterproductive. Because the whole idea of Assessment for Learning if I understand correctly is that it's supposed to integrate in an almost seamless way into the teaching and learning process. So Assessment of Learning like the goals on standardised assessments that you were talking about by their very nature lend themselves more readily to target setting and so on...Whereas Assessment for Learning, the whole idea is that it blends more seamlessly into the teaching and learning process in a way that really supports it and kind of encourages it to go further".

Commentary on assessment notes that the purposes of assessment prioritised in policy and in CPD give an insight into the theories of learning and knowledge being espoused (Chapter 2). AfL is outlined in the national literacy and numeracy strategy but development in this area is not prioritised in funding for CPD or in the setting of targets for the system.

7.4.2 Using assessment for target setting

The literacy and numeracy strategy contains targets utilising assessment that are based on AoL. For primary schools these are to:

- "Ensure that each primary school sets goals and monitors progress in achieving demanding but realistic targets for the improvement of the literacy and numeracy skills of its students in a school improvement plan
- Increase the percentages of primary children performing at Level 3 or higher (i.e. at the highest levels) in the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading by at least 5 percentage points at both second class and sixth class by 2020
- Reduce the percentage of children performing at or below Level 1 (i.e. minimum level) in the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading by at least 5 percentage points at both second class and sixth class by 2020" (DES, 2011, p.17-18).

Most of the interviewees felt that target setting was appropriate (PA, HH, TÓR, RQ, EM) and Dr. Hislop stated that the desire to include such specific targets came "*from the Inspectorate with the advice of the ERC*". Mr. Murtagh called it "*a tangible and easily understood metric*", but there was "*a certain arbitrariness about them as well. I mean five percent is lovely, it's a magic number! I think people relate to it*". Dr. Hislop commented that "*unless you set an ambitious target you're not going to get anywhere at all*". Ms. Nunan felt that this target setting was "*ridiculous nonsense*" and that it would lead to "*stress in schools about the use of the tests*". Dr. Archer acknowledges that what were "*previously low stakes standardised tests could end up being perceived as relatively high stakes, and that's a danger*". These targets prioritise a particular type of assessment data as the most valuable in the system. This assessment data appears objective but research demonstrates that it favours certain groups and can discriminate against others (2.5.4). The prioritisation of this

type of data can be analysed as part of Sahlberg's GERM movement. Chapter 6 outlines how elements of this movement are present in the literacy and numeracy strategy. The trend for the prioritisation of this form of data to evaluate systems has been described as the 'datafication' of pedagogy (Roberts-Holmes, 2015). The use of data as a technology of governance is prevalent in a number of countries (see 3.4.2.2). It is an example of Foucault's notion of governmentality (1.2.1.3). This approach in Ireland is criticised by the NCCA. It prioritises the work of certain national agencies who manage this information, such as the Inspectorate and the ERC. This is further analysed in section 7.5.

There were mixed opinions on whether the targets would be attained. Mr. Murtagh and Mr. Ó Ruairc believe that they will be reached if the strategy is implemented fully. Dr. Hislop is unsure about whether they will be met "*spot on*". Dr. Archer and Ms. Nunan do not think that there will be a change in the distribution of performance that exists already. The next section (7.4.3) discusses the results of the latest NAMER tests in Ireland. The changes in the purpose and use of assessment contained in the strategy are part of a reform agenda, examining the quality of the Irish education system. Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2012) outline how high-stakes testing and target setting was introduced in Australia in 2008. Some of the consequences include the narrowing of the curriculum, higher order thinking skills are neglected, and time is spent on coaching the tests. Skedsmo (2011) outlines the introduction of the national evaluation system in the Norwegian education system in 2005. She categorises this as a shift in the Norwegian educational policy from the use of input oriented policy instruments towards a more output oriented policy. She found that evaluation seems to be used to hold the

school leadership and teachers accountable for school's practices. The theme of target setting through the use of assessment and the reform agenda in Irish primary education is discussed further in the findings and analysis of the teachers' questionnaire (Chapter 8).

7.4.3 Using assessment as a discourse of management

In December, 2014, The Department published the latest results from the National Assessments in Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER). These found that the targets set in the literacy and numeracy strategy of increasing the percentages of primary children performing at the highest levels by at least 5 percentage points at both second class and sixth class by 2020 and reducing the percentage of children performing at the minimum level by at least 5 percentage points at both second class and sixth class by 2020 had been already met. Minister O'Sullivan is intending of setting new targets because "*if you have already reached targets you have to have new targets in order to get better*". There will be a review of the literacy and numeracy strategy in 2015, which has been brought forward from 2016 in light of these targets being accomplished. Minister O'Sullivan also states that

> "The other thing I suppose to bear in mind is that we shouldn't rest on our laurels either. This is one particular testing mechanism at one particular point in time but I mean 2009 was a great disappointment. People felt that maybe we should have been better than we were then so I think that you can't just assume that because we got good results in the last ones that that means that we are on an upwards trajectory. I think we will only be on an upward trajectory if we continue to refine the processes, keep what is working, keep what is good. But if there are other things that we can do to improve the situation, we should do it".

The notion of 'good is not good enough' or that 'we shouldn't rest on our laurels' is a particular form of discourse that is now being used in Irish primary education, particularly in relation to assessment. Ball argues that, in the UK, the discourse of 'management' is "a key feature of the current reform of education" (1994, p.65). Self-management "articulates self-regulation with a microtechnology of control and ramifies the value and cultural changes set in train by finance-led decision making and competition. In other words, it is a disciplinary practice" (p.66). Self-management is "a mechanism for ensuring the delivery of the National Curriculum, and it ties classroom practice, student performance, teacher appraisal, school recruitment and resource allocation into a single tight bundle of planning and surveillance" (p.71). As a result of this, "it becomes possible to blame the schools for the faults and difficulties inherent in or created by the policies" (p.80) (see section 3.2.1). Sahlberg (2011) also believes that self management of schools is an aspect of the GERM movement. These interviews offer evidence that this discourse of management is present in Irish primary education. The next section investigates the theme of the policy development process and the role of discourse in this area.

7.5 Policy development process – agenda setting in the guise of consultation

Foucault's notion of governmentality offers an analytical framework for examining policy formation, which focuses on an archaeology of knowledge (1.2.1.1). This theory investigates the limits and forms of the sayable; the limits and forms of conservation; the limits and forms of memory; the limits and forms of reactivation; and the limits and forms of appropriation. A key element of this is the role of discourses. Discourses are extremely influential as they create the context in

which the policy is developed. An example of a discourse that is prevalent in the development of educational policies at present, including those on assessment, is the notion of a consultative approach.

7.5.1 A consultative approach to policy making

Gillies (2008) argues that there is a new form of governmentality, which includes public consultation (see 3.4.1). However, by deciding what is to be consulted on, the government have already set the tone of the debate by determining what can and cannot be discussed. In this way, a common language around policies develops, or, as Gillies states, "the public opinion being sought has already been discursively shaped" (2008, p.424). Similarly, Gerwitz, Dickson and Power (2004) argue that the process of spin does not only take place after a policy is finished and is being presented, but spin is involved in how the policy is constituted.

Literacy and numeracy for learning and life started as a draft document, *Better literacy and numeracy for children and young people* (DES, 2010). Dr. Hislop argues that "*generally when you get agreement then it makes implementation a good bit easier because there is a certain amount of buy-in*". Most participants (RQ, HH, EM, TÓR, PA) emphasis the substantial consultation period that occurred between late 2010 and early 2011, which fed into the development of the final strategy. Dr. Hislop states that it was "*one of the most intensive consultation periods we have ever conducted about a policy*". Over 480 contributions were made and the final document is different to the draft strategy in a number of ways. These include that the definition of literacy was expanded upon, the initiative to compare schools with similar profiles, *Schools Like Ours* was removed, and the area of special

educational needs was further developed. Dr. Archer comments that "*We did a lot in our submission on the* 'Schools Like Ours*' bit in the draft, and I think we succeeded in getting rid of the worst aspects of that proposal*". Mr. Ó Ruairc comments that "*we would be quite happy with the manner and frequency of engagement with the Department in the steps of policy evolution*". However, Ms. Sheila Nunan claims there has been a shift in the manner in which policy is now developed in Ireland. The government agencies (Inspectorate, ERC) were involved in the preparation of the draft document. Ms. Nunan outlines how this policy development process differs from the previous situations:

> "There was no consultation before the draft document. That of itself speaks volumes. I won't say that it came out of the blue, but it was a reform initiative from the current Minister that came out very suddenly. We would have considered the initial draft document a terribly flawed document, even though there were some relatively good points. When it was in draft form we did make a submission and I think that they had a general invitation for submissions from individuals and organisations. I suppose we had some questions in our own minds about the way that consultation has gone in recent years. I think the type of consultation is not as it should be in terms of genuine partnership, I think we've seen a shift. But we did, at least, have an opportunity to input and we did feel that some of stuff that we inputted was taken on board in terms of broadening it out to acknowledge sociocultural context and things like that, and the broad nature of the curriculum. We put in a lot of reservations about the over reliance on standardised tests. But this was after the event. There was a kind of an architecture set out and while we did, after the event, have some input into it, we would still have concerns about the consultation process".

Dr. Archer also states that the lack of events where all of the partners were invited in the preparation of the strategy "*differed...from some other consultation processes, certainly the ones that happened in the 90s and in the early years of the last decade*". The Chief Inspector, Dr. Hislop, states that there was an open invitation for parties to present a written submission or to present orally. However,

he also adds that "*We tried to have a written paper before we met people orally so we could follow up with particular issues that we thought were important*". This indicates that the agenda for these meetings was determined by the Inspectorate. This, allied to the supposition, as Ms. Nunan states, that there was "*an architecture set out*" for the policy, would support the argument that Gillies makes about a new form of governmentality. A key point in analysing the policy development process of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* is that the consultation period was in response to a draft document, *Better literacy and numeracy for children and young people*. Gillies (2008) states that it is common for consultation to take the form solely of focused questions on specific aspects of a policy proposal, often dealing with how the policy is to be implemented rather than examining the policy's actual rationale. Gillies does not believe that this represents true consultation. He argues that the agenda is pre-set by the government, which means that people cannot legitimately respond.

7.5.2 The role of the NCCA and a policy 'elite'

Ms. Nunan argues that the Department "*grabbed back the literacy and numeracy strategy*" from the NCCA, and that "*It became a very political instrument and that is worrying*". Dr. FitzPatrick states that the NCCA are "*not the authors of the strategy*" and that their submission was the "*first official response*" to the policy development process. Dr. FitzPatrick also comments that it was "*very significant for us to broker and to argue for in response to the draft plan was the piece around standards in particular...I suppose for us the particular concern was that standards, if introduced, would ultimately take the place of curriculum*". There is wide

agreement that the impetus for the strategy came from the incidental inspections and the results of the National Assessments in Reading and Maths (TÓR, EM, HH, PA). Grimaldi notes that the policy process empowers some subjects who use specific technical language (section 3.3.3). This can give these subjects greater authority and status. This could include the Inspectorate and ERC's use of information gleaned from these inspections and assessments. Robert (2012) also notes this phenomenon and critiques the role of 'expert groups' in policy formation. The advice from these groups is used to make "the decision appear 'natural', while presenting it as the implementation of principles which are acknowledged as neutral and universal (be they scientific, technical or legal) and not as a matter of political choice. The discourse of reform led to a number of changes in Irish education in this strategy. It includes a number of reforms that were previously published but never implemented, including changes to initial teacher education. Dr. Hislop comments that "*Some of them had been around as proposals for the best part of ten years...they had lain on shelves for years and here was an opportunity where you could get movement on them in three to four years (in initial teacher education), which had been around for the best part of a decade and had never been tackled*".

To instigate these reforms there were a number of people in the right place at the right time, who as Dr. Hislop states, "*are willing to say, "now here's our gap, let's run with what we have to get through this gap'*"". Dr. Hislop and Minister Quinn agree that those people included Mr. Alan Wall, the new Director of the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Unit at the Department; Mr. Edward Murtagh, Assistant Chief Inspector; the Secretary General of the DES, Ms. Brigid McManus; and the Director of the ERC, Dr. Peter Archer. Dr. Hislop also comments that his recent appointment as Chief Inspector facilitated him to "*propose*

things and do things". He states that, in developing the literacy and numeracy strategy, there was "*a combination of political willingness..., the knowledge need for it and the evidence for it, and you had officials willing to develop it*". Dr. Hislop also states that elements of the strategy were decided in a political context and that, "*Ultimately the document is a Ministerial document*". This seems to indicate a change in the consensus policy making process of the past decade and point to the establishment of a policy 'elite' in Irish education. It also poses this question: why were these reforms, some of which were unimplemented for up to ten years, initiated at this point in time? This is investigated in the next section.

7.6 Effect of PISA on the development of the strategy – the addition of an Irish story to an international narrative

Grek et al. (2009) argue that international organisations, such as the OECD, have become increasingly influential in the policy process of individual states. Ms. Nunan argues that "*PISA has become this extraordinary currency in judging national standards... I think the state went into overdrive over the PISA results*". Due to relatively poor results in the 2003 and 2006 PISA tests, France, Germany, Norway, and Turkey have undertaken reforms of their education systems (Dobbins and Marten, 2012; Grek, 2009; Skedsmo, 2011; Gur, Celik and Ozogulu, 2012 – see 3.4.2.1). These reforms have uniformly consisted of an increased focus on outcomes, as opposed to inputs or process. They have also concentrated on a narrow definition of success which is linked to achievements in literacy and numeracy. Germany and Norway have introduced national testing for the first time. The poster nation of the PISA effect is undoubtedly Finland. Researchers have reported that

policy makers from other European countries are now attempting to replicate Finnish policy to boost their PISA rating (Dobbins and Martens, 2012; Grek, 2009). Sahlberg (2011) has identified a Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM), which he states is resulting in a more rational, outcomes-based view of education. Minister Quinn underscores the manner in which education is now utilised as a means of international comparison:

> "education now is becoming internationally something that is assessed and measured and benchmarked, however unevenly and however arbitrarily it may be, the PISA results are very good indicators from an internal domestic education point of view, but they are also critically important internationally because they are regarded as an index of a society's evolution and development"

7.6.1 PISA 2009: Effect on Literacy and numeracy for learning and life

Ireland performed relatively poorly in PISA 2009 in comparison with its previous results. The participants vary in opinions on the amount of influence that these poor results had on the development of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. Some (PA, EM, TÓR) state that the strategy was being developed before the results were announced and that it is based on other factors (such as Departmental inspections and analysis of the National Tests in Reading and Mathematics by the ERC). Mr. Ó Ruairc argues the need for the strategy is based on the fact that there are "*a number of young people who are either falling out of the system or making the transition from primary to post-primary without being literate*". Dr. Archer states:

> "There is a perception that the results from the 2009 PISA survey, which suggested that the performance in Ireland had dipped dramatically, that that was the factor that prompted this. I think that that can't be the case because the work had started before that

> result became available, and it was a complete surprise...So I don't think that presentation of it or that viewing of it as 'this happened because of PISA 2009', that's just wrong. Now, it might well be that it might have taken a little bit longer to formulate. It might be that it wouldn't have been as strongly supported by the two Ministers, Mary Couglan and the current Minister, if it hadn't been for PISA 2009. But it was well advanced before that".

Others (HH, SN) assert that the PISA results provided a huge political impetus in the development of the strategy and to a focusing on literacy and numeracy. It also led to the strategy being given priority status by the Minister and the DES. Dr. Harold Hislop comments:

> "Within the Inspectorate we had been starting to do a set of unannounced inspections in primary school (and)...they were showing quite high levels of unsatisfactory lessons in literacy and numeracy. Now we continued to do the inspections and continued to run and re-run the report. But the statistics didn't change fundamentally, which was very surprising and a bit worrying to be honest. We had some of the first of that data at the end of 2009 because we had done some pilot inspections in spring 2009 and we did a large batch of them in autumn 2009. So by Christmas and January we were getting this data that was saying to us – "there's a big weakness here in literacy and numeracy teaching that's worrying". That was one thing. Secondly, there had been no changes in the National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics at primary level for the best part of twenty years despite huge investments in it. People had asked a number of times, why is that? Thirdly, and I think the one that provided much of the political impetus was PISA. The first indications of the data of PISA 2009 became available to the Department in mid-summer of 2010. We already had within the Inspectorate this report on literacy, there were comments about people leaving school not literate and stuff like that, but you had this PISA stuff as well,... (it) created a political awareness. So you had some inspection input, you had historic and continuous concerns about literacy and particularly about numeracy – actually we have a much bigger problem with numeracy than we do with literacy –, thirdly you had PISA and I suppose there must have been a junction of individuals involved who were willing to say, "look there are a number of coordinated things that need to happen here together".

As mentioned previously the literacy and numeracy strategy is ultimately a Ministerial document. Minister Quinn's view of the educational system before the 2009 PISA results was that "*There was a kind of an arrogant self-assertion that we*

had the best education system in the world, which was just an aspirational declaration". Minister Quinn also states that the main advantage of PISA 2009 was that it created space for educational reforms in literacy and numeracy to be introduced,

> "the benefit of the 2009 PISA results was it opened the door – hey guys we have a problem, what's the extent of it? Is the problem overstated? Is the problem understated? But nobody doubted that we did have a problem. We did. And that was the great positive effect of PISA 2009".

Whether the reforms introduced after PISA 2009 are part of the GERM philosophy is analysed in another section of my doctoral project (Chapter 6).

7.6.2 PISA 2009: a question of objectivity

The policy makers noted the impact of PISA 2009 in giving impetus to the development and implementation of the national literacy and numeracy strategy. There were other reports that fed into the strategy's development but, as Dr. Hislop acknowledges, many of these reports lay on shelves for up to ten years. It is apparent that the PISA 2009 results gave the policy makers the space within the educational system to enact the reform agenda. As Minister Quinn states, PISA 2009 was a "*wake-up call*" for Irish education. Minister O'Sullivan comments that the PISA tests are "*a reasonably accurate measure...I think that they are genuinely fair tests and we want to be as good as the best. We want to learn from countries that are getting the best out of their students and we want to give the best we can to our students so I think international comparisons are important*". Yet some of the policy makers agree that the PISA 2009 results were an aberration. Dr. Archer of the ERC states that the results were "*probably wrong by the way, it was probably a blip.*

We'll see in a few months time when the next results are published". The Chief Inspector, Dr. Hislop, agrees that the decline indentified in PISA 2009 was overstated, "*we would still say that the research subsequent to the publication of PISA does show clearly that the extent of the decline was exaggerated quite considerably*". The General Secretary of the INTO, Ms. Nunan, is concerned that the publication of PISA 2009 had this impact on the Irish education system, "*if the dominant discourse in the media is that we're not accountable, that we're hiding something, didn't PISA tell us we're a disaster, well then people get a bit suspicious*". It is interesting to note that PISA 2012 presented a readjustment in Ireland's scores. This realignment was met with little response by the Department. Minister Quinn summarises this position by saying:

> "I mean in one sense if PISA 2009 was an overshoot, and the general intellectual consensus now would be that it probably was; which was why we didn't make a big song and dance about the 2012 figures because there was an element of readjustment or self-correction; it was very beneficial in that it forced us to wake up, it forced us to look at what we were doing, it forced the schools community to say "hey we've got a problem here".

It is evident that the PISA assessments are an influential factor in Irish primary education policy, particularly in reference to assessment. A Foucauldian approach would argue that the discourse of international comparisons is an element of governmentality. Governmentality relates to the conduct of conduct. For Foucault, power relations are internalised by subjects and are not scrutinised or examined as the subjects are unaware that they have been internalised. He also avers that "the instruments of government, instead of being laws, now come to be a range of multiform tactics" (1991a, p.95). An analytics of government in this approach assumes that "discourses on government are an integral part of the workings of

government rather than simply a means of its legitimation, that government is accomplished through multiple actors and agencies rather than a centralised set of state apparatuses" (Dean, 2010, p.37). One of these actors in implementing reforms in assessment is the teacher. The teacher's role, as discussed by the interviewees, is analysed in the next section.

7.7 The role of the teacher in enacting reform in assessment – a partner or a pawn?

Fullan and Hargreaves argue that change cannot be enacted in the system without the support of teachers (1996). They aver that reforms are only successful when they are instigated by and through the teacher, rather than being imposed on the teaching force in a top-down manner. Section 2.5.2 highlights empirical evidence investigating teachers' perspectives on assessment, the main findings of which are that new assessment policies must take teachers' conceptions of assessment into account in order to succeed; and that teachers do not believe in efficacy of large-scale tests. This section is divided into two parts: 1) the role of CPD for the practising teacher; and 2) the teacher as an agent of change in assessment policy and practice.

7.7.1 The role of CPD for the practising teacher

Some participants (HH, SN, PA, EM) stated that assessment is underdeveloped in Irish education, particularly at research and third level and in the

area of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), which impacts on teachers' operational knowledge and practices. Mr. Murtagh argues that

> "There is an entire generation of teachers out there who have had very little professional development in the area of assessment and in fact the Department's own effort to provide that support was stymied in that the resources ran out just as we were reaching that important part of professional development, as part of the introduction of the primary curriculum".

Dr. Hislop commented that "*teachers' own understanding of how assessment should support their teaching is really really important and it's not well developed as of yet*". Dr. FitzPatrick of the NCCA notes that the 2007 *Assessment Guidelines* made a sizeable contribution to teachers' understanding of assessment through a "*focus on how and methodology (and) it also gives a fairly robust definition of assessment*". However, Ms. Nunan identifies the fact that these Guidelines were accompanied by CPD for teacher in the administration of standardised tests without any further professional development in the area of formative assessment. She stresses that "*If you just tell teachers you're getting trained for this, they could end up just assuming that that's the most important instrument*".

Mr. Murtagh acknowledges this point when he says that "*There is an entire generation of teachers out there who have had very little professional development in the area of assessment and in fact the Department's own effort to provide that support was stymied in that the resources ran out just as we were reaching that important part of professional development*".

However, it must be noted that resources were provided to provide CPD for teachers in the administration of standardised tests. It was observed by a number of participants (JO'S, RQ, HH, EM, TÓR) that the restructuring of the initial teacher education courses to a four year degree course could accommodate a greater focus

on assessment. Ms. Nunan states that "*I think it's really important that, at a systematic and ongoing basis, teachers would have continuous professional development to assist them in developing really good strategies and good tools for assessment*". However, the introduction of the literacy and numeracy strategy was not accompanied by widespread CPD for teachers (beyond some seminars for Literacy and Numeracy Link teachers and principals). The targets for CPD for current teachers in the area of assessment only provide for access to course (see 6.3.3).

7.7.2 The teacher as an agent of change in assessment policy and practice

Ms. Nunan highlights the danger of a top-down approach to reform when discussing the initial roll out of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. This occurred at the same time when schools were beginning to prepare and implement School Improvement Plans for the first time, as part of the School Self Evaluation initiative. Ms. Nunan comments that the new literacy and numeracy policy decreed that "*everybody now has to take a bite out of the literacy and do that. That became very top-down and I think that kind of approach can really irritate people*". This top-down approach to the implementation of policy is evident in the comments of many of the participants. These outline how the participants consider the teaching profession to be a body to be worked on, rather than worked with.

Mr. Ó Ruairc demonstrates this top-down approach when commenting on the assessment methodologies used by teachers:

> "If we as a Council are saying to the profession that we want them to improve what they are doing the whole time, well they can't know

> what they need to improve if they don't have a sense of how well they are achieving what they set out to do. So insofar as it feeds into quality teaching and learning, it is critically important. We as a Council would be quite strong on that. We can have whatever type and style and tool of assessment you put in place, and I know it's another part of your research, it won't achieve what we would like it to achieve if the quality of teaching is not all what it could be".

This outlines how the language of the Teaching Council separates itself from the teaching body. The teachers are an external group, "them", in need of improvement. This is further emphasised when Mr. Ó Ruairc comments on the purpose of the Council, "*we are clear that behind all of what we are trying to do is a powerful narrative of giving more autonomy to the profession to drive change in teaching and learning, that they know best*". Mr. Ó Ruairc states that the thrust of the literacy and numeracy strategy is

> "about empowering the profession, and giving them the autonomy that perhaps they might say they don't want, some say that they don't but others say that they do. I think those who might say that they don't want it, my read of it is, the word was used in a recent consultation, the word fear. I think the sense that there were all these different constructs out there – an eternal example, an inspector comes in and that provided a very welcome of reassurance, but that should change if we are to be true to our professionalism".

The idea that the assessment practices of teachers need to be changed is also mentioned by Mr. Murtagh. He states that there are teachers who "*are unlikely to be aware of the need for systematic formative assessment or the approaches they could use in the classroom to better understand the learning needs of their pupils*". However, Ms. Nunan argues that

> "Absolutely everybody in the classroom, whether they name it as assessment or not, from the minute they step in, are carrying out assessment functions from one end of the day to the other. Very often it is not a named process but I think it's so integral it's inseparable from the teaching process".

The key issue is relation to the reforms is where they are located for the teachers. As Fullan and Hargreaves argue, if teachers believe that the reforms are being implemented on them without consultation, they are unlikely to be realised in more than a piecemeal fashion. Research in the area of policy change regarding assessment has highlighted that any new assessment policy must take account of teachers' conceptions of assessment in order to succeed and that teachers' domesticate' the reform so that it fits into their belief system (see 3.5).

Dr. Hislop questions the ability of teachers to accurately assess their pupils:

> "If you're not on top of assessment and how it is to be used, if you're not professionally confident in it, then you're not well placed to defend what you do and you're not well placed to argue or to present a cogent argument or to present satisfactory assessments to parents and others. So you feel professionally vulnerable as a teacher about it and I think most teachers, especially when they hit a case where the child is not progressing well, they know themselves that the child is not progressing well but they don't have the professional wherewithal to use assessment tools to understand why and to remedy that; they feel professionally vulnerable".

Similar to Mr. Ó Ruairc, the language utilised demonstrates that Dr. Hislop believes that teachers are a group that can be acted upon. When discussing the curricular changes that are part of the literacy and numeracy strategy, Dr. Hislop comments that "*there is no point in changing the curriculum if you don't change the teaching force to go with it*". An element of the change that Dr. Hislop envisages is through reform of inspection. He states that "*At the moment Irish teachers do not watch each others' practice. They live in cells...It's part of a professional practice to seek a second opinion...That's a big cultural change that we need teachers to get at*". This almost divorces teachers from their situations of work, which include legacy factors, both at local level in their school's practices and nationally through historic

assessment policies and inspection practices. Minister Quinn also comments on this perceived lack of collegiality:

> "the principal of that school has a direct line to this Department...And they are like inmates in a concentration camp, they have a roll number and they get on to the Department. The fact that they might look across the yard and say 'is there any way you could give me help?' or 'can we share something?' or whatever even though it might be the same patron, the same shared Board of Management, but the principal is straight up to there: the idea that you'd look sideways... now that's a caricature, in some cases common sense prevails. But I would hope over time that you would have a greater sense of the local schools community, you're getting some informal networks, some cross-horizontal collaboration and support. But the default mode is principal, roll number, ring the Building Department, ring Tullamore, ring Athlone and nobody else. I think in time that that will probably change".

These comments indicate that policy makers want teachers to change as opposed to being partners in a process of reform. When asked what the problems posed by the implementation of the strategy might be Minister Quinn stated that he was not sure and that he did not have an answer. Both Dr. Hislop and Mr. Murtagh mentioned momentum. Mr. Murtagh states that "*to sustain the momentum in a strategy like this you do need to have to keep it in the forefront of people's minds and to be doing things along the way that maintain people's engagement*".

The literature review in Chapter 2 demonstrates how developments in theories of learning and in epistemologies of knowledge led to changes in the conceptualisation of assessment over the past fifty years. Teachers are at the forefront in implementing these changes and a number of researchers have completed empirical research examining teachers' perspectives on assessment (see

2.5.2). In examining the success of assessment for learning approaches, it was found that there is a strong link between teachers' personal convictions and their successful implementation of assessment for learning practices (Marshall and Drummond, 2006; Yung, 2001). These practices were more likely to be used effectively if teachers took responsibility for the success or failure of pupil autonomy than those teachers who only implemented the procedures. This has implications for any implementation of reform in assessment practices as reform will not succeed unless teachers have a sense of agency and personal conviction about the changes. Difficulties or obstacles in instigating these reforms were only surmounted when the teachers believed themselves professionally responsible for the success of the reform (Marshall and Drummond, 2006). This research demonstrates that teachers need to be partners in the reform process. Assessment for learning approaches also highlight the importance of the pupil's role in mediating their own learning. The teacher-pupil relationship is imagined as one of facilitation and partnership where the teacher assists the pupils in understanding any challenges they may be having and outlining how to improve their learning. The next section outlines the interviewees' views of the role of the pupil in assessment.

7.8 The role of the pupil in assessment – what impact do our decisions have on those we teach?

The literature review of assessment in Chapter 2 demonstrates how assessment methodologies impacts on pupils (2.4 and 2.5.3). Research with pupils (Brown and Hirschfeld, 2008; Cowie, 2005) reveals that pupils with learning goals viewed assessment for learning as a joint teacher-pupil responsibility, whereas pupils

with performance goals viewed assessment as the sole responsibility of the teacher. It also reveals that these pupils tend to achieve higher grades. When pupils assess their own work, effort is identified as the most important factor. However, when it comes to standardised tests, pupils are aware that 'achieving' is the required outcome (Robinson and Fielding, 2010). Pupils also identify the affective and social purposes of assessment, as well as the cognitive purpose (Cowie, 2005; Moni et al., 2002). Pupils can identify the manner in which some tests displace a mutually supportive collaborative environment with a more individualised, competitive way of working (Reay and Wiliam, 1999). A key element in understanding assessment for learning approaches, and implementing them successfully, is awareness of the pupil's role. In such an approach, the pupil is an active agent in their own learning. The student collaborates with the teaching in choosing assessment tasks and is also involved in the correction of these. The policy makers all recognise the importance of assessment for learning in the interviews. But there are notable differences in how they position the learner when speaking about assessment practices.

7.8.1 The pupil as an active agent in the assessment process

The interviewees acknowledge that pupils have different learning styles and that this needs to be managed when all of these styles are included in a classroom setting. Dr. FitzPatrick calls assessment "*a way of engaging with learners*". Minister Quinn states that "*each child is developing at a different speed to ultimately a different ceiling of capability*". A common interpretation on behalf of the interviewees (EM, JO'S, TÓR) of assessment for learning is that part of its function is to give feedback to the pupil about his/her learning. For example Minister

O'Sullivan states that "*the primary role of assessment is to improve learning so that as you assess you give feedback to the children*". Mr Murtagh expresses his hope that, due to the strategy, pupils would have "*a more extensive experience of formative assessment and that the teacher would be able to articulate to the child where their strengths were and were they need to improve*". Mr. Ó Ruairc also states that assessment plays a role in ensuring that teachers are accountable to their pupils.

However, very few of the interviewees speak of the importance of including pupils in the assessment process. Ms. Nunan argues that "*the ideal kind of notion is that the teacher would have the pupils involved in their own assessment, you know portfolios and all of that*". The ultimate goal of this approach to assessment, for her, would be "*the rounded child to have the ability to look and reflect on their work*". Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith note that "there has been a pervasive silence around the rights of the child/student and the ways in which they have been positioned by testing and accountability priorities" (2012, p.76). This is replicated in the views of most of the policy makers who were interviewed for this dissertation. Foucault's archaeological method highlights there are displacements and transformations in the development of a concept such as assessment. Chapter 2 outlines three learning theories, which lead to different conceptualisations of teaching and assessment: i) behaviourist-empiricist, ii) cognitive-rationalist, and iii) socio-constructivist. A socio-constructivist approach would focus more on assessment for learning methodologies. As section 7.2 demonstrated, the policy makers acknowledge the tension present in assessment methodologies. However, the focus on objective testing in the strategy and the prioritisation of target setting indicates that the cognitive-rationalist perspective is most dominant amongst the 'elite' policy makers who were responsible for drafting and developing the strategy (7.5.2). This

viewpoint is reinforced by international comparative tests, such as PISA. For Bourdieu, this would be constituent of habitus. Habitus represents the unspoken or unexamined influences in an educational policy. Bourdieu argues that, not only should one examine what is in a policy, but also examine what is omitted. Habitus creates an environment where certain opinions or thoughts are valued more than others and become the dominant discourse. This leads to a situation where policy makers may not even know that they are reproducing these dominant ideas as Bourdieu argues that habitus is the source of a "series of moves which are objectively organised as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention" (1977, p.73). Furthermore, the notion of habitus limits the possibilities of policy making as it narrows the potential content or aims that could be included, and establishes 'a right way' of development and implementation. The role of the pupil is an underdeveloped aspect of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. If assessment for learning approaches were to be truly prioritised, the pupil's role would be more apparent in the document.

7.8.2 Consequential validity and pupils

Mr. Murtagh notes that, regarding summative assessment, pupils are "*keen to maybe show what their knowledge is and I think students like to engage in that kind of assessment*". He argues that a pupil's experience of primary school will not be negatively affected by the mandating of standardised testing because "*the standardised testing takes place on three days during their primary school career*". However, a number of interviewees (TÓR, PA, SF, SN) acknowledge the fears that the increase in standardised testing may result in anxiety or stress for the primary

school pupils. Both Dr. Archer and Dr. FitzPatrick comment that the majority of Irish primary schools have a tradition of administering standardised tests every year before the advent of mandated testing. Mr Ó Ruairc comments that "*There is a fear I think that kids are so alert to nuances, and in the absence of a clear communication as to what is being done with this or why we're doing this, they hear exams, they have other siblings doing the Junior Cert or the Leaving Cert, and their framework of reference will lead them to think that this is a high stakes test*". Both Mr. Ó Ruairc and Ms. Nunan both note that teachers play a vital role in alleviating any fears that pupils may have through communicating with the children and their parents.

The area of the consequential validity of assessment is discussed in section 2.3.2 and 2.5.3. It is important to examine the effects of any assessment system of the pupils that are participating in it. A number of researchers argue that there is an ethical foundation for this (Elwood and Lundy, 2010; Sambell et al, 1997). This is especially true of when an assessment tool is used for purposes other than those for which it was designed. This situation is introduced in Ireland as a result of the literacy and numeracy strategy. Whereas previously standardised tests were used in schools to assist learning, the results now are required to be aggregated and reported to the school's Board of Management and the DES. Whilst some policy makers acknowledge the fears that are inherent in increases in standardised testing and changes in their usage, there is no discussion of this in the literacy or numeracy strategy. There is also no precautionary measure to guard against the ethical concerns that are noted in the research.

7.9 Conclusion

This chapter examined themes emerging from the interviews with Dr. Peter Archer, Director of the Education Research Centre (ERC); Dr. Sarah FitzPatrick, Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA); Dr. Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector; Mr. Edward Murtagh, retired Assistant Chief Inspector; Ms. Sheila Nunan, General Secretary of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO); Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director of the Teaching Council; Ms. Jan O'Sullivan, TD, Minister for Education and Skills (2014-present); and Mr. Ruairí Quinn, TD, former Minister for Education and Skills (2011-2014). The interviews examine the development of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*, and the following seven themes were identified: 1) Role of assessment in primary school; 2) Reforms in Irish education; 3) Using assessment methods for target setting 4) Policy development process; 5) Effect of PISA on the development of the strategy; 6) The role of the teacher in enacting reform in assessment; and 7) The role of the pupil in assessment. The themes were framed by ideas explored in the literature review. The essay linked the themes to these ideas by utilising a number of expansive quotes from the participants, and also explored where the opinions of the participants converged and diverged.

An initial analysis of these interviews demonstrates that assessment is now a central part of a 'quality agenda' that is driving education policy in Ireland. However, this has not been accompanied by CPD for teachers in the area of assessment, particularly regarding the new measures outlined in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. This has the potential to create misunderstandings in the teacher force. The analysis of the interviews shows how one stakeholder (INTO) felt that policy development has changed fundamentally in Ireland and that 'genuine

partnership' is no longer in practice. This jars considerably with the views of other agencies (Inspectorate, ERC) who felt that every partner was involved and that there was widespread consultation. However, these are both government agencies and the Inspectorate prepared the draft strategy before wider consultation occurred pointing to the creation of a policy 'elite'. This chapter also outlines the impact that PISA has on education policy in Ireland. Education is increasingly being used as an international benchmark to compare countries, which has led to reductive exercises in educational reform in certain countries (particularly the USA). A vernacular approach to global policy indicates that, whereas Ireland has adopted some aspects of this reform agenda (a focus on standards and the implementation of standardised testing), the education system has thus far resisted the harshest aspects of other jurisdictions, especially with regard to the publication of comparative league tables and the linking of funding with results in mandated testing. Finally, the chapter illustrates how influential policy makers view the teaching profession and pupils as bodies to be acted upon, as opposed to being worked with, whilst implementing change.

CHAPTER 8 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRE OF TEACHERS

8.1 Introduction

There have been a number of changes in the landscape of primary education in Ireland over the past five years. These include the introduction of new initiatives such as School Self Evaluation and Aistear; the changes to curricular time for literacy and numeracy; mandated standardised testing at 2nd, 4th and 6th class; reported aggregated scoring in these tests to the Department and Boards of Management; as well as industrial relations disputes. This chapter focuses on teachers' perceptions of assessment in primary schools. It analyses the findings of 144 responses to a questionnaire of teachers' practices, knowledge and beliefs about assessment. In analysing these findings, the chapter is cognisant of the literature review on assessment in Chapter 2. The main points of this review relevant to the analysis contained in this chapter are:

- Research implies that the implementation of any new assessment policy must take account of teachers' conceptions of assessment in order to succeed (2.5.2).
- In examining the success of assessment for learning approaches, it was found that there is a strong link between teachers' personal convictions and their successful implementation of assessment for learning practices. These practices were more likely to be used effectively if teachers took responsibility for the success or failure of pupil autonomy than those teachers who only implemented the procedures (2.5.2).

- If there is an assessment innovation or initiative that is significantly different to the beliefs that teachers hold, the challenge on the teachers demand them to restructure their belief or 'domesticate' the reform so that it fits into their belief system (2.5.2).
- Research shows that teachers believe that classroom tests provide more information about pupils' learning styles and progress, are more likely to influence meaningful learning, and are more likely to develop learning rather than test-taking strategies and large-scale testing (2.5.2).
- Research has demonstrated how assessment can dominate the learning experience. Teachers can begin to use assessment for learning approaches to constitute the curriculum as opposed to aiding learning (2.5.2).
- It is essential to provide continuing professional development to teachers with both formative and summative assessment approaches. This should disentangle the two and provide teachers with guidance on the type of feedback from teachers which will increase pupil motivation and ownership of their learning (2.5.2 and 2.6).

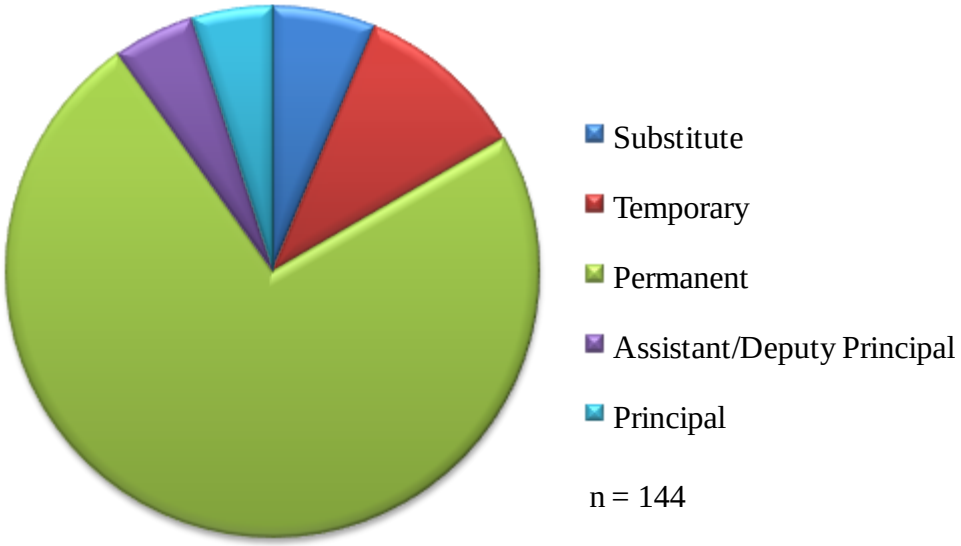
This chapter also makes reference to the theoretical perspectives based on the work of Bourdieu and Foucault as outlined in Chapter 1. The chapter is divided into the following seven areas, based on the questionnaire format: 'Biographical information'; 'School policy'; 'Purposes of assessment'; 'Use of assessment'; 'Purpose of standardised tests'; 'Reforms in primary education'; and 'Continuing professional development'.

8.2 Biographical information

8.2.1 Position in the school

The vast majority of teachers who responded were in a permanent position in their school. Graph 1 demonstrates the proportions of the respondents who are substitute, temporary, permanent, assistant/deputy principals or principals. Almost 10% of respondents are in a managerial role in their schools.

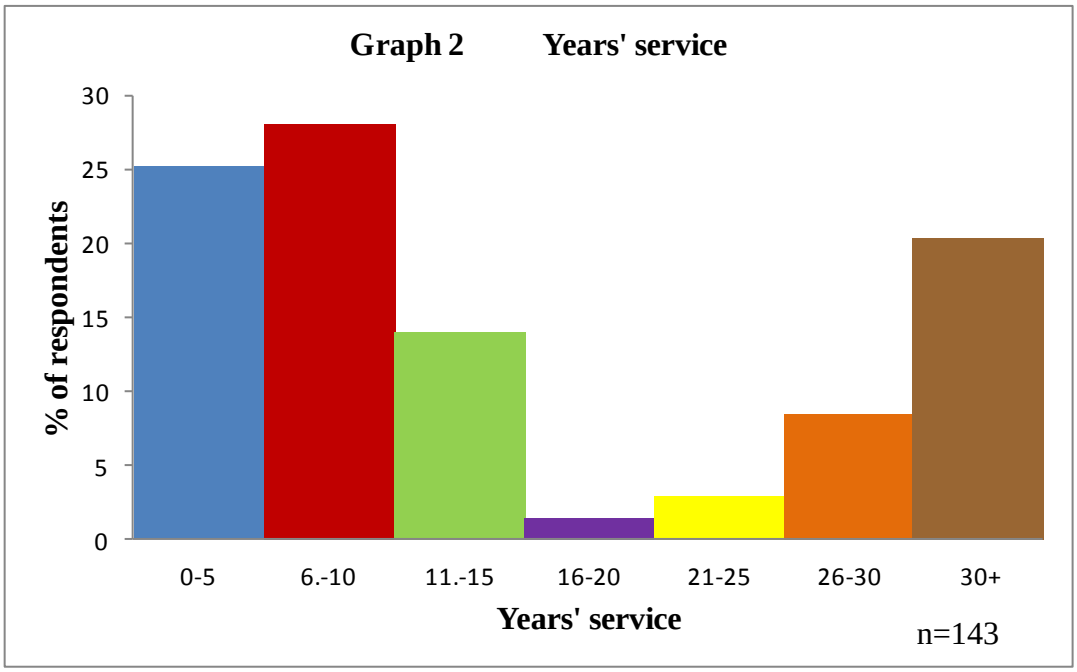
Graph 1 Position in the school



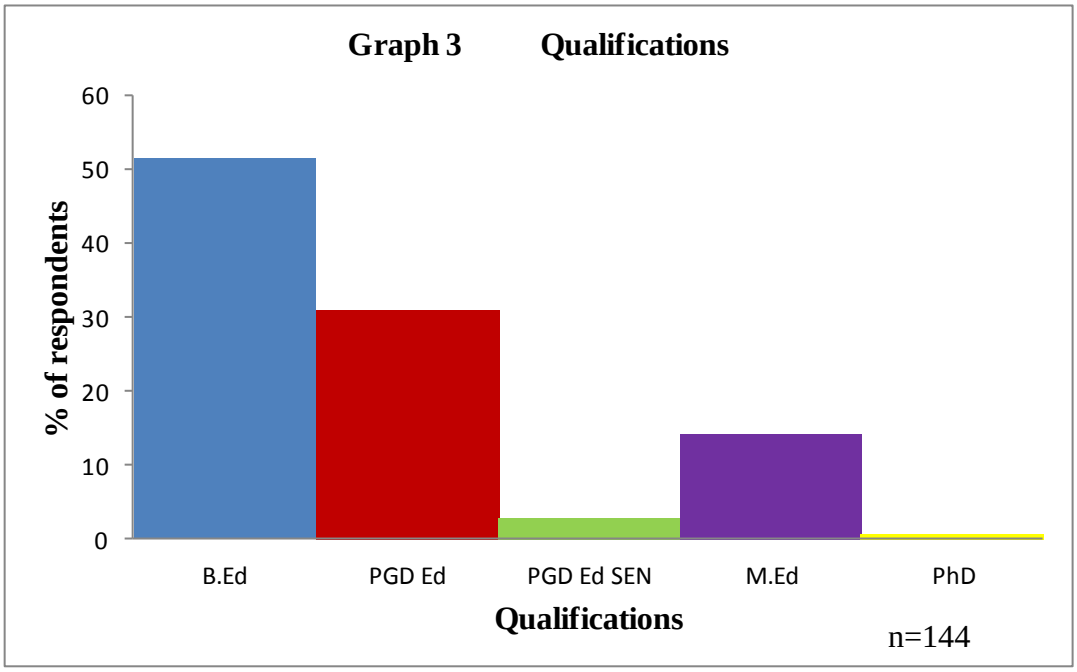
8.2.2 Years' service

A majority of teachers who responded to the questionnaire have been teaching for less than 10 years. The teaching profession in recent years has undergone considerable change due to industrial relations factors. A number of teachers have accepted early retirement packages as part of the Croke Park and Haddington Road agreement. Some of the newly qualified teachers (0 – 5 years

experience) would have benefited from changes in initial teacher education, as well as a more focused probationary period. Many of these teachers would also have been mentored by a colleague under the induction process. This subgroup is investigated in a proceeding section to ascertain whether they hold different beliefs about the purposes of assessment than their teaching colleagues.



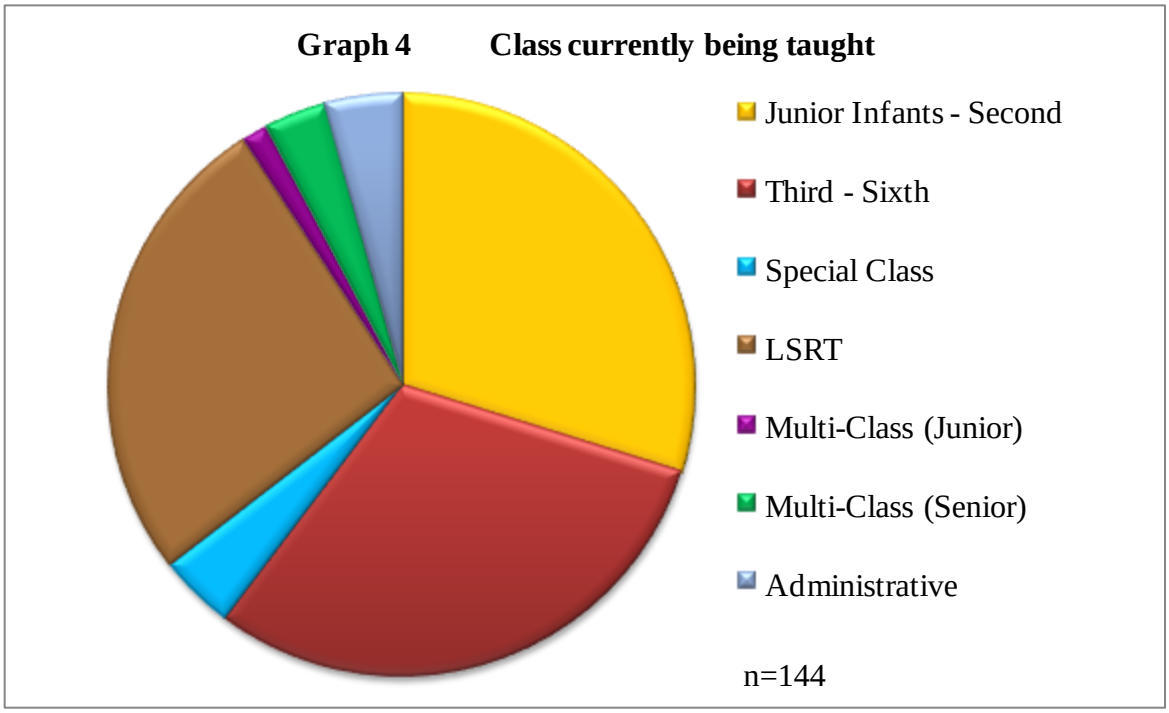
8.2.3 Qualifications



Research has indicated the important of teacher training, both initial teacher education and continuing professional development, in developing an awareness of assessment methodologies (2.5.2). This is particularly true of assessment for learning approaches where the pupil is a collaborative agent in the process and is involved in setting learning targets for him/herself, as well as assessing and reviewing their learning. Graph 3 displays the qualifications held by the respondents. The responses to this question were quite interesting in that they indicated that a sizeable number of participants completed a Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGD Ed). This highlights the fact that there are a number of different avenues into the teaching profession in Ireland. The other respondents either held a Bachelor of Education degree (B.Ed), a Post-Graduate Diploma in Education in Special Educational Needs (PGD Ed SEN), a Masters in Education (M.Ed) or a Doctorate in Education (PhD). 14% of the participants hold a Masters in Education.

This type of qualification is examined in the area of assessment purposes to investigate whether those with a Masters in Education hold a different view of the purposes of assessment.

8.2.4 Class currently being taught



Graph 4 displays the classes that were being taught by the respondents at the time of the questionnaire. Whilst the majority of teachers were in a mainstream class or multi-grade setting (94 out of 144), 26% were in a Learning Support/Resource (LSRT) role. This subsection will be examined to determine whether this cohort have different assessment practices from their colleagues who teach in a mainstream class.

8.3 School policy – a balanced approach to assessment?

76% of respondents claimed that their school had a policy on assessment. 1% stated that their school did not have an assessment policy and a further 23% of respondents did not know. This corresponds with the 2008 INTO survey which found that 77% of schools surveyed had a policy on assessment, whereas 23% did not. The following table indicates the responses to whether these school's assessment policies addresses assessment for learning, assessment of learning, standardised assessment, diagnostic testing and screening, and peer/self assessment. These responses are presented next to the rate of response for the same questions from the 2008 INTO survey.

Table 6 Comparison of responses to assessment policy questions with INTO survey

	Doctorate survey			**INTO survey**	
Does the policy address:	**Yes**	**No**	**Don't Know**	**Yes**	**No**
Standardised assessment *(N for doc = 109; N for INTO = 187)*	93%	1%	6%	99%	1%
Assessment of learning *(N for doc = 109; N for INTO = 187)*	85%	4%	11%	91%	9%
Diagnostic testing/screening *(N for doc = 108; N for INTO = 187)*	84%	5%	11%	99%	1%
Assessment for learning *(N for doc = 105; N for INTO = 187)*	76%	7%	17%	83%	17%
Peer/Self assessment *(N for doc = 100; N for INTO = 187)*	41%	31%	28%	52%	48%

8.3.1 Contents of school policies on assessment

It is notable that in both surveys the inclusion of assessment of learning approaches in school assessment policies is almost 10% higher than the inclusion of

assessment for learning. It is also noteworthy that standardised assessment is included in the vast majority of policies whereas there is a far lesser inclusion of more formative approaches to assessment, such as peer or self assessment. Whereas there was a tradition of using standardised tests in Irish primary schools since the 1970s, this assessment method was mandated by the Department of Education and Skills in 2006 at 2nd and 4th class (see 4.3). The publication of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* stipulated that all national schools must administer standardised tests at three stages in the primary school cycle: 2nd, 4th and 6th classes. Due to the fact that these tests are mandated by the Department, it is not surprising to note that 93% of teachers surveyed are aware that the use of standard tests is included in their schools' assessment policy. The figures regarding peer/self assessment indicate that these assessment methods are not included in school's assessment policies as much as standardised tests. 31% of teachers surveyed state that these methods are not addressed in their school's assessment policies, and a further 28% are unsure. The implication here could be that these school's assessment policies deal with the procedures of summative assessment whilst possibly mentioning the formative assessment strategies. However, by highlighting the procedures to be followed in the administration of standardised tests (e.g. which classes, at what stage in the year), schools are in danger of creating a situation where these tests are seen as the most valuable by the teachers, and also by pupils and parents (this is a point revisited in Chapter 9).

Research indicates that assessment practices can lead the curriculum. Many commentators have identified how standardised tests can narrow the curriculum and stifle creativity (see 2.3.2). The fact that the DES has made the administration of standardised tests compulsory could lead to a situation where other assessment

strategies are sidelined. According to Bourdieu, habitus creates an environment where certain opinions or thoughts are valued more than others and become the dominant discourse (1.2.2.1). If there is a belief at a policy level that standardised tests are the best method of measuring the system and that they should be prioritised above other assessment methodologies, this could create a scenario where these tests are considered to be the most important by teachers, pupils and parents. Bourdieu argues that there would be no intentionality on anyone's behalf in creating such a situation. Bourdieu argues that habitus is the source of a "series of moves which are objectively organised as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention" (1977, p.73). Policy makers, teachers and parents may believe in the objectivity of standardised tests but may not question the effect that they have on the pupils or their suitability for assessment for learning purposes (see 7.4.2).

8.3.2 School policies on standardised tests

Standardised testing is quite commonplace in the schools in which the teachers surveyed are working. In the doctoral questionnaires, 86% of teachers indicated that their schools administered standardised tests in classes apart from those mandated by the Department (2nd, 4th and 6th). Table 7 displays the percentages of respondents who specified in which classes standardised tests were used in their schools.

Table 7 Responses to classes in which standardised tests are administered

	No. of respondents	Yes	No
Junior Infants	123	12%	88%
Senior Infants	123	63%	37%
First Class	124	86%	14%
Third Class	124	84%	16%
Fifth Class	124	85%	15%

The NCCA recommends that standardised testing not be used with infant classes (2006). However, 12% of respondents state that it is used in their schools and a further 63% of teachers state that standardised tests are administered in senior infants. Table 2 demonstrates the frequency of usage of standardised testing in Irish primary education, where the practice in many schools is to administer the tests every year from at least First Class. A key consideration here is how the results of these tests are used and communicated to the pupils. Research has shown that standardised tests can lead to pupils developing fixed identities of themselves as learners and allocating their achievements to innate characteristics, rather than effort and application (3.5.3). Teachers' perceptions of the suitability of standardised tests for a variety of assessment purposes is examined in a later section of this chapter.

The questionnaire also found that 29% of the respondents inform parents as to the dates of standardised tests. A number of policy makers in Ireland have identified the danger of standardised tests being perceived as having 'high stakes' in Irish primary education due to the fact that the scores are reported to the DES and Boards of Management (8.3.3). These scores are also included in report cards developed by the NCCA. Research has shown in a variety of jurisdictions that

preparation for tests only improves a pupil's ability to take tests, it does not develop their problem solving ability or their ability to transfer or generalise skills (3.5.1). Any preparation for standardised tests would also invalidate the tests scores. If the perception were to develop that these tests were 'high stakes' or a Primary Certificate by another name, there is the possibility that these parents may begin to prepare their children for the tests. Bourdieu theorises that the interplay of these power relations manifests itself in different layers of capital (economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, symbolic capital), which are possessed by each citizen (2.3.2). He argues that relations of domination of power are made, unmade and remade in and by the interactions between persons, and through social formations, such as schooling. A Bourdieuian approach counsels that primary education could be in danger of parents viewing the results of standardised tests as a form of cultural capital. If this happens, then many parents would invest time and resources into ensuring that their children benefit from positive results in these tests. Consequently, this could create a greater divide in terms of achievement as parents from disadvantaged areas would find it difficult to compete. Studies have shown that standardised tests can also include a cultural bias, which would compound these issues (3.3.2 and 3.5.4). Bourdieu also states that examinations impacts on a person's self image and, indeed, can create a person's identity as a learner. It would be beneficial to conduct research into the number of primary schools that inform parents of the dates of standardised tests and the reasons that they have for doing this. It would also be conducive to survey parents about their opinions on the purposes of standardised tests in primary education in Ireland.

8.4 Purposes of assessment –the priorities of these teachers

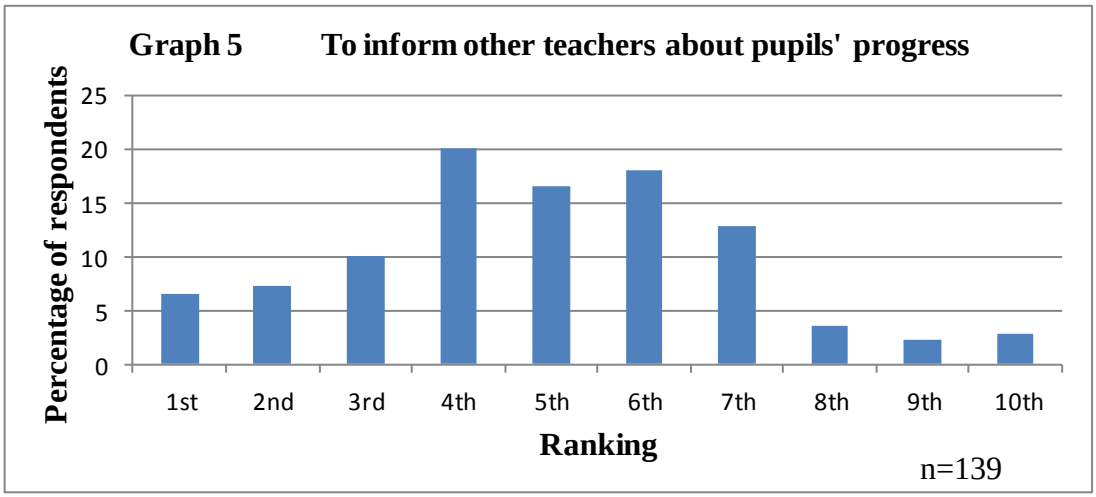
The participants were asked to rank the following purposes of assessment in order from 1 – 10:

- To inform other teachers about pupils' progress
- To inform parents about their child's progress
- To inform pupils about their progress
- To group pupils for instructional purposes
- To identify pupils who have learning difficulties
- To identify pupils' strengths and weaknesses
- To compare the school to national performance
- To monitor the school's progress from year to year
- To identify aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved
- To provide information to the Department of Education and Skills (DES)

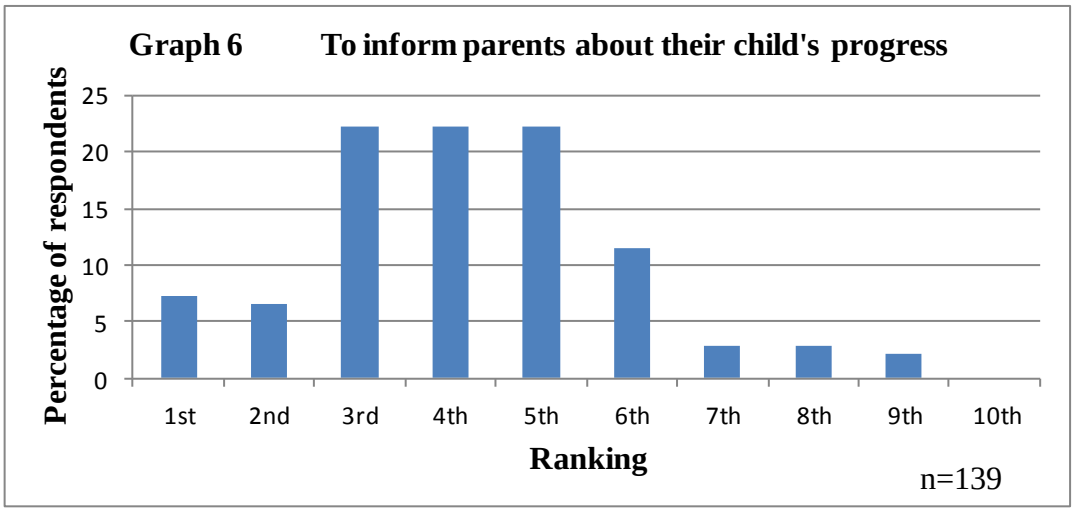
These can be divided into three separate groups: 1) Using assessment to support teaching and learning; 2) Using assessment to report information; and 3) Using assessment to evaluate systems.

8.4.1 Using assessment to support teaching and learning

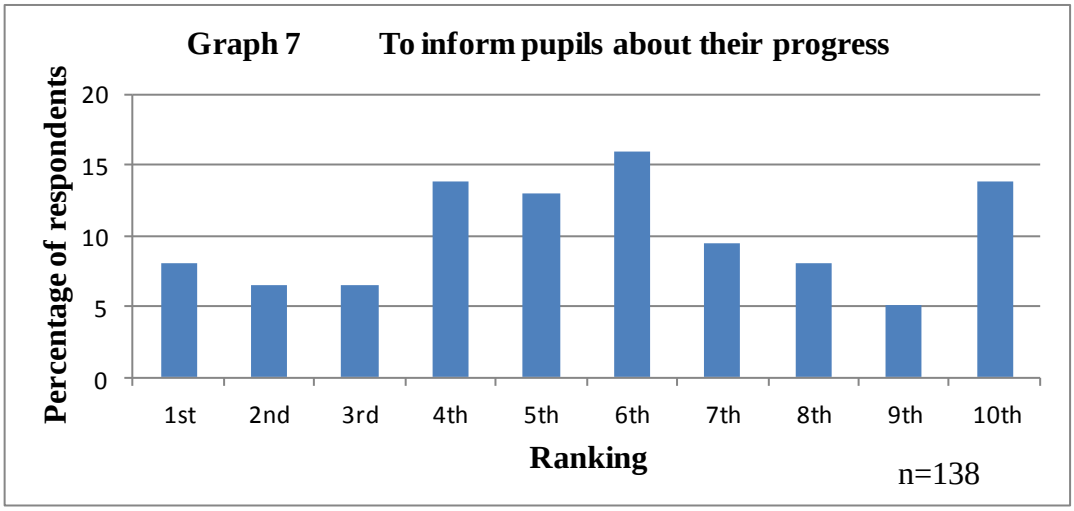
The section investigates teachers' response rate to three purposes of assessment: to group pupils for instructional purposes; to identify pupils who have learning difficulties; and to identify pupils' strengths and weaknesses.



Graph 5 demonstrates that 43% of teachers believe that the most important purpose of assessment is to identify pupils' strengths and needs. 28% feel that it is the second most important purpose. 71% of teachers highly rate the importance of using assessment to identify strengths and weaknesses. This is hardly surprising as this is a vital role in the teaching and learning process. Although it is acknowledged that assessment is widely underdeveloped in Irish primary education (4.3), this survey shows that these teachers prioritise the use of assessment to support learning. This is further supported by Graph 6, which outlines teachers' responses to the use of assessment to identify pupils who have learning difficulties.



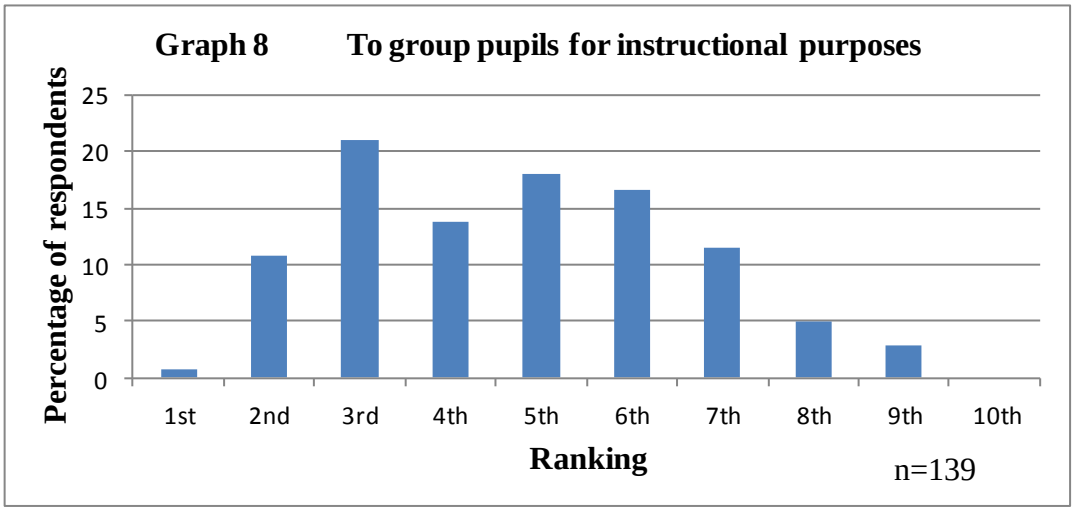
28% of teachers feel that this is the most important purpose of assessment and a further 32% believe that it is the second most important purpose. 60% of teachers surveyed ranked this purpose very highly. It is apparent that the teachers surveyed link their assessment purposes to the pupils in their classrooms. There is a tradition in Ireland of utilising assessment approaches (such as screening or standardised tests) to identify those pupils in need of learning support teaching. This is re-enforced by the percentages of respondents who state that their school administer standardised tests in each class from First to Sixth (8.3.2). This may explain the high percentages acknowledging the importance of these purposes.



Graph 7 demonstrates the teachers' response to the use of assessment to group pupils for instructional purposes. While only 12% rate this purpose as their most or second most importance, 21% feel it is the third most important purpose. These three graphs display that these teachers most highly rank those assessment purposes that have an effect on teaching and learning. This is discussed further in section 8.4.4.

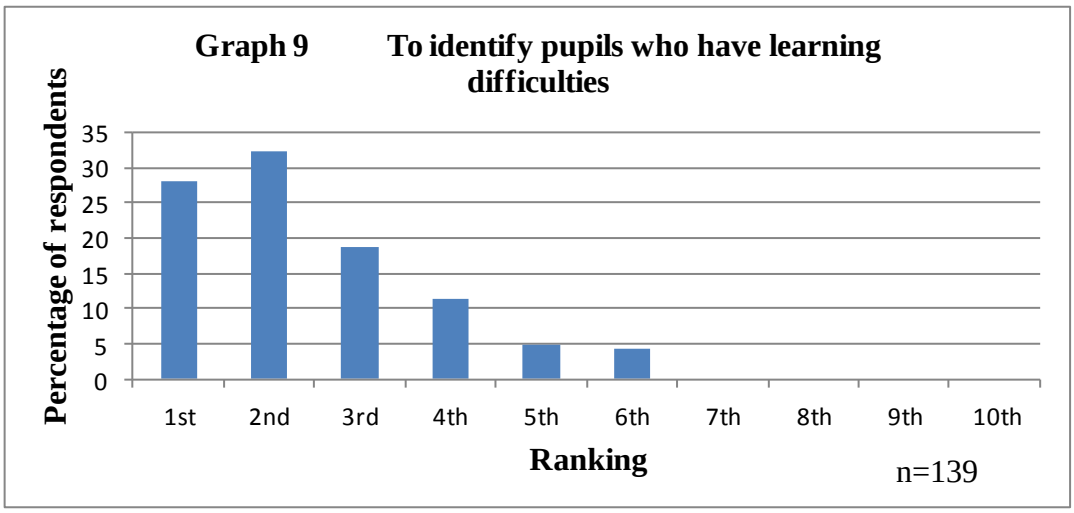
8.4.2 Using assessment to report information

This section examines teachers' response rate to three purposes of assessment: to inform other teachers about pupils' progress; to inform parents about their child's progress; and to inform pupils about their progress.

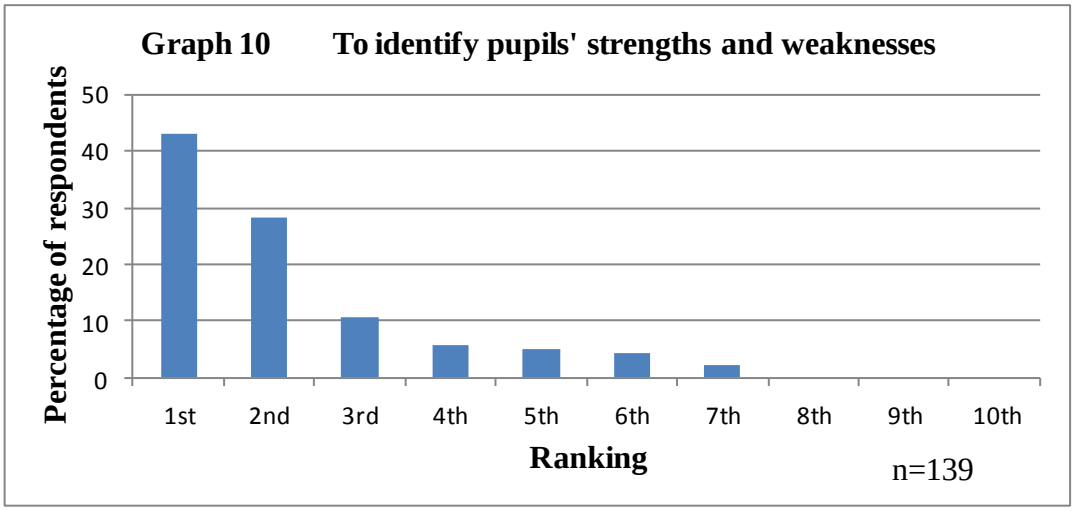


Graph 8 shows that 14 % of the teachers surveyed view informing parents about their child's progress as the most important purpose of assessment and a further 22% feel it is the third most important purpose. One of the aspects of change in Irish primary education recently has been the development in reporting procedures to parents. The

NCCA has created a number of templates for report cards and the DES has instructed schools that they must choose one of them (Circular 18/2012).



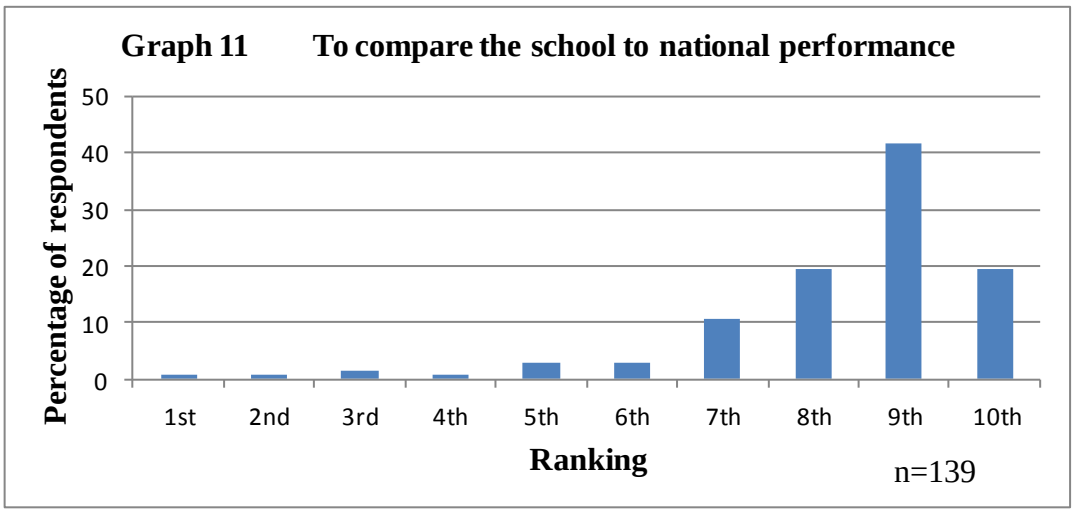
Assessment information is also reported to other teachers. Teachers feel that this is less important than reporting to parents. Graph 9 shows that 14% of these teachers feel that this purpose is in the first or second rank of importance. A further 10% believe that it is of third most importance. Similar results are found regarding teachers' views on the importance of using assessment to inform pupils about their progress.



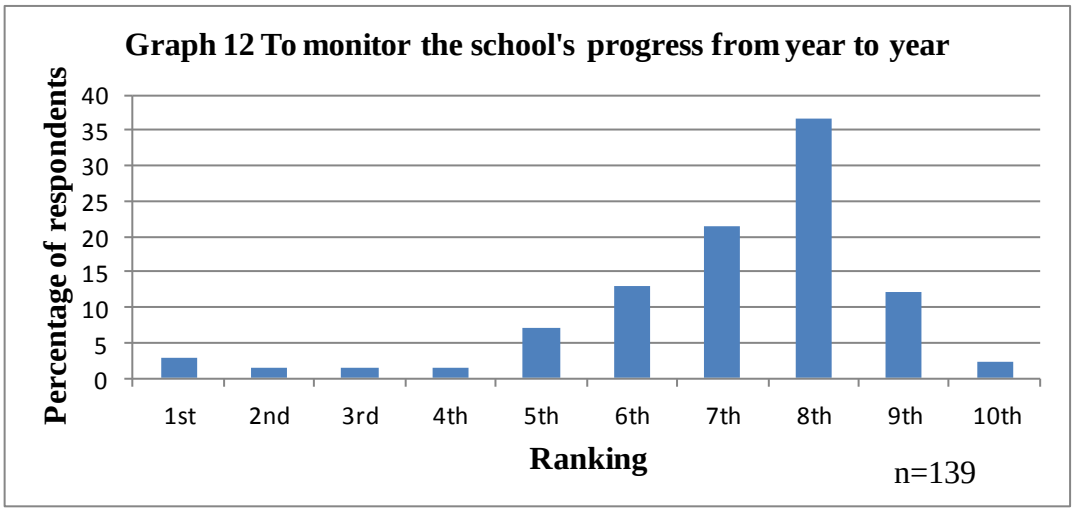
Graph 10 demonstrates that 15% of teachers think that this is a first or second priority purpose for assessment and a further 7% believe that it is of third importance. The teachers' prioritisation of the role of assessment in reporting to pupils is further analysed in section 8.4.4.

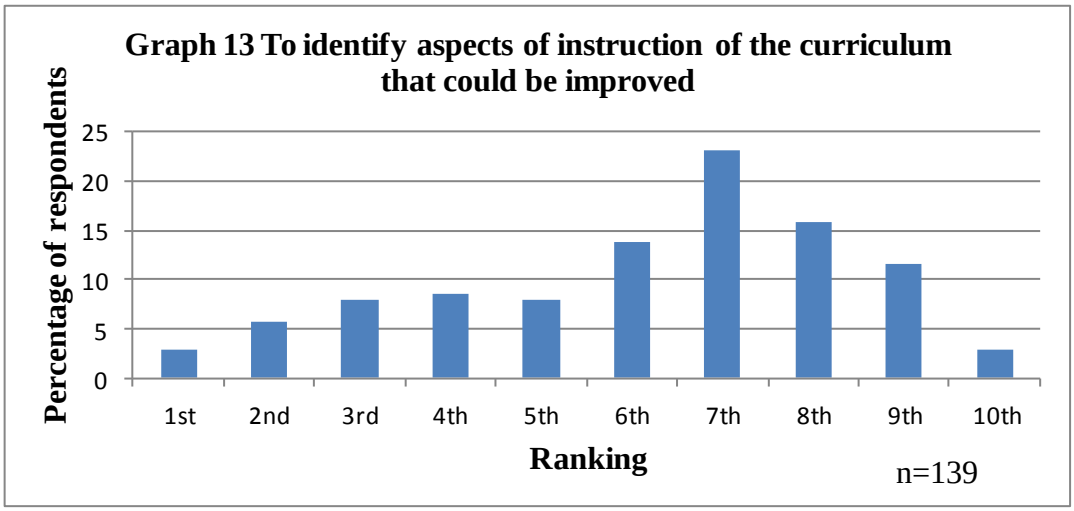
8.4.3 Using assessment to evaluate systems

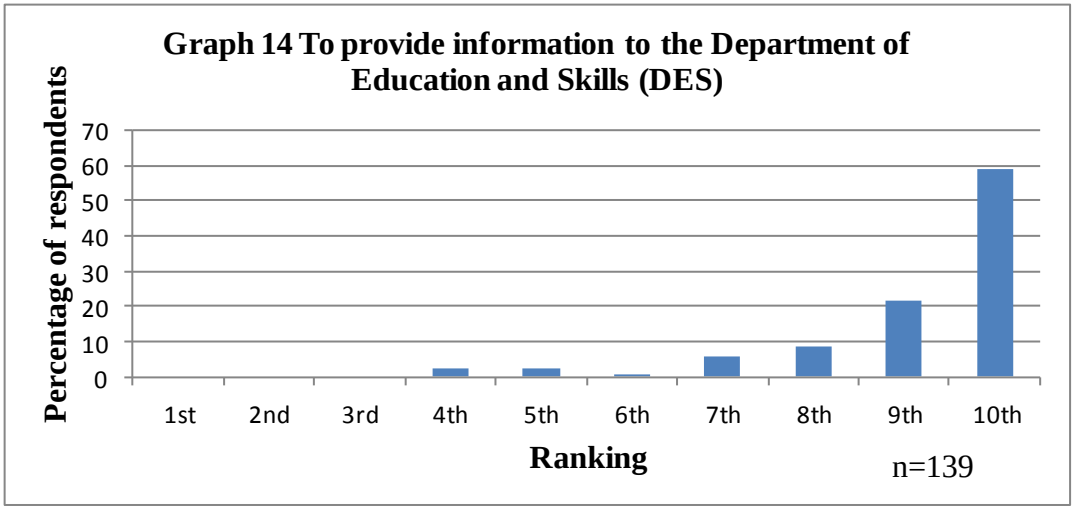
The section explores teachers' response rates to four purposes of assessment: to compare the school to national performance; to monitor the school's progress from year to year; to identify aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved; and to provide information to the DES.



Graph 11 displays that these 3% of these teachers believe that identifying aspects of the curriculum that could be improved is the main purpose of education. A further 14% feel that it is the second or third most important objective of assessment. These teachers seem to prioritise the purposes of assessment directly impacting on their practice as opposed to the purposes of assessment to evaluate the system. This can be seen in Graphs 12, 13 and 14.


Graph 12 To monitor the school's progress from year to year
Percentage of respondents
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
1st
2nd
3rd
4th
5th
6th
7th
8th
9th
10th
Ranking
n=139


Graph 13 To identify aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved
Percentage of respondents
25
20
15
10
5
0
1st
2nd
3rd
4th
5th
6th
7th
8th
9th
10th
Ranking
n=139


Graph 14 To provide information to the Department of Education and Skills (DES)
Percentage of respondents
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
1st
2nd
3rd
4th
5th
6th
7th
8th
9th
10th
Ranking
n=139

These graphs demonstrate that the teachers surveyed do not prioritise the use of assessment for evaluative purposes. 3% feel that the most importance purpose of assessment is to monitor the school's progress from year to year; 1% believe that it is to compare school to national performance; and 0% think that it is to provide information to the DES. These findings are analysed in the next section.

8.4.4 Discussion on teachers' rankings of the purposes of assessment

Literacy and numeracy for learning and life mandates the reporting of standardised tests to the DES on an annual basis. 59% of teachers believe that this is the least important purpose of assessment. The teachers surveyed tended to focus their priorities for assessment on identifying pupils' strengths and weaknesses and on identifying pupils with learning difficulties. This is an apparent indication of a means in which teachers adopt policy reform through its implementation. Chapter 2 reviews some empirical evidence relating to teachers and assessment policy implementation (2.5.2). This research demonstrates that teachers mediate assessment reforms based on their personal convictions. The research also shows that assessment reform can also replace the curriculum if teachers believe that it is high stakes. A longitudinal study is required to examine if and how Irish primary teachers adapt their practice in light of the assessment initiatives contained within the literacy and numeracy strategy.

The responses to this survey seem to indicate a dominance of formative purposes of assessment amongst these teachers. However, only 8% thought the most important purpose of assessment was to inform pupils about their progress. 14% of teachers indicated that this was the least important purpose in their responses. This

highlights a certain ambiguity in teachers' understanding of formative assessment and is consistent with the findings of research in Ireland by Lysaght and O'Leary (2013) (see section 2.5.2). The use of Foucault's archaeological method is instructive in this instance. Foucault argues against modernity's teleological assumption that history moves upward or forward. He argues that an archaeological approach to understanding concepts shows that there are displacements and transformations in their development. In reminding ourselves about the developments in the concept of assessment in education, we can examine these displacements and transformations (1.2.1.1). The literature review on assessment in Chapter 2 outlines the purposes to which assessment is used since the start of the twentieth century. This chapter outlined how assessment has been identified as having three different purposes in education: i) selecting and certifying individuals; ii) evaluating institutions; and iii) assisting learning (Wiliam, 2000; Goldstein and Lewis, 1996). The review documented how, historically, selection has been the most pervasive purpose of assessment (Gipps. 1999; Broadfoot, 1996a; Sutherland, 1996). Assessment was also used for selection within the education system (2.2.1). A key tool in this process was the IQ test (Gipps, 1999; Sutherland, 1996). Many involved in education believed that they were able to identify innate levels of intelligence. Recent trends see assessment being used to control and drive curriculum and teaching, and to evaluate the larger institution of education (2.2.2). The literature review on assessment also explores developments in learning theory and how these impact upon assessment (2.3). It concludes that the theory of assessment has developed to focus more on the process of assessment and the learner's role in it, as well as the importance of the teacher. These changes are linked to changes in philosophy of the epistemology of knowledge, and in related developments in

theories of learning (Howe and Mercer, 2010; Conway, 2002; Lin, 2002; Mayer, 1998; Broadfoot, 1996a). Three views of learning can be summarised as behaviourist-empiricist; cognitive-rationalist; and socio-constructivist. In the behaviourist-empiricist outlook, the learner is a passive recipient of content and assessment includes checklists and time-based responses. In the cognitive-rationalist tradition, the learner is a processor of knowledge and assessment involves measuring learning outcomes. Standardised testing would be informed by this outlook. In this approach, these tests can be administered at various levels to show what learners know and/or have learned. These tests are seen to be objective and a reliable indicator of a learner's level of ability. Finally, in the socio-constructivist approach, the learner is a constructor of knowledge and instruction is geared towards helping the student develop learning and thinking strategies. Evaluation is qualitative rather than quantitative. This approach espouses the use of portfolios, authentic tasks, group projects, cooperative learning, self-assessment and pupil choice on what they are learning.

Foucault states that the history of a concept, such as assessment, is not of its progressive refinement or increasing rationality, but that of its "various fields of constitution and validity, that of its successive rules of use, that of the many theoretical contexts in which it developed and matured" (1989, p.5). The three purposes of assessment (selecting and certifying individuals; evaluating institutions; and assisting learning) and the three theories of learning on which teaching and assessment are based (behaviourist-empiricist; cognitive-rationalist; socio-constructivist) have not replaced one another in chronological order. They co-exist and compete with each other in the educational domain. This competition can be demonstrated in the uses to which assessment is put in primary education in Ireland.

The DES has mandated that standardised testing be aggregated and reported every year. It has also stipulated that schools should design school improvement plans, an element of which is to be based on pupil performance. These initiatives are based in a cognitive-rationalist perspective where standardised tests are seen as an objective and reliable indicator of attainment. Graphs 12, 13 and 14 clearly show that teachers believe that these purposes of assessment are the least important. Graphs 5 and 6 indicate that most teachers prioritise using assessment to identify pupils who have learning difficulties or to identify learners' strengths and weaknesses. On initial inspection it may appear that these are formative purposes. However, the key to analysing this is to question what the teachers do with this information. Is it to group pupils for instructional practices, which would be based on a cognitive-rationalist epistemology of knowledge and learning, or is it to inform pupils of their progress, which would be based on a socio-constructivist perspective? Graph 7 indicates that informing pupils about their progress is not a high priority for these teachers. If replicated on a wider scale, it would mean further CPD is required to assist teachers' understanding of assessment for learning approaches. Irish primary teachers' conceptualisation of assessment is an area that is in need of further research.

It is also noteworthy to examine the role of assessment by the reflective practitioner. The purpose of assessment to identify aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved is one that would be held by a teacher who reflects on their practice in order to improve their teaching and, therefore, the learning opportunities for the pupils in their classrooms. Research shows that teachers who are reflective tend to focus more on assessment for learning strategies and involve pupils more in the learning process (2.5.2). Table 8 outlines how

percentage of teachers who included this purpose in their top three rankings. The table also shows these rankings distributed by qualification held by the participants.

Table 8 Rankings of identifying aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved distributed by qualification

Qualification	Ranking in top three
Percentage of all participants	17%
B.Ed	19%
PGD Ed	7%
PGD Ed SEN	0%
M.Ed	35%
Ph.D	0%

There is a notable difference in the amount of teachers who rank using assessment to identify aspects of instruction for improvement in their top three. 35% of those surveyed who held an M.Ed believed this purpose was of more importance than the other purposes. This may indicate that these teachers are more reflective in their practice and seek to improve their teaching and the learning outcomes for their pupils. The effect of Masters of Education programmes on a teacher's perspective of assessment is an area that could be examined further.

A number of high profile policy making interviewees highlighted the lack of continuing professional development in the area of assessment, especially assessment for learning strategies (7.7.1). Mr. Eddie Murtagh (retired Assistant Inspector) commented that

> "It's a lacuna in the initial teacher education system and some colleges have moved to address it now, to be fair, in recent years. But

> it is also a lacuna in the professional development system. We have to look at it in I'd say the last ten years, colleges of education have begun to address this, particularly in the two large colleges. There is an entire generation of teachers out there who have had very little professional development in the area of assessment and in fact the Department's own effort to provide that support was stymied in that the resources ran out just as we were reaching that important part of professional development".

Table 9 examines teachers' top three rankings of the purposes of assessment, based on their years of service.

Table 9 Teachers' top three rankings of the purposes of assessment based on their years of service

Purpose	**Over-all**	**0 - 5**	**6 - 10**	**11 - 15**	**16 - 20**	**21 - 25**	**25 - 30**	**30+**
To inform other teachers about pupils' progress (n=139)	29%	20%	26%	17%	0%	0%	33%	32%
To inform parents about their child's progress (n=139)	36%	40%	36%	45%	100 %	0%	25%	32%
To inform pupils about their progress (n=138)	21%	34%	16%	22%	0%	0%	8%	21%
To group pupils for instructional purposes (n=139)	32%	20%	31%	33%	0%	100 %	42%	39%
To identify pupils who have learning difficulties (n=139)	79%	83%	82%	61%	100 %	100 %	75%	82%
To identify pupils' strengths and weaknesses (n=139)	82%	86%	87%	83%	100 %	100 %	83%	64%
To compare the school to national performance	3%	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	11%
To monitor the school's progress from year to year (n=139)	6%	6%	3%	11%	0%	0%	8%	4%
To identify aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved (n=139)	17%	11%	15%	28%	0%	0%	25%	14%
To provide information to the DES (n=139)	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

The literature review of assessment highlighted the differences between Assessment for Learning (AfL) and Assessment of Learning (AoL) (2.4.1 and 2.4.2). It outlined how Vygotsky is an important theorist in understanding a socio-constructivist approach to assessment (AfL) (2.4). Vygostky argues that education is a social process based on interactions between the teacher and the students and the students with each other and their environment. Vygotsky disagrees with assessments that examine students based on their individual performance on a given day. He believes that a truer indication of a student's ability was his/her facility when assisted by another – what Vygotsky terms the zone of proximal development. Assessment is seen as ongoing and collaborative, with an emphasis on the developing nature of the learner's performance. Instruments used for AfL include portfolios, peer assessment and pupil-teacher conferences. The term AfL is relatively recent and its prominence owes much to the work of Black and Wiliam, especially their seminal article '*Assessment and classroom learning'* (1998). AoL can be associated with summative assessment. The purpose of assessment in this guise is to ascertain a pupil's understanding of knowledge or skills at the end of a given period in a course of instruction. Assessment instruments in this framework are seen to be objective and neutral, and can accurately establish a learner's competence at a given topic. Harlen explains that summative assessment of pupils has two purposes: an internal aspect including teacher records and reporting to parents; and an external aspect comprising of national assessments and information gathered to pass on to secondary schools (2010, p.485). Table 4 identifies possible differences in conceptions on assessment based on a teacher's amount of service.

Teachers who participated in this survey who have 0 – 5 years' service rank the purpose of informing pupils about their progress much higher than their

colleagues. This purpose is based on a more formative view of assessment and the belief in the importance of sharing information with pupils to help them create targets for themselves and to aid the learning process. 34% of teachers with 0 – 5 years' service think that this is one of the three most important purposes of assessment, whereas only 8% of those teachers with 25 – 30 years of service believe that this purpose is one of the three most important. This is a noteworthy difference and may be caused by a number of factors. It is possible that changes in initial teacher education as a result of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* or in the probation period may have contributed to this difference. It is also possible that teachers with 25 – 30 years' service have used their experience to become more reflective in their practice. 25% of these teachers believe that identifying aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved is in the top three priorities for assessment, whereas 11% of teachers who have 0 – 5 years' service include this purpose in their highest rankings. It is also noticeable that there is a difference between these groups when it comes to using assessment to group pupils for instructional purposes. 42% of teachers who have 25 – 30 years of service states that this purpose is of a high priority whereas only 20% of teachers with 0 – 5 years' experience think likewise. The reason for this may be that those teachers with 25 – 30 years' experience hold different views of learning and pedagogy. They may believe that a pupil's ability to learn is static and internal and that the class would be better served if it was divided into instructional groups based on ability.

Current learning theory informs us that children's ability to learn is malleable and dependent on external factors, such as social context, as well as the child's own capacity. The differences between these groups is worthy of further research. The sociocultural approach changes the dynamic between teacher and student

significantly (2.4.3). From being the independent assessor under the cognitive-rationalist perspective in a largely hierarchical relationship, the teacher is now a partner with the student in the assessment. Learning is not located within the mind of the learner but is constituted of the interactions between the learner, teacher and the classroom environment. A key link between assessment and learning is feedback. It is vital for teachers to specify improvement or process rather than attainment in their feedback. This assists the student in taking ownership of their learning, in identifying the improvements that need to be made, and in ascertaining the means to make these changes. If the feedback focuses on attainment it may lead to the student believing that they cannot improve. Foucault's archaeological method explains that theories of a concept do not replace one another but exists side-by-side competing for influence. The cognitive-rationalist perspective has strong tradition in Irish education, particularly in the historical use of standardised tests (4.3). The next section examines teachers' use of a variety of assessment tools and uses Foucault's genealogical approach to further the analysis.

8.5 Use of assessment – the prominence of teacher observation and the role of feedback

Research demonstrates that assessment approaches can lead the teaching and learning styles in schools (2.5). The following table indicates the responses of the participants to the extent of their use of the following strategies: diagnostic tests, negotiating targets with learners, peer assessment, pupil portfolios, pupil profiles, self assessment, standardised tests, teacher-designed tests, and teacher observation.

Table 10 The extent to which assessment strategies are used

	Not at all	**Daily**	**Weekly**	**Monthly**	**Termly**	**Yearly**
Diagnostic tests *(n=124)*	12%	1%	8%	9%	33%	37%
Negotiating targets with learners *(n=126)*	19%	21%	25%	15%	17%	2%
Peer assessment *(n=128)*	39%	17%	27%	9%	7%	1%
Pupil portfolios *(n=131)*	15%	15%	27%	19%	20%	5%
Pupil profiles (n=127)	15%	12%	21%	17%	25%	10%
Self assessment *(n=124)*	17%	38%	27%	11%	3%	2%
Standardised tests *(n=137)*	7%	2%	2%	0%	7%	83%
Teacher-designed tests *(n=134)*	2%	12%	56%	16%	14%	0%
Teacher observation *(n=141)*	1%	95%	3%	1%	0%	0%

8.5.1 Teacher observation

Table 10 demonstrates that teacher observation is the dominant assessment strategy that is employed by these teachers. 95% of them utilise it on a daily basis. The genealogical method outlined by Foucault gives insights into the themes of control and access in assessment in primary education (1.2.1.2). Foucault argues that assessment is an instrument of the state to create its subjects. He avers that disciplinary mechanisms which used to be external changed their nature in the nineteenth century. He argues that the state changed from exerting power externally on its subjects to exerting power internally through its subjects. This is done by control of the body through the distribution of individuals in space; the control of activity through the manipulation of time and the instruction of the correct relation

between body and gesture; and instilling the means of correct training through hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and examination (Foucault, 1975). A key element of this is observation. Foucault gives the example of Bentham's Panopticon. This was a surveillance device to be used in prisons. Prisoners were held in cells in a circular wall surrounding a central tower with concealed windows. In this way the prisoners never knew when they were being watched and so, internalised the behaviours that were expected of them.

This is self-regulation used as a disciplinary tool and is a mechanism that has been commonly used in schools. The teacher works through a norm whilst observing, normalising whilst categorising. Foucault's theory avers that subjects internalise the power relations of the state through a process of normalisation – by comparing oneself with what they should be like. The key to the effectiveness of this approach to assessment is the quality of the teacher feedback once the action/task has been observed. Observation is the most used form of assessment by these teachers. For this type of assessment to be formative, it must be followed by feedback which focuses on the process of learning and the effort of the pupil, not the product. Further research is required to investigate teachers' use of observation as an assessment tool, particular the timing and purpose of the observation, and whether this information is related to the pupil to assist their learning. There are other indications of some element of difficulty regarding the utilisation of assessment for learning approaches in these responses. 19% of these teachers never negotiate targets with learners; 40% of the teachers do not use peer assessment at any stage; and 17% do not use self assessment strategies.

8.5.2 The use of assessment by teachers holding a learning support/resource role

As outlined in section 8.2, 26% of the teachers who participated in the survey held a learning support/resource role in their schools. This role has developed since the 1998 Education Act, which states that all children, regardless of disability, are entitled to education. The Department created a number of learning support and resource posts over the interceding years to assist those pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools. These teachers often work with their pupils on an individual basis or in small groups. The next table analyses whether these teachers' assessment practices are similar or different to their colleagues.

Table 11 Assessment practices of teachers in LSRT compared with overall percentages

	Not at all		Daily		Weekly		Monthly		Termly		Yearly	
	All	**LS-RT**	**All**	**LS-RT**	**All**	**LS-RT**	**All**	**LS-RT**	**All**	**LS-RT**	**All**	**LS-RT**
Diagnostic tests *(LSRT n=34)*	12	9	1	0	8	9	9	9	33	38	37	35
Negotiating targets with learners *(LSRT n=36)*	19	14	21	19	25	22	15	17	17	25	2	3
Peer assessment *(LSRT n=31)*	40	58	17	10	27	23	9	6	7	3	1	0
Pupil portfolios *(LSRT n=36)*	15	17	15	28	27	28	19	14	20	8	5	5
Pupil profiles *(LSRT n=34)*	15	21	12	12	21	24	17	9	25	27	10	9
Self assessment *(LSRT n=32)*	17	22	39	22	27	34	11	13	3	3	2	6
Standardised tests *(LSRT n=38)*	7	5	2	5	2	3	0	0	7	13	83	74
Teacher-designed tests *(LSRT n=32)*	2	0	12	6	56	44	16	22	14	28	0	0
Teacher observation *(LSRT n=38)*	1	3	95	90	3	5	1	3	0	0	0	0

Table 11 demonstrates that the assessment practices of teachers in a learning support or resource role is very similar to their teaching colleagues. The differences regarding formative assessment strategies used by teachers overall and those in a learning support or resource setting are in the usage of peer assessment and self assessment. One notable difference is that, whereas an overall 40% of teachers state that they never use peer assessment, 58% of LSRT teachers state that they never use

this. This may be due to the fact that they are teaching in a one-on-one setting. Another noteworthy difference is that, while 17% of teachers overall never use self assessment, 22% of LSRT teachers state that they never use this method. Furthermore, 39% of teachers state that they use self assessment daily whereas 22% of teachers in LSRT state that they use this method daily. This doctorate recommends further research be undertaken to compare and contrast the assessment methodologies used by teachers in a mainstream and learning support/resource setting, specifically to identify if there are significant differences in the assessment for learning approaches being utilised.

Teachers in a learning support/resource role are also more likely to use diagnostic and standardised tests on a termly basis (38% and 13% respectively) than their teaching colleagues (33% and 7% respectively). It would be prudent to question the frequency of these types of tests with pupils in a learning support or resource role as constant testing can create negative self images for learners (see section 9.3). Furthermore, the use of assessment in the identification of learning difficulties has been challenged by recent literature (2.5.4). MacRuairc (2009) and Reay and Wiliam (1998) contend that there is bias present in the items in standardised tests. This bias results in children from minority or working-class backgrounds performing less well than their peers. MacRuairc (2009) states that in his study of middle-class and working-class pupils, the difference noted in their standardised test is down to the linguistic capital of the two groups. McDermott (2001) argues that children can acquire a learning disability through the process of schooling. McCoy et al. (2012) found that, in Ireland, children attending highly disadvantaged primary school contexts are far more likely to be identified with

behavioural problems and less likely to be identified with learning disabilities than children with similar characteristics attending other schools. The use of labels such as slow learner, ADD, ADHD, ODD, and learning disability in the past fifty years can mask underlying problems with the educational system. By labelling the child in this way, the system can excuse itself of its responsibilities. In so doing, teachers and other pupils can create the disability by reacting as if it were a constant presence. Such labels, in Foucauldian terms, are also a disciplinary mechanism of the state. One tool to measure learning abilities is the standardised test. Teachers' perceptions of the purpose of standardised tests is investigated in the next section.

8.6 Purpose of standardised tests – to assist the learner or evaluate the system?

The literacy and numeracy strategy created a new dimension for primary schools with regards to the use of standardised tests (6.3.3). Standardised tests were traditionally used in Irish primary schools as a means of identifying pupils' strengths and weaknesses and for allocating additional learning support to pupils who were achieving at under a certain percentile. The DES mandated testing at two stages of the primary school cycle in 2006, which were to be included on report cards. These were developed by the NCCA. The publication of the literacy and numeracy strategy in 2011 increased the occasions that standardised testing was to be administered to at least three times in the primary cycle. It also included the stipulation that these scores were to be aggregated and presented to the DES, as well as each school's Board of Management. Table 12 indicates the extent to which those

teachers who completed the questionnaire believe that standardised testing achieves the purposes of assessment as outlined in section 8.4.

Table 12 The extent to which standardised testing achieves various assessment purposes

	Not at all/ Not well	**Not sure**	**Well/ Very Well**
To inform other teachers about pupils' progress *(n=141)*	3%	7%	90%
To inform parents about their child's progress *(n=141)*	13%	18%	69%
To inform pupils about their progress *(n=137)*	44%	29%	27%
To group pupils for instructional purposes *(n=140)*	6%	13%	81%
To identify pupils who have learning difficulties *(n=140)*	4%	6%	91%
To identify pupils' strengths and weaknesses *(n=140)*	19%	9%	72%
To compare the school to national performance *(n=139)*	9%	23%	68%
To monitor the school's progress from year to year *(n=140)*	9%	19%	72%
To identify aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved *(n=138)*	19%	20%	61%
To provide information to the DES *(n=139)*	9%	28%	63%

8.6.1 Using the results of standardised tests to support teaching and learning

91% of teachers believe that standardised tests are suitable to be used in identifying pupils who have learning difficulties. This correlates with the historical use of standardised tests in primary education in Ireland, which was to identify those pupils who were to be allocated additional learning support in the areas of English and Mathematics. 90% of teachers also believe that these tests are well suited to the

task of informing other teachers about pupils' progress. This seems to indicate that most teachers believe that standardised tests present a fair reflection of their pupils' attainment. The results of standardised tests are also included on pupil report cards. Yet, 44% of teachers believe that standardised tests are not well suited to informing pupils about their progress. This displays that some teachers hold a certain ambiguity as to the appropriateness of using standardised tests for formative purposes with their pupils. The literature review in Chapter 2 presents many issues with the use of standardised tests (2.3.2). A number of researchers have contested the objectivity of standardised tests, while others also argue that standardised tests distort curricula as they lead to a narrowing of what is taught in schools.

8.6.2 Using standardised tests to evaluate the system

Regarding the use of standardised tests to evaluate the system as a whole, 63% of teachers believe that these tests can provide information to the DES and 67% feel that they can be used to compare the school to national performance. However, a sizeable proportion of teachers (38% and 32% respectively) are either unsure or think that standardised tests do not achieve these purposes. A Foucauldian approach would question the use of standardised tests to evaluate the system. Foucault offers the theory of governmentality which is the art of managing the 'conduct of conduct'. He argues that power is exercised and internalised by subjects through disciplinary mechanisms that reflect and regulate the norms of conduct and behaviour. One such mechanism for Foucault would be the standardised test. Foucault argues that power relations are internalised by subjects and are not scrutinised or examined as the subjects are unaware that they have been internalised. He also avers that "the

instruments of government, instead of being laws, now come to be a range of multiform tactics" (1991a, p.95). These tactics include social control mechanisms. Ball argues that the discourse of management is a key feature of the current reform of education. He argues that the promotion of self-management, such as devolved organisation and school self evaluation, articulates self-regulation with a "microtechnology of control" (1994, p.66). This technique aims to create a situation where school management internalises the judgement criteria provided by the government. This is a modern equivalent of Foucault's theory of disciplinary mechanisms. It can be argued that the introduction of standardised tests to evaluate the primary education system is a social control mechanism, which is constituent of the art of governmentality (1.2.1.3). This mechanism is part of a reform agenda in primary education, which is analysed in the next section.

8.7 Reforms in primary education – how teachers mediate policy

As outlined previously there have been a number of changes in primary education in Ireland in recent years. Many of these were included in the literacy and numeracy plan. Table 13 displays whether these changes have occurred in these participants' schools.

Table 13 Recent changes in primary education

	Yes	Unsure	No
Increased tuition time for literacy and numeracy *(n=135)*	87%	1%	12%
Decreased tuition time for other subjects *(n=120)*	44%	1%	54%
Implementing School Improvement Plan *(n=126)*	84%	2%	14%
Use of Aistear plan for Infant classes *(n=124)*	58%	8%	34%
Increased use of standardised tests *(n=130)*	30%	3%	67%
Changes in reporting to parents *(n=134)*	60%	2%	37%
Changing the provision of SEN *(n=125)*	59%	6%	35%

8.7.1 First order effects of assessment policy change in Ireland

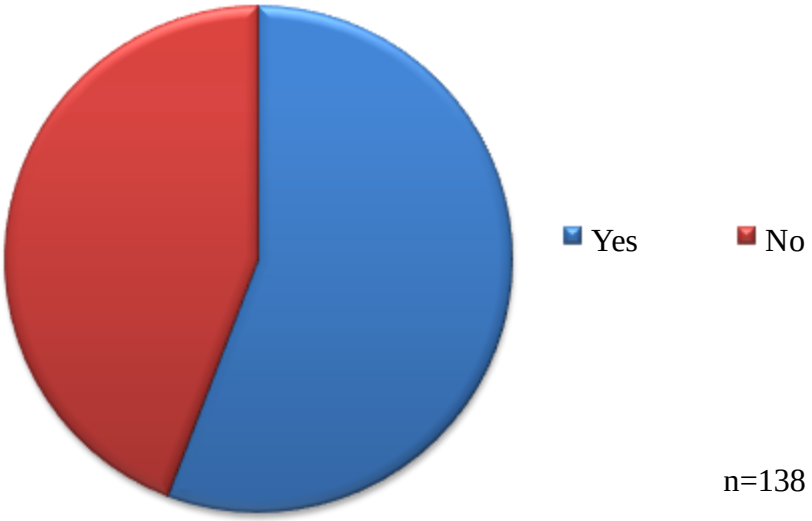
Ball distinguishes between first order and second order effects of policy (3.2.2). First order effects relate to changes on practice or structure. Second order effects refer to the impact of these changes on patterns of social access, opportunity and social justice (1994, p.26-26). There have been clear first order effects of the literacy and numeracy strategy. 87% of teachers acknowledge that the tuition time for literacy and numeracy has been increased. This stipulation was contained in the first circular that the Department sent to schools regarding the literacy and numeracy strategy. 44% of teachers state that the tuition time for other subjects has decreased. This was a fear that was mentioned by a number of stakeholders when the strategy was being developed (6.3.2.2). The Revised Primary School Curriculum was widely welcomed when it was published in 1999 due to its holistic nature and the balance of subject areas. The nature and impact of these decreases in tuition time is an area in need of further investigation.

The schools included in this survey have also implemented School Self Evaluation with 84% of teachers aware of the School Improvement Plan. 30% of teachers surveyed indicated that there was an increase in the use of standardised tests. The nature and frequency of this increase warrants further examination. However, 67% state that there was no increase in standardised testing in their schools. This is an interesting finding as an increase in standardised testing was mandated by the DES as part of the literacy and numeracy strategy. The most likely explanation is that the extra mandated point of testing (4th class) is already happening in most of these primary schools. Section 8.3.2 shows that over 80% of respondents administer standardised tests at every point of the primary cycle from First Class. This has the potential to decrease the second order effects of this policy change as the amount of administration of standardised tests is not directly associated with the literacy and numeracy strategy.

8.7.2 Second order effects of assessment policy change in Ireland

Many of these reforms were included in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. Dr. Harold Hislop has called this document a strategy for the wider reform of the education system in Ireland (see 7.3). However, 44% of the teachers have not heard of this strategy (Graph 15).

Graph 15 Have you heard of the *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* strategy?



Due to relatively poor results in the 2003 and 2006 PISA tests, France, Germany, Norway, and Turkey have undertaken reforms of their education systems (Dobbins and Marten , 2012; Grek, 2009; Skedsmo, 2011; Gur, Celik and Ozogulu, 2012). These reforms have uniformly consisted of an increased focus on outcomes. They have also concentrated on a narrow definition of success which is linked to achievements in literacy and numeracy (3.3). A Bourdieuian perspective would argue that this defines the habitus in which *Literacy and numeracy for learning and* life was developed. For Bourdieu, habitus creates an environment where certain opinions or thoughts are valued more than others and become the dominant discourse (1.2.2.1). This leads to a situation where policy makers may not even know that they are reproducing these dominant ideas as Bourdieu argues that habitus is the source of a "series of moves which are objectively organised as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention" (1977, p.73).

Sahlberg sees these changes as part of a Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) (2011, p.175). He outlines six features of this movement and their impact on education: i) Standardisation; ii) Increased focus on literacy and numeracy; iii) Teach for predetermined results; iv) Transfer of innovation from corporate to the educational world; v) Test-based accountability policies; and vi) Increased control of schools. *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* contains features of standardisation; an increased focus on literacy and numeracy; teaching for predetermined results through assessment approaches emphasising the achievement of standards; and the increased control of schools through the School Self Evaluation initiative. The strategy does not contain test-based accountability where school performance is tied to the processes of accrediting, promoting, inspecting and rewarding or punishing schools. By not including these aspects, it can be argued that the reform agenda in Ireland has avoided the worst aspects of such changes, particularly in relation to the use of assessment, in other jurisdictions (6.3.3). However, the second order effects of the literacy and numeracy strategy on patterns of social access, opportunity and social justice should be investigated.

8.8 Continuing professional development

The literature notes the importance of continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers in the area of assessment (2.5.2 and 2.6). There have been a number of advancements in learning theory which have direct impact on pedagogy and assessment methodologies. The teachers were asked in the questionnaire to rank in order from 1 to 10 which of these agencies/partners is responsible for providing CPD in the area of assessment policy: DES, INTO, Inspectorate, Local education

centres, NCCA, PDST, School management, Teacher educators (University/College), Teachers themselves, or the Teaching Council (Table 14).

Table 14 Whose responsibility is it to provide CPD to teachers about changes in assessment policy

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th
DES *(n=139)*	61%	11%	7%	4%	2%	6%	1%	2%	4%	2%
INTO *(n=135)*	1%	3%	4%	8%	10%	8%	9%	19%	15%	24%
Inspectorate *(n=133)*	1%	15%	12%	11%	10%	10%	14%	12%	8%	8%
Local education centres *(n=136)*	4%	7%	15%	12%	19%	17%	12%	8%	5%	2%
NCCA *(n=135)*	10%	22%	19%	18%	8%	4%	10%	5%	4%	0%
PDST *(n=134)*	4%	16%	21%	23%	12%	10%	5%	5%	5%	1%
School management *(n=137)*	10%	12%	9%	8%	7%	10%	12%	12%	14%	7%
Teacher educators *(n=134)*	2%	4%	5%	7%	14%	7%	17%	15%	21%	9%
Teachers *(n=138)*	7%	6%	7%	4%	8%	15%	12%	12%	9%	21%
Teaching Council *(n=137)*	2%	7%	4%	7%	11%	13%	8%	9%	15%	24%

Research implies that the implementation of any new assessment policy must take account of teachers' conceptions of assessment in order to succeed (2.5.2). Black et al. (2006) outline three practices that need to develop for the successful implementation of AfL approaches: 1) the learner must be actively involved in the learning, and that such involvement ought to take place in social and community discourse; 2) emphasis on giving comment-only feedback on written work, with the requirement that pupils respond to the comments by further work; 3) development of peer- and self-assessment. While the literacy and numeracy strategy does mention

the importance of AfL approaches, the DES has not provided significant CPD in this area for teachers (see 6.3.3). The vast majority of teachers (61%) who participated in the questionnaire believe that it is the DES' responsibility to provide CPD in the area of changes in assessment policy. 51% of teachers rank the NCCA within their top three with regards to responsibility for providing CPD in this area. Surprisingly, 48 % of teachers rank the Teaching Council within the lowest three positions and 41% rank teachers themselves within these lowest three positions as well. Harlen and James (1997) argue that it is essential to provide continuing professional development to teachers with both formative and summative assessment approaches. This should disentangle the two and provide teachers with guidance on the type of feedback from teachers which will increase pupil motivation and ownership of their learning (2.6.4).

8.9 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of the questionnaire of 144 primary school teachers and analysed them with reference to the literature review and the theoretical frameworks based on the work of Foucault and Bourdieu. The chapter was divided into seven areas: 'Biographical information'; 'School policy'; 'Purposes of assessment'; 'Use of assessment'; 'Purpose of standardised tests'; 'Reforms in primary education'; and 'Continuing professional development'. The survey results highlight that these teachers prioritise using assessment to assist teaching and learning in their classrooms. They also demonstrate that these teachers believe that standardised tests are useful tools with which to fulfil a number of assessment purposes. However, the survey shows that there is a lack of balance between AfL

and AoL approaches. The teachers demonstrate an awareness of AoL approaches in their school policies, but are less aware of AfL methods. They rate assessment purposes that prioritise teaching and learning highly yet they do not prioritise informing pupils of their progress. This is a key characteristic for assessment to have truly formative characteristics and impact on pupils' learning (2.4.1). The fact that it is not prioritised may be as a result of a lack of CPD in the area of assessment for current teachers. This was highlighted in Chapters 4, 6 and 7.

The first level order of the 'quality agenda' identified in Chapter 7 (7.3) is demonstrated in the teachers' responses to the survey where 87% of them have increased time for literacy and numeracy and 84% have implemented a School Improvement Plan. Interestingly, 67% have not increased the use of standardised tests. This shows that there is a tradition in these Irish primary schools of administering standardised tests before the implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategy. This legacy may negate against the worst aspects of the implementation of testing regimes in other countries (teaching to the test, coaching, narrowing of the curriculum) as the practice of Irish teachers regarding standardised tests has not changed dramatically. What has changed, however, is the use to which this data is put.

CHAPTER 9 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS WITH PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS

9.1 Introduction

The topic of pupils' perspectives on assessment was examined in the literature review in Chapter 2 (2.5.3 and 2.5.4). A key motivation for including pupil perspectives in this doctoral study is that there has been an identified silence in the literature around the rights of the child and the ways in which they have been positioned by testing and accountability priorities (Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Reay and Wiliam, 1999). Craig states that research with children as participants has found "children to be more robust, articulate and willing to be heard than many adults assumed to be the case" (2003, p.41). However, the views of primary school pupils were not ascertained in the development of the literacy and numeracy strategy, a criticism noted by the NCCA (2010, p.14). My dissertation is cognisant of this silence, particularly in Irish primary education and views the data gathered during focus group interviews with children as an attempt to breach some of that silence.

This chapter examines some pupils' opinions about assessment in primary school in Ireland. Different conceptions of learning hold differing views on the role of the learner and the nature of assessment (Chapter 2). These can be summarised as follows: 1) Behaviourist-empiricist, where knowledge is seen to be external to the learner and can be transmitted through techniques such as repetition. Attainment of this knowledge can then be examined through testing or checklists. 2) Cognitive-rationalist, where knowledge is seen as something that can be acquired by the learning through a variety of learning activities based on the learner's stage of

development. Assessment involves measuring learning outcomes (e.g. standardised tests); 3) Socio-constructivist, where the learner is a constructor of knowledge and instruction is geared towards helping the student develop learning and thinking strategies. Assessment is qualitative rather than quantitative and takes the form of portfolios, authentic tasks, group projects, cooperative learning, and self-assessment; and 4) Socio-cultural, where knowledge is constructed in a relational dynamic between pupils and teacher. Assessment needs to be viewed through social and contextual factors and needs to be grounded in the relational element of learning. In the first three approaches, assessment (to varying degrees) is something that happens to the learner. In the sociocultural approach, assessment is a partnership between all of those involved in the learning process. The first two approaches (behaviourist-empiricist and cognitive-rational) view assessment as an objective data gathering exercise which measures pupils' attainment. The latter two (socio-constructivist and socio-cultural) recognise that assessment takes place in a social context and has an impact on both pupils and teachers alike. This dissertation is informed by the latter two approaches and explores the impact of assessment on primary school pupils. It utilises the focus interview approach and also participant-produced drawings to elicit the children's views. These approaches were outlined in Chapter 5. This chapter presents the findings and analysis of two focus group interviews with two separate groups of sixth class pupils from two schools (one rural primary school and one urban primary school). Both interviews were conducted with five participants, aged 11 to 12 years. The literature review highlighted a number of areas regarding the relationship between pupils and assessment that influence the analysis of the focus group interviews. These are:

- Research has demonstrated that an assessment approach that focuses on test scores and summative characteristics can lead to a pupil internalising these scores as fixed points (Wang et al, 2006; Reay and Wiliam, 1999).
- The pupils can see results of assessments as conflated with future prospects (Reay and Wiliam, 1999).
- High stakes exams lead to pressure and stress on the pupils (Smyth and Banks, 2012).
- Young people shape and reshape themselves as learners as they move through the education system, and this can happen in response to the demands of the assessment approaches utilised (Brookhart and Bronowicz, 2003).
- Children are aware of the narrowing of the curriculum to focus on literacy and numeracy due to external standardised tests (Reay and Wiliam, 1999).
- Pupils identify the affective and social purposes of assessment, as well as the cognitive purpose (Cowie, 2005; Moni et al., 2002).
- The form and nature of feedback is a key influencing factor in pupils' perceptions of assessment and their views of themselves as learners (Cowie, 2005; Smith and Godard, 2005; Moni et al., 2002).
- The quality of the feedback provided is crucial for pupil progress (Smith and Godard, 2005).

This chapter refers to these insights from the literature and also utilises the theoretical lens based on the work of Foucault and Bourdieu (as outlined in Chapter 1) to analyse the findings. After coding the interviews, five main themes emerged: 'Purposes of assessment: formative and summative'; 'The role of the pupil in

assessment'; 'The role of the teacher in assessment'; 'Feedback on assessment for pupils'; and 'The ordering of school subjects through assessment'.

9.2 Purposes of assessment: formative and summative – pupils identify teacher priorities

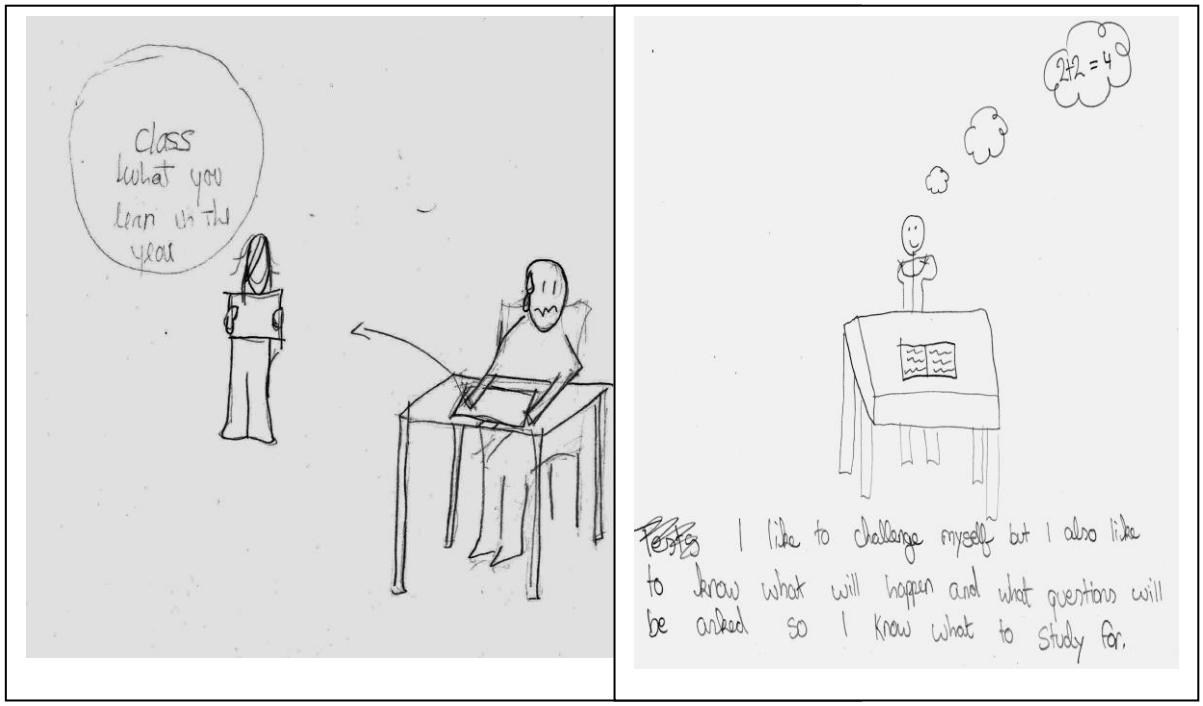
The strategy, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*, identifies two approaches to assessment: i) assessment for learning, where teachers use information "to plan the next steps in their teaching and their students' learning" (DES, 2011, p.74); and ii) assessment of learning, which is ascertaining and reporting pupils' progress to date (*ibid.*). These have been aligned with formative (AfL) and summative assessment (AoL) (see Chapter 2). During, the focus group interviews, I was surprised by the pupils' nuanced view of assessment in the primary school. I had believed that the pupils would focus their answers on the impact that assessment strategies had on them personally, but these pupils also identified the effect assessment had on the teachers, the teachers relations with the pupils and the peer dynamic in the classroom. The pupils were forthcoming in how they sought information about their learning from assessment results, and they also commented on the summative purpose of assessment as well as both the various uses and users of this information. The next section explores pupils' perspectives of formative assessment.

9.2.1 Pupils' perspectives on formative assessment

Pupil: "*If you didn't have tests you wouldn't know how high, like, your standard in school. Like I think tests are good because the teachers would assess you from the tests and like help you like where you need help. Say now you were getting low in tests, she'd help you with more like than if you were doing better in tests*."

In both focus group interviews the pupils highlighted the importance to them of assessment for learning approaches. I presented the pupils with three tools, each representing a different type of assessment: a spelling book, representing weekly tests; a mathematics assessment book, representing end-of-term tests; and standardised tests, representing annual assessment. All of the pupils interviewed stated that they preferred either weekly or monthly tests, with a large majority (seven out of ten) expressing a preference for weekly tests. The main reason that the children gave for this was because they wanted information about how they were learning and it also provided them with the opportunity to revise more often. The pupils all discussed the importance of assessing their learning at regular intervals and receiving support from the teacher if they were having difficulty in any particular area: "*if we're doing Maths, and we did a test, and somebody was stuck on like dividing, and then she'd know to go over that certain thing again with us to like maybe even an individual lesson*". An interesting facet of these interviews is that, while the pupils highlight the essential formative purpose of assessment, they do not name any formative assessment methods such as peer assessment, self assessment or portfolios. Their conception of assessment after eight years in primary school is based on tests – regardless of the type (oral or written) or timescale (daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly). This is an area to which I will return in a further section

examining the role of the pupil. The pupils also view assessment as an individual enterprise. This can be most clearly demonstrated in their drawings.



Pupil: "*In a test you wouldn't really think about who's next to you, you just focus on your own thing"*.

The pupils explained that they are usually seated in rows or groups in primary school. But during assessments, such as tests, they may be seated apart from one another – "*there's this gap between us in tests*". Sometimes there is no gap or change in the seating arrangements but "*it kind of feels like that in a way*". Developments in learning theory in recent years point to the importance of a sociocultural approach to assessment. The work of Vygotsky is particularly influential in this perspective (2.4). Vygotsky's work opposes the view that assessments can examine students based on their individual performance on a given day. He believes that a truer indication of a student's ability was his/her facility when assisted by another – what Vygotsky terms the zone of proximal development. Assessment in this outlook should not be an individual enterprise isolated to the

result of an examination administered on one particular day. It should be an on-going, relational process between the student and teacher. The key idea is that the result of the collaboration is the best result of which the student is capable. Assessment is not an external or formalised activity, but rather it is integral to the teaching process. The pupils in these interviews relate assessment as an individual enterprise, which is based on a behaviourist-empiricist or a cognitive-rationalist perspective of teaching and learning. The pupils believe the reason for this is so that they do not cheat – "*Teachers think that we copy*". This will be explored further in a later section of this chapter.

These drawings also demonstrate an affective element of assessment, which can have a large impact on a child's formative years in primary school. Recent studies have found that pupils' identity as learners can be constructed in the assessment process (Devine, 2003; Reay and Wiliam, 1999 – see section 2.4). Wenger (1998) argues that identity is negotiated in social contexts through a constant process which relates the local to the global. A pupil's identity is not a static characteristic. Instead it is formed and transformed through the pupil's interactions with his/her teachers and classmates, influenced by the classroom dynamic and environment and moulded by the pupil's participation in a variety of assessment techniques. The process of identity forming is an active part of a pupil's time in school. Research has shown that young people shape and reshape themselves as learners as they move through the education system, and this can happen in response to the demands of the assessment approaches utilised (Brookhart and Bronowicz, 2003 – see 2.5.3). The importance of a teacher's understanding and explanation of assessment cannot be overstated in its impact on pupils. This is analysed in Chapter

8 (8.4.4). The next subsection of this chapter identifies pupils' perspectives on summative assessment.

9.2.2 Pupils' perspectives on summative assessment

The pupils identified a dual purpose of summative assessment, in particular standardised tests, as ascertaining the quality of the teaching as well as the pupils' own performance. The pupils also believe that summative assessment is what the teachers value the most. When asked which assessment methods did they believe that the teachers felt were most important, nine out of ten pupils replied the standardised tests. The pupils give three reasons as to why they believe that teachers view these tests as priority items: 1) the teacher tells the pupils that they are important – "*it must be really important if they want us to try really hard in it*"; 2) standardised tests are given more time than other tests – "*the other ones take half an hour, an hour. These ones could take a whole day or half a day*"; and 3) the results of standardised tests are reported directly to their parents – "*they don't show you, they tell your parents*". The *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* strategy has mandated the administration of standardised tests at 2nd, 4th and 6th class in primary school. These results are now reported to each school's Board of Management and the DES. This has the potential to make these tests more valuable or 'high stakes' in the eyes of pupils, teachers and parents.

Research has found that the introduction of state-based examinations in a number of jurisdictions lead to a discernible teaching to the test effect (see 2.5.1). This is true even in situations where the exams are low stakes for schools and teachers as there are no sanctions linked to them, and are low stakes for pupils as

exam grades are based on outcomes of exit exams. When exams are introduced on a state-wide level, teachers narrow the curriculum to concentrate on those items included in the exam. The pupils interviewed in these focus group interviews believe that teachers view standardised tests as the most important tests. These pupils also state that there is no formative purpose to them as the results are related to their parents. The focus group interviews highlight the pupils' frustrations with summative assessments, in particular standardised tests. The pupils feel no sense of agency regarding these assessments as the teacher is in control of their administration and the results are passed to their parents, bypassing them. Proponents of standardised tests point to their objective nature. However, these pupils demonstrate that the administration of standardised tests is not an objective, value-free exercise. These tests are based on a particular view of learning, in which relational or contextual factors are underdeveloped. The pupils in the focus group interviews speak of their emotional response to these tests and their sense of a lack of involvement or ownership. This impacts on their sense of selves as learners as it teaches the children that the most important people in the administration of this assessment technique are the teachers (who administer the test – including disciplinary techniques such as time management and seating arrangements) and their parents (who receive the test results instead of the pupils). Teachers' perspectives on the purpose and use of standardised tests is analysed in Chapter 8. Interestingly, 91% of teachers believe that standardised tests are suitable to be used in identifying pupils who have learning difficulties, yet 44% believe that standardised tests are not well suited to informing pupils about their progress. This displays that some teachers hold a certain ambiguity as to the appropriateness of using standardised tests for formative purposes with their pupils (8.6.1).

As well as the pupils themselves, they named a number of stakeholders who would be interested in the results of summative assessments without prompting from the interviewer. These included teachers, principals, Boards of Management, secondary schools, test designers, the Department of Education and the Minister for Education. The following extract outlines one group's understanding of the use of standardised tests at national level:

"***Alan Sheehan (AS):*** *Do you think that the Minister for Education would look at Pupil 4's results?*

Pupil 5 (P5): *No, no, no...*

Pupil 3 (P3): *Not...*

Pupil 4 (P4): *I'd say they wouldn't really look at our names, I just think how children in Ireland are getting on.*

P5: *Not...*

P3: *They wouldn't look at your name, they might look at your name and then take down your score but they wouldn't take your name as...*

AS: *Do you think that they'd look at (school name)?*

P5: *No I think that they'd look at Cork.*

P3: *I'd say Cork yeah. Or Tipperary.*

P5: *They'd look at different counties like, so I think they'd look at all like Cork schools' results and...*

P3: *Yeah.*

P5: *...and do the averages for Cork.*

AS: *Do you think that they compare schools in Cork?*

P5: *Yes.*

AS: *So say that (school's name) is better than (neighbouring school)?*

All: *No.*

Pupil 1 (P1): *Well we are better! (Laughter)*

P5: *I'd say they'd like compare different counties.*

P3: *Yeah, I was about to say that...*

P5: *Like Cork...*

P3: *Like Cork and Clare.*

P5: *...are better than Dublin. Then they'd go to Dublin...*

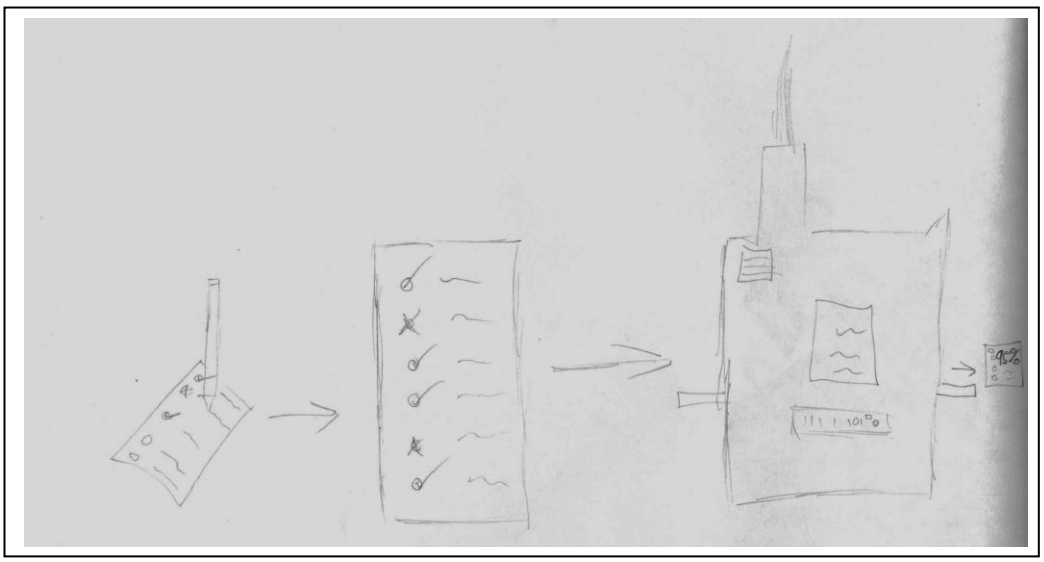
P3: *And try to fix that a bit.*

P5: *...yeah.*

P4: *Or if your result is in the bottom 20% or in the top 20%, they'd want to know that.*"

9.2.2.1 The assessment machine

The focus group interviews demonstrate that these sixth class pupils are aware that results in standardised tests are not only used for their learning purposes but hold an accountability purpose also (Eivers, 2010; Resnik, 2006). As outlined in the above extract, the pupils do not feel that their own personal results are examined by national officials but that aggregates are investigated. One pupil drew his interpretation of a standardised test as being comparable to a machine. What is notable here is the lack of human interaction with the testing process.



Pupil: "*I drew someone filling in their tests, then the test completely answered goes into a machine and then it comes out with their grade*".

This drawing demonstrates that the pupil is familiar with a behaviourist-empiricist or cognitive-rationalist theory of learning and approach to assessment. The machine demonstrates these approaches belief in the objectivity of assessment. In this approach, assessment is a value free enterprise that can ascertain the attainment of pupils in various subject areas. However, a socio-constructivist view would question the approach as demonstrated in this drawing. In a socio-constructivist view, the learner should be an active agent in assessment, not a passive object to be summarily graded. A socio-cultural perspective would criticise the implicit assumptions on assessment that this pupil has encountered. This perspective would question the historical and social origins for the assessment machine and examine its purpose and functions. It would highlight the relational element of assessment. If this pupil had encountered an educational system based on a socio-cultural theory of learning, it is probable that, in place of the machine, the pupil would have focused on drawing him/herself along with the other pupils in the class and the teacher engaged in an activity to assess their learning.

The drawing can also be critiqued from a Foucauldian perspective. In the image, the agents of power/judgement have been removed and replaced by a machine. The machine makes it appear as if the judgement is neutral and objective and should be accepted as a verifiable fact. The pupil is a passive recipient of this judgement and internalises it. The use of objective judgement as a disciplinary technique is a key insight from Foucault's work. He (1975) argues that it is a disciplinary tool of the state to produce the 'correct' type of subjects. He describes the notion of the Panopticon, where a central tower is surrounded by walls containing prison cells. The prisoners cannot see where the guard is located in the central tower and there is the possibility that they are always under observation. The

prisoners internalised the 'correct' behaviours through the permanent surveillance technique. Similarly, with the drawing of the assessment machine, there is no single person present to ensure compliance with the norms (e.g. teacher to grade the test). The machine implies that there is an accepted standard or norm providing criteria for judgement. These norms are internalised by the subject (in this case the pupil). The pupil is created by these norms as he/she interacts with them, is compared to them and internalises them (see 1.2.1.2). These tests occur in most schools on a yearly basis (INTO, 2008). Each pupil is compared with the norms contained within them and internalises these expectations.

The pupils are conscious of the fact that the results of their standardised tests are also used to evaluate schools on a national level. They also assert that these tests are the most important to their teachers. A Foucauldian analysis would indicate that the use of standardised tests to compare schools on a national level is an example of the art of governmentality (1.2.1.3). Governmentality entails "any attempt to shape with some degree of deliberation aspects of our behaviour according to particular sets or norms and for a variety of ways" (Dean, 2010, p.18). This conception examines the type of governing authority, the means of calculation, the entity to be governed and how it is conceived, the ends sought and the outcomes and consequences. In this situation the governing authorities include the DES, the school and the teacher. The DES has implemented a regime of calculation (the use of standardised tests) for its own purposes (evaluation of the system). The school and teacher implement these tests and may use the results for other purposes (reporting to parents; allocating pupils to learning support). The entities to be governed are the school, the teacher and the pupil. The school is governed by the DES through the reporting of the results of the standardised tests and the quest to improve these

results. The teacher is governed by the fact that these results are reported to the school's Board of Management and may be used to compare teacher performance. The pupil is governed by both the DES and the school in their completion of these tests in which they are compared to a standard and normalised. This theme of governmentality is also identified in Chapter 6 and 7. The DES has instigated this process in order to achieve 'higher standards' in literacy and numeracy (2011). The consequences are as yet unknown. Foucault's theory of governmentality concerns not only practices of government, but practices of the self. It encompasses not only how we exercise authority over others, but also how we govern ourselves. In this perspective, power is a creative force. While the government gives shape to freedom, the governed are free in that they are actors. How primary school pupils react and enact these reforms in assessment policy is of particular interest to this doctorate. The next section examines this further.

9.3 The role of the pupil in assessment – to be acted upon, not engaged in partnership

The pupils in these focus group interviews demonstrate a traditional view of the pupils' role in assessment. For them, tests are given by the teachers and their responsibility is to revise for them and try to do as well as possible. These pupils do not discuss a partnership approach to assessment – to be involved in what is assessed or how. As outlined previously, a number of their drawings depict the pupil by him/herself when completing a test. They view assessment as an exercise to be undertaken in isolation – alone within the group. The pupils outline that the teachers' role in assessment is essentially one of judgement. This judgement has

both behavioural and academic connotations. During assessment, the pupils believe that they are separated from each other so that they do not cheat – "*If you're in sixth you sit next to each other and then there is a separate table then so that you can't look into each others' copy*". The teacher in this interpretation is the teacher-judge, surveilling and regulating the pupils' behaviour. The pupil has a passive role in this account. The teacher also uses assessment information for academic judgement by comparing pupils to norms and standards. Foucault's genealogical approach demonstrates how disciplinary mechanisms have led to norms being internalised by subjects (Foucault, 1975). In education, this includes choosing the content from the curriculum, organising the classroom (including seating arrangement and the positioning of furniture), timetabling the various curricular areas and activities of the school day, and choosing what to assess and how to assess it. This process is not neutral. By so doing, the teacher works through a norm, normalising whilst categorising. The teacher does this through a variety of assessment methodologies including tests and observation. Foucault avers that subjects then internalise the power relations of the state through a process of normalisation – by comparing oneself with what they should be like (1.2.1.2). This has led to the growth of objective and standardised tests and the development of phrases such as 'atypical development'. Research (McDermott, 2001) has demonstrated that a child can be identified as learning disabled through the educational context in which he finds himself. McDermott attributes learning disability to a deficit theory within the educational system in which the system categorises and creates these disabilities through assessment procedures. Other research (McCoy at al., 2012; Espinosa, 2005) demonstrates a large variation in children's results in standardised tests due to their cultural or socioeconomic background, and that these children are also more

likely to be identified as having learning disabilities or behavioural problems (see 2.5.4).

9.3.1 Assessment as a normalising instrument

It is instructive to hear the pupils' voices from the focus groups for when they are having difficulty in a subject area. One pupil states that one of his fellow interviewees is "*just one of the slow workers*". This demonstrates the fact that classmates are aware of each others' abilities. It also reveals that primary school pupils utilise language of the deficit model of education, which is described in the previous section. By classifying the classmate as a "slow worker", this pupil has a belief that there is a norm or standard by which everyone should work or learn. Similarly, some pupils state that it is annoying when the teacher is helping someone who is experiencing difficulty: "*She'd be there for ten minutes explaining the thing and we'd be like "Miss, it's kind of like, it's near enough to lunch time and we need to get this done". And then sometimes that just cuts into our lunch time and our break time*". This demonstrates quite an individualistic approach in this classroom to teaching and learning, and to time management. These pupils are anxious to "get this done" and are frustrated by the fact that the teacher is assisting a pupil who is experiencing difficulty. It also demonstrates a view of learning that is distinct from the learner, the sense of engagement is not to the topic being taught but to the time being invested in it.

Research shows that the classroom environment can change as a result of the assessment procedures which are utilised (see 2.5.3). Pupils can identify the manner in which some tests displace a mutually supportive collaborative environment with a

more individualised, competitive way of working (Reay and Wiliam, 1999). It would be worthy to investigate whether this has happened in an Irish context since the introduction of mandated standardised testing. The pupils also recognise that there are pupils who receive extra support – "*there is a resource teacher and she's sending some people out because they need help*". Some of the pupils participating in the focus group interview were attending learning support: "*Me and Pupil 3 and Pupil 2 also have to come downstairs for Maths because we're not good at Maths*". In these instances, the language that the pupils use is passive – they are being acted upon (sending out, have to come downstairs). These pupils are withdrawn from their class which must serve to highlight the difficulties that they are experiencing in a curricular area. The pupils who are receiving the support identify themselves as having difficulties and state this is an all-encompassing manner – "*we're not good at Maths*". They do not state that they are having difficulties with computation or word problems or aspects of measure. The role that assessment plays in identifying pupils in need of learning support has ethical implications (Elwood and Lundy, 2010), which require further consideration at a national level.

These are clear examples of Foucault's notion of the internalisation of power relations. This data highlights assessment's role as a disciplinary technique for these children. The teacher controls the time, the activity and the conceptualisation of pupils' abilities as learners. Assessment (in their conceptualisation of it as described in these interviews) is something that is enacted upon the pupils, they do not state that they have a role to play in it besides completing the tests to the best of their ability. Foucault argues that the state exerts control by internalising power relations in its subjects. This is done by control of the body through the distribution of

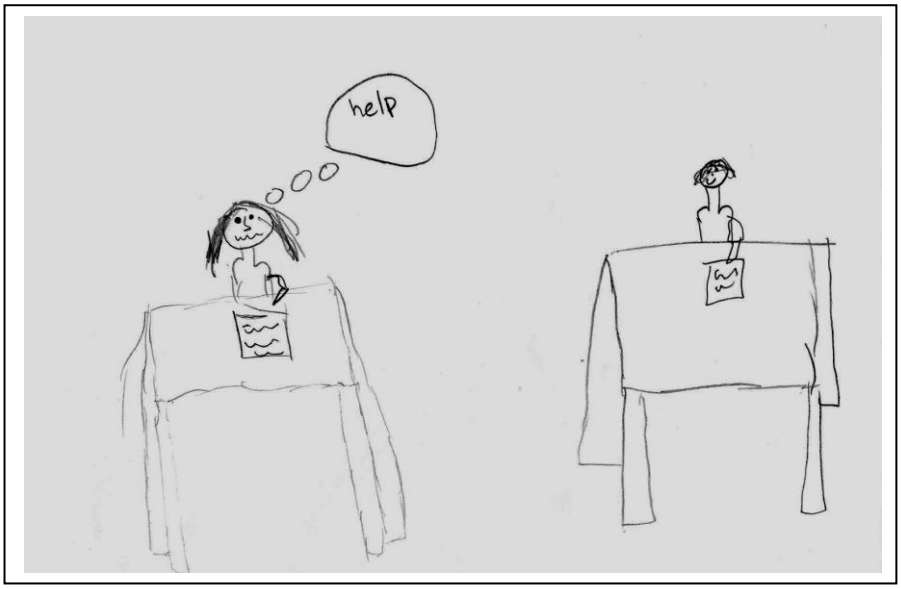
individuals in space; the control of activity through the manipulation of time and the instruction of the correct relation between body and gesture; and instilling the means of correct training through hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and examination (Foucault, 1975). In education, this includes choosing the content from the curriculum, organising the classroom (including seating arrangement and the positioning of furniture), timetabling the various curricular areas and activities of the school day, and choosing what to assess and how to assess it (See Chapter 2). Table 15 uses quotes from the pupils about their experiences of assessment to demonstrate Foucault's theorisation of the examination as a disciplinary technique.

Table 15 Examples of Foucault's theorisation of the examination as a disciplinary technique

Aspect of Foucault's Theory	**Pupils' Comments**
Docile Bodies	"*there is a resource teacher and she's sending some people out because they need help*" "*I just dislike the fact that they tell you something to bribe you. They keep going on to me, like they'd say to me "If you don't do this you'll never become a physiotherapist" or anything like that that you want to become with your life*".
Normalisation	*"If you didn't have tests you wouldn't know how high, like, your standard in school"* *The results are usually done by averages like. Like the result of last year is more than likely put into the average this year. So then like if that class gets below it they'll know what teacher was doing."* "*just one of the slow workers*"
Use of Space	"*If you're in sixth you sit next to each other and then there is a separate table then so that you can't look into each others' copy*" "*Me and Pupil 3 and Pupil 2 also have to come downstairs for Maths because we're not good at Maths*" "*there's this gap between us in tests*"
Use of Time	"*She'd be there for ten minutes explaining the thing and we'd be like "Miss, it's kind of like, it's near enough to lunch time and we need to get this done". And then sometimes that just cuts into our lunch time and our break time*". "*I am annoyed because I don't have enough time to finish the test*" *They'd be like cutting the time all the time. They'd be like "ten minutes left" and they'd be like, just walking around the classroom, "five minutes left"*

9.3.2 The consequential validity of assessment

A number of researchers have demonstrated that pupils identify the affective and social purposes of assessment, as well as the cognitive purpose (Cowie, 2005; Moni et al., 2002 – see 2.5.3)). A key theme that is identified by the pupils is the affective purpose of assessment. This can be demonstrated in the following drawing:



Pupil: "*I've done a person that's saying "Help" because she's stressed out and another person just there all happy and he can do his test*".

This drawing emphasises the insular nature of assessment for these pupils. The children are seated by themselves and are completing the assignment individually. It is an individual enterprise (or struggle) to complete the test, which is clearly displayed by the internal thoughts of one pupil (*help*). Their physical demeanour in the drawing also demonstrates their emotional state. Assessment in this guise is not a shared activity where pupils and teacher work together in mutual collaboration. During the interviews, the pupils relate a variety of emotions concerning tests. Some state that they are happy when they are doing exams because they know the answers or they like finding out how they achieved – "*I was kind of excited because I wanted*

to know what I did like what I got on my Drumcondra test". Others report more negative emotions. Smyth and Banks (2012) found that high stakes exams lead to pressure and stress on the pupils (2.5.3). These sixth class pupils report similar feelings both before and after the tests. One pupil comments that "*you don't know what to study for you'd be so nervous. You'd like to know what's on the test*". A number of pupils report worrying about the results of standardised tests, naming feelings of fear and embarrassment – "*I feel a bit scared about how it is going to be*". Other pupils express their feelings of stress when a test is timed. These pupils feel that they would achieve better in the test if they were given more time and are very frustrated by the teachers' role in administering the tests: "*I am annoyed because I don't have enough time to finish the test*". I will return to the teachers' role in administering tests in the next section. These feelings of fear, embarrassment and frustration highlight the issue of the consequential validity of assessments.

Consequential validity refers to the effects of assessment or testing on the teaching and learning context and the social consequences of the use of assessment information (2.3.2). Assessment methods, such as standardised tests, based in the cognitive-rationalist approach have been criticised based on their consequential validity (Elwood and Lundy, 2010; Sambell et al, 1997). Any assessment technique can have an emotional affect on pupils. However, these researchers emphasise the need for test designers to be aware of consequential validity whilst developing tests. They also highlight the problems that arise when tests are utilised for reasons for which they were not designed. In an Irish context, this could include the recent use of standardised tests to evaluate the primary school system. These tests were not designed with this purpose in mind. The consequential validity of these tests could change if they are perceived to be high stakes by the pupils and teachers and this is

an area which would benefit from further research. Another element of consequential validity is the social purpose of assessment, which is explored in the next section.

The pupils are also aware of and highly concerned with the social purpose of assessment. They understand that assessment can be used for selection and certification purposes and that this can impact on themselves and their relations with their peers. They identify a number of users of assessment information. They identify the Department of Education and the Minister for Education and Skills as using assessment information to evaluate the education system as a whole. They also state that Boards of Managements use this information to examine teacher performance. Both focus groups discuss completing *"entrance exams"* for secondary school. They associate these exams with entry in to their preferred secondary schools. Entrance examinations or selection examinations for secondary schools are prohibited in Ireland by the DES since 1985. However, in some areas around the country some secondary schools still administer tests of primary school pupils before entry to secondary school (*Irish Examiner*, April 24th 2014). The pupils interviewed in these focus group interviews live in these areas. These assessments are no longer called 'entrance exams' but are now termed 'aptitude tests'. Enrolment is not offered on the basis of the results of these exams but they can be used to stream pupils. The language used by the pupils (entrance exam as opposed to aptitude tests) demonstrates the surviving legacy of a previous discourse of assessment. Foucault argues that the history of a concept, such as assessment, is not of its progressive refinement or increasing rationality, but that there are displacements and transformations in their development. The historical artefact lives on with the newer policy and interacts with it, creating something unexpected by

policy-makers in the process. The assessments for secondary school were very important for the pupils as they constitute the first impression that the secondary school teachers get of them. They were also aware of their importance as they were prepared for them by the teachers – even down to small groups who were completing entrance exams for a secondary school other than the rest of their classmates:

P5: *In our entrance exam, the three of us are going to (secondary school), most entrance exams don't have Irish but we did have Irish for ours.*

AS: *And did teacher prepare ye then?*

P5: *She gave it to all of us.*

P3: *At two o'clock every day the front row did Irish, that's us and one more.*

P1: *And she split the class.*

The pupils also acknowledge the social impact of assessment on their conceptions of themselves as learners and on the peer dynamic within the classroom. One pupil recounted an experience regarding a Maths result: "*For my Maths I didn't really get a good score at all, it was 56 and they were all like "ha ha I got 70" and stuff*". Another pupil agreed stating that "*I kind of find it really annoying because people don't stop for about two weeks or so, especially if it is a really bad score*". Research has also demonstrated that an assessment approach that focuses on test scores and summative characteristics can lead to a pupil internalising these scores as fixed points (2.5.3). Pupils relate themselves to these scores, "I'm a 6 in Maths'. Such an approach hampers a pupil's potential to improve as they may believe that the score is as good as they will ever be. This also can lead to a teacher assuming that the child's current level cannot be improved upon, and to teach the child with these expectations in mind. This creates a cycle where the pupil can identify that the teacher expects less of him/her than another pupil and so responds accordingly.

Such an approach can lead to a pupil viewing their ability as fixed and static, instead of something that is adjustable and can improve through effort. The pupils can also see these results as conflated with future prospects (Reay and Wiliam, 1999). Bourdieu argues that examinations impact on a person's self image and, indeed, can create a person's identity as a learner (1.2.2.2). He states that "academic qualifications are to cultural capital what money is to economic capital" (1977, p.187) and argues that the unequal distribution of cultural capital makes people think that they deserve to be in the position in which they find themselves. He believes that examination provides one of the most efficacious tools for inculcating the dominant culture and the value of that culture. Bourdieu asserts that those from working class backgrounds 'eliminate themselves' from examination. He summarises this argument by stating that

> "When one knows how much examiners' judgements owe to implicit norms which retranslate and specify the values of the dominant classes in terms of the logic proper to the education system, it is clear that candidates are handicapped in proportion to the distance between these values and those of their class origin" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p.162).

The next section explores pupils' understanding of the teacher's role in assessment.

9.4 The role of the teacher in assessment – the normalising judge

A number of commentators have stated that any new policy or strategy depends on teacher support to be implemented effectively (Levin, 2010; NCCA, 2010; Ball, 1994). *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* is no different. Teachers mediate national policies in their classrooms. One teacher might put more of an emphasis on a certain subject or methodology than their colleague in the

classroom next door. The pupils in the focus group interview were acutely aware of this point when it came to assessment strategies being utilised in their schools. The pupils stated that some teachers assess pupils more than others. In both of the focus group interviews, the teachers were the central agents in the assessment process – they were responsible for what was assessed and when. The pupils identified that there were universal weekly spelling tests, but there were widespread differences amongst teachers when it came to weekly mathematics tests. Some teachers administered daily tests. Both of these schools have assessment policies yet teachers have a liberal amount of freedom with regards to the timing, number and type of assessment they employ in their classroom. Both sets of pupils felt that the teachers thought that the standardised tests were the most important. This is a troublesome finding as other research demonstrates how pupils have differing conceptions of themselves when they are assessed using different methods. When pupils assess their own work, effort is identified as the most important factor. However, when it comes to standardised tests, pupils are aware that 'achieving' is the required outcome (Robinson and Fielding, 2010 – see 2.5.3). The pupils in these focus groups believe that standardised tests can be used to judge teachers, which is why teachers place such an importance on them. This is demonstrated in the following extract:

"***Pupil 4 (P4):*** *I think the people who make out that assessments want the results back and the teachers want them to be impressed with our class' results because she taught us throughout the year.*

AS: *Ok. So do you think these are assessing how the teachers are doing?*

Pupil 2 (P2): *A little bit yeah.*

Pupil 3 (P3): *Yeah.*

Pupil 5 (P5): *Yeah kind of. Like if you get really bad results they'd be like "God what's the teacher teaching you" like.*

P4: *"I guess she didn't go over that enough with us".*

AS: *Who assesses what the teachers are doing?*

P5: *The results are usually done by averages like. Like the result of last year is more than likely put into the average this year. So then like if that class gets below it they'll know what teacher was doing*."

9.4.1 Teachers' use of standardised tests

Both sets of interviewees also reported that the teacher prepared the pupils for the standardised tests, in one instance beforehand: "*when the teacher told us we were doing this, she told us all the whole week to revise Maths, revise your spellings all the time*"; and in the other instance during the test: "*in the Drumcondra, apparently a lot of us got a question wrong and she was like "just keep checking over your answers". She said that every two minutes*". Research has shown that the imposition of large-scale testing can have negative repercussions for education (see Chapter 2). When exams are introduced on a state-wide level, teachers narrow the curriculum to concentrate on those items included in the exam. This includes a tendency to leave aside topics relevant to everyday life and a failure to consider the interests of the pupils in the class. It also led to time spent on coaching and practice. As well as producing the narrowing of curriculum effects, these exams also led to higher order thinking skills being neglected and a growth of a testing industry (2.5.1). Research also demonstrates that there is cultural bias in the test items in standardised tests (2.3.2).

The children interviewed in these focus groups experienced some of these effects: they were instructed to revise various areas ("*the whole week to revise Maths, revise your spellings all the time"*) and they were coached during the test ("*apparently a lot of us got a question wrong and she was like "just keep checking*

over your answers"). The administration of some standardised tests explains that no guidance should be given before or during tests as this would invalidate them. Further research is required to ascertain whether teachers are providing preparation before or guidance during standardised tests in primary schools in Ireland. It is also advisable to investigate whether other negative repercussions of the implementation of large-scale testing are becoming apparent in Irish primary education. A Bourdieuian outlook criticises this phenomenon as it rewards those pupils who have access to the particular cultural capital contained within these tests and excludes other children. Bourdieu argues that relations of domination are made, unmade and remade in and by the interactions between persons, and through social formations, such as schooling (see 1.2.2). Standardised tests reward pupils with the cultural capital contained within them (and similar to that of the test designers). They discriminate against those from a different cultural background and the unequal distribution of cultural capital can, according to Bourdieu, make people think that they deserve to be in the position in which they find themselves.

9.4.2 Teacher as the prime agent in assessment procedures

The pupils regard the teachers as the principal agent in assessment practices that they have encountered in primary school. No participant mentioned self assessment or peer assessment during the focus group interviews. The administration of tests was highly contentious for one focus group as they felt that they could achieve better results if they were given more time. The following is an extract from that interview:

"***AS:*** *Ok. And tell me about the time – "two minutes left"...*

Pupil 1 (P1): *You don't get a lot of time.*

Pupil 5 (P5): *Yeah you don't get a lot of time like. Sometimes you don't get enough time to do stuff. They'd say like "five minutes left" and then like two minutes later they'd say "only two minutes left".*

P1: *They'd be like cutting the time all the time. They'd be like "ten minutes left" and they'd be like, just walking around the classroom, "five minutes left"*

P5: *There should be a timer.*

Pupil 3 (P3): *Yeah sometimes they don't pay attention to the clock and just shout out a time, roughly.*

AS: *And how does that make you feel then?*

P5: *Annoyed.*

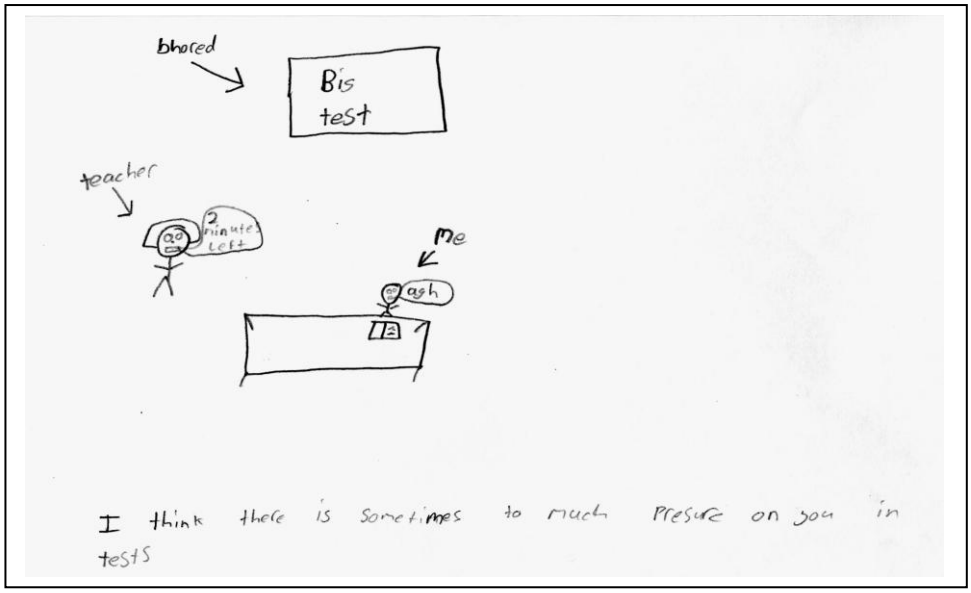
P3: *If they had a thing on their arm, say...*

P5: *A watch!*

P3: *No like say a timer and then the alarm would go off when it is over. Like we just have to clock roughly.*

P1: *But then for the Drumcondra test they do like all the time you need. But for normal tests you don't*".

This association of assessment as a disciplinary mechanism involving time and control was summarised in Table 15 previously. It can also be demonstrated in the following pupil drawing:



Pupil: "*I drew a picture of me sitting at the table with like the test in front of me and then the teacher says, "Only two minutes left" and I'm like "Aaah!"*"

Foucault's genealogical approach theorises that power relations became invisible and internal in the subjects through disciplinary mechanisms utilised by the sovereign, such as hierarchical observation, normalising judgement, and the examination (Foucault, 1975 – see 1.2.1.2). The use of time as outlined here by the pupils is an example of a social control mechanism outlined by Foucault. There have been many developments in learning theory, which have led to associated developments in assessment purposes and approaches (see Chapter 2). However, continuing professional development for teachers in this area has been piecemeal and skewed towards more summative assessment procedures (see Chapter 4). The interviews and drawings indicate that these pupils have experienced a cognitive-rationalist approach to teaching and assessment as opposed to a socio-cultural one. They view assessment as an external activity that is performed on them. It is viewed as competitive, normative and insular. This is highlighted in Table 16. The language that the pupils use indicates that they view themselves as a group which is being enacted upon by the teacher ('Us' and 'Them'). Yet, whereas the pupils view

themselves as a collective that is powerless in the activity, they perceive themselves as individuals within the collective when completing the assessment tasks that are required of them.

Table 16 Pupils' language regarding their teacher during assessment procedures

Pupils' views as a collective on which assessment is performed	Pupils' views as an individual completing the assessment task
"*Teachers think that we copy*" "*it must be really important if they want us to try really hard in it*" *"They talk with your parents*"	"*In a test you wouldn't really think about who's next to you, you just focus on your own thing"*. *Like I think tests are good because the teachers would assess you from the tests and like help you like where you need help*

The pupils do not view the teacher as a partner in the assessment process. How a teacher communicates the results of assessment is especially important in developing a pupil's sense of their own abilities. The next section examines the area of feedback on assessment for pupils.

9.5 Feedback on assessment for pupils – the pathway to improvement

9.5.1 Types of feedback

Smith and Godard (2005) state that the quality of the feedback provided is crucial for pupil progress (2.5.3). The pupils name a number of ways that they receive feedback from their teachers: oral appraisals, notes in their copies, results

from weekly or monthly tests, yearly reports. The type of teacher feedback is demonstrated in this extract from one focus group interview:

"***AS:*** *Interesting. So we spoke about these and we know that there is weekly and there is end of term and there is the yearly. How do teachers tell you how you're getting on? Do they talk to you about it? Do they write it down?*

Pupil 3 (P3): *They bring you up to the top of the class and they talk to you privately. That's what they did with our Easter tests anyway.*

Pupil 1 (P1): *People at the front can hear.*

Pupil 4 (P4): *Yeah, people at the front can still hear.*

Pupil 5 (P5): *They put notes too sometimes in your copy. If you do it very good they say "very improved".*

P4: *That's not really a test though.*

P5: *It says "improving".*

AS: *Yeah, it tells you how you are doing, that you're getting better. That is assessment as well.*

P5: *They talk with your parents.*"

Tunstall and Gipps (1996) classify the roles of feedback as socialisation, classroom management, performance orientation, mastery orientation, and learning orientation. In this extract, the pupils identify the socialisation role (*People at the front can hear*) as well as the performance orientation and mastery orientation aspects (*They put notes too sometimes in your copy. If you do it very good they say "very improved"*). However, in the interviews they do not suggest a learning orientation to the feedback that they have received. Research demonstrates that when the locus of control regarding feedback lies with the teacher, it negatively affects pupils' intrinsic motivation (Murtagh, 2014). Lyzaght and O'Leary (2013) found that, in Ireland, feedback from teachers designed to assist learning and the involvement of pupils in providing feedback to parents is not as common as feedback specifying the nature of progress (see section 2.5.2). The views of the pupils interviewed in the focus groups support this finding.

9.5.2 The nature and form of feedback

Assessment has a number of purposes, as outlined in Chapter 2. One pupil has encountered a teacher that is conflating future prospects with the results of primary school tests – "*I just dislike the fact that they tell you something to bribe you. They keep going on to me, like they'd say to me "If you don't do this you'll never become a physiotherapist" or anything like that that you want to become with your life*". As noted previously, assessment policy is mediated in practice by teachers in their classroom. Teachers also have their historical legacy regarding assessment from their own experiences of schooling. These experiences and understandings can impact on the effective implementation of any new assessment policy (Foucault, 1989; Bourdieu, 1977). The pupils also highlighted the fact that public feedback is often utilised by teachers as a disciplinary mechanism. This is related to the point outlined previously about the use of assessment as a disciplinary mechanism as opposed to a tool to improve teaching and learning, and is an area in need of further study. During the interview the pupils became most animated when discussing the standardised tests. They knew that these scores were posted to their parents on their report card yet they did not receive these scores themselves from their teachers. While there was an acknowledgement that it was important for parents to receive this information, the pupils emphasised that they should be informed as well. The pupils' reasoning was grounded in notions of fairness. The pupils view themselves as autonomous individuals with the ability to make important decisions for themselves. This also correlates with an AfL approach to teaching and learning.

A number of researchers have identified that the form and nature of feedback is a key influencing factor in pupils' perceptions of assessment and their views of themselves as learners (2.5.3). When pupils were asked about their preferred form of feedback each one identified private discussions with the teacher above written comments or public oral feedback. Their thoughts were based in the principles of formative assessment, that they can recognise areas of strength and weakness and work to improve. However, the interviewees noted that it did not happen very often but when it did it was something that they appreciated and from which they benefited:

"***AS:*** *So you're saying that you'd like at some stage to be able to talk to the teacher one on one...*

Pupil 3 (P3): *Yeah.*

Pupil 2 (P2): *Yeah.*

Pupil 4 (P4): *Yeah.*

AS: *...about how you're getting on?*

Pupil 1 (P1): *Yeah.*

Pupil 5 (P5): *Yeah.*

AS: *How many times a year do you think that you should do that?*

P1: *After every big test.*

P5: *Yeah.*

P4: *I'd say maybe like at Christmas and then at Easter just to say how you were doing that term.*

AS: *Pupil 2?*

P2: *Yeah because I think that that would help you like kind of improve on what you need to improve on.*

AS: *Pupil 5?*

P5: *Like before, this morning, some people were after getting their letters like their...*

AS: *Their reports?*

P5: *...Drumcondra results and she called them up and she asked them "how do you think you did?" and like "did you think that was good for you?". But I remember like the day before the Drumcondra she said like she called all of the (secondary school) people up separately and she said "so are you stuck on anything? Do you feel confident?"*

AS: *And did you like that?*

P5: *Yeah.*

P1: *No that was for the entrance exams.*

P5: *Yeah, entrance exam, sorry.*

P3: *She called four of us and asked...*

P5: *Separately asked.*

P1: *Because there was like a month...*

P3: *..."are you ok and everything?"*

P1: *Because ours was a month before everybody else's.*

P3: *Yeah.*

AS: *So again we said there that if you were to talk to your teacher like one at a time, you'd like it maybe once a term in around the big exams.*

P4: *Yeah.*

P2: *Yeah.*

P3: *Yeah. Like them ones, yeah.*

AS: *Yeah? That's what most people think.*

AS: *And at the moment, you don't get anything?*

P3: *No.*"

Black et al. (2006) outline three practices that need to develop for the successful implementation of AfL approaches: 1) the learner must be actively involved in the learning, and that such involvement ought to take place in social and community discourse; 2) emphasis on giving comment-only feedback on written work, with the requirement that pupils respond to the comments by further work; 3) development of peer- and self-assessment. *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* does contain advice regarding AfL:

> "We know that the most effective teachers use assessment information on the progress that their students have achieved to date, they share this information with their students, and they use this information to plan the next steps in their teaching and their students' learning. This approach, sometimes referred to as *assessment for learning (AfL)*, should be used to inform all teaching but it is not used sufficiently widely in our schools and we need to enable teachers to improve this practice" (DES, 2011, p.74).

However, the DES has not provided widespread CPD for primary school teachers in this area (6.3.3). The literacy and numeracy strategy did contain elements of reform to the system, one of which is a greater focus on literacy and numeracy. Pupils' perspectives on the ordering of schools through assessment are outlined in the next section.

9.6 The ordering of school subjects through assessment – tests tell the pupils what is important

The national literacy and numeracy strategy mandates increased time spent on the teaching of literacy and numeracy in primary schools (DES, 2011). The pupils interviewed in this study indicated that English and Mathematics were the two most important subjects in primary school. The strategy states that "developing good literacy and numeracy skills among all young people is fundamental to the life chances of each individual and essential to the quality and equity of Irish society" (DES, 2011, p.9). The interviewees also acknowledged this premise, one pupil stated "*I feel that you'd really need to be good at them if you wanted a job*". The pupils also assume that the amount of time spent at a given subject area is an indication of how important it is, which gives primacy to English and Maths in primary school: "*Because I think that they are the most important subjects, that we usually do. We do them more often than science and history and stuff. We do them*

most so they're the most important". Also, the fact they complete standardised tests in English and Maths only underscores their significance for pupils as the following extract outlines:

"***AS:*** *Yeah. How about yourself? Do you think that they (English and Maths) are the most important?*

Pupil 4 (P4): *Yeah but Irish is important as well but I'd say you'd use English and Maths more like.*

AS: *How about the other subjects? History, Geography, Science, Music, Art, Drama, PE?*

Pupil 1 (P1): *PE is good, I like PE!*

P4: *I think Geography should be on the test as well.*

AS: *Are they as important as English and Maths?*

Pupil 3 (P3): *No.*

Pupil 2 (P2): *No.*

P4: *No.*

P5: *But I think History is important because you need to know...*

AS: *Who's saying that they're not as important? Sorry. Are ye saying that or do the teachers say that or does Dublin say that? Where is that coming from? Did somebody come in to you and say, "English and Maths are the most important guys...*

(Laughter)

P2: *No.*

AS: *...but we do these subjects". Where does that come from?*

Pupil 1 (P1): *The fact that we get...*

P3: *Well I think the fact that we get only English and Maths in Drumcondras you think that's the most important...*

P1: *You'd think that's the most important.*

P3: *...If Irish was in that you'd think that that's another very important one...*

AS: *Or if History was in it?*

P3: *Yeah.*

P2: *Yeah.*

P4: *Yeah.*

AS: *Ok, yeah, alright*."

Brookhart and Bronowicz (2003) note that people shape and reshape themselves as learners as they move through the education system, and this can happen in response to the demands of the assessment approaches utilised (2.5.3). These pupils are shaping themselves in reaction to a primary assessment system that values English and Maths above other subject areas. Both sets of interviewees also relate how they do not do certain subjects anymore (e.g. music or PE) or that these subjects are only taught "*as a treat*". This reported marginalising or elimination of certain subjects from the primary school curriculum should be investigated further to identify how widespread it is and the reasons behind it.

Referring to their own experience of assessment, the pupils identified that they had mainly completed tests in three subjects, English, Mathematics and Irish. When asked whether they had tests in Social, Environmental, Scientific Education (SESE), the response was mainly negative. The interviewees also replied that they had no tests in any of the arts subjects or in PE. There are a number of issues that can be explored as a result of these comments. Firstly, is the experience of these pupils replicated on a broader scale? It would be insightful to explore whether other schools conducted assessments in subjects other than English, Mathematics and Irish, or if the priority given to these subjects is a trend. Bruner (1996) comments about the message systems in educational institutions. He states that players in an educational system are aware of the priorities being set by the primacy given to certain areas, despite the language of holism and balance being utilised in documents. Secondly, in light of the increased time allocated to literacy and

numeracy in the national strategy, are teachers offering a more restricted curriculum, particularly in relation to the arts? Thirdly, how are teachers assessing SESE, PE and the arts subjects? It is possible that teachers are assessing these informally without the knowledge of the pupils.

9.6.1 The purposes of school subjects

The pupils interviewed displayed a highly reductive view of the purposes of school subjects. The following are some comments made about the usefulness of certain school subjects:

- Maths: "*So in Maths, there are a lot of jobs that need Maths*".
- English: "*And in English, if you want to be a story writer or something, then you need to have good English*".
- Irish – "*You used to need Irish to get into the Guards and stuff*".
- SESE: "*Well, there are still a lot of jobs that you need geography or science to do, but those subjects (English and Maths) would be the main ones that are helping you. I would feel that you'd really need to be good at them if you wanted a job – the kind of base layer of any job other than science and geography, to help with the job you want to take*".
- Art – "*if you want to become as artist, yeah Art is important. But not everybody enjoys Art as something that they want to do for their life*".

Pierre Bourdieu argues that the structures of an environment produce habitus - "systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to

function as structuring structures...objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them" (1977, p.72, italics in original). For Bourdieu, habitus creates an environment where certain opinions or thoughts are valued more than others and become the dominant discourse (1.2.2.1). These pupils are relating the purpose of primary school curricular area to their utility in succeeding in the employment market. The burgeoning link between education and the economy can weaken the social goals of education (3.2). Gewirtz et al. (1995) state an over-emphasis on standards or a reductive approach to the aims of education can mean a re-orientation in the dynamics of schools. They argue that "The sense of what education is and is for, the nature of the social relationships of schooling, teacher-student and student-student relationships are potentially all changed by the forces and micro-practices of the market" (p.177). Ball distinguishes between first order and second order effects of policy (3.2.2). First order effects relate to changes on practice or structure. Second order effects refer to the impact of these changes on patterns of social access, opportunity and social justice (1994, p.26-26). These focus group interviews identified that some pupils believe that certain subjects are prioritised through the assessments used in primary schools. They also display reductive views about the purpose of some curricular areas. It would be advisable to investigate what proportion of primary school pupils hold these views and whether they are a second order effect of recent changes to assessment policy in primary education in Ireland.

9.7 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the findings and analysis of two focus group interviews with two groups of five sixth class primary school pupils. It analysed the interviews with reference to the literature review and the theoretical framework based on the work of Foucault and Bourdieu. The main findings are as follows:

- The pupils identified the formative and summative purposes of assessment, as well as both the various uses and users of this information.
- All of the pupils interviewed stated that they preferred either weekly or monthly tests.
- The pupils view assessment as an individual enterprise.
- The pupils believe that summative assessment is what the teachers value the most.
- The pupils are aware that results in standardised tests are not only used for their learning purposes but also hold an accountability purpose.
- The pupils in these focus group interviews demonstrate a traditional view of the pupils' role in assessment. For them, tests are given by the teachers and their responsibility is to revise for them and try to do as well as possible.
- The pupils outline that the teachers' role in assessment is essentially one of judgement.
- A key theme that is identified by the pupils is the affective purpose of assessment.
- The pupils are also aware of and highly concerned with the social purpose of assessment. They understand that assessment can be used for selection and

certification purposes and that this can impact on themselves and their relations with their peers.

- Both sets of interviewees also reported that the teacher prepared the pupils for the standardised tests.
- The pupils highlighted the fact that public feedback is often utilised by teachers as a disciplinary mechanism.
- The pupils interviewed in this study indicated that English and Mathematics were the two most important subjects in primary school, based on the amount of time given to them and the fact that they completed standardised tests in them.
- The pupils interviewed displayed a highly reductive view of the purposes of school subjects.

CHAPTER 10 CONCLUSION

10.1 Introduction

Assessment is a broad and complex topic in education and effects parties at a macro and micro level. Assessment policies for education in countries are now developed in negotiation with international organisations and are influenced by the ever increasing weight of pan-national comparative examinations. Educational policy makers are looking to import policies which are deemed to be successful in certain evaluations of what it is to have a good education system. These national policies are enacted at a local level by primary school teachers who are positioned by them in a particular manner. The teachers also mediate and change these policies through their implementation. Primary school pupils live out these policies through their school experiences. The policies demonstrate to these children what the priorities of education are for the adults with whom they relate in their classrooms. As such, any study examining this area needs to contain elements of breadth and depth. This dissertation examined assessment in primary schools in Ireland. It explored the role of assessment in education policy, with specific reference to *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. It also highlighted teachers' practice regarding assessment methodologies, as well as outlining their beliefs about these methodologies' purposes. The dissertation also explored pupils' perspectives on nature and provides accounts of the impact of assessment policy and procedures on them.

The DES published a national strategy in 2011, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life: the national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people 2011*-2020. The document consists of a number of reforms to the education system in Ireland. These include specific reforms of the

primary school sector, including how assessment data is processed and reported. This dissertation examined the notion of assessment in a number of settings in the Irish primary school context. This doctoral study aimed to examine three key research questions:

1. How were the uses of assessment for primary schools in the national strategy, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*, devised and for what purposes are they based?

2. What are primary teachers' views on the purpose of assessment and what constitutes their practice?

3. How do assessment strategies impact on primary school pupils?

It utilised a mixed methods approach to research, based in the transformative paradigm. The research contained qualitative and quantitative aspects and triangulation was used to identify themes. The research consisted of four parts:

1. Document analyses of the assessment aspects of the draft plan, *Better literacy and numeracy for children and young people* (DES, 2010); the submissions in response to the draft plan from the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and the Teaching Council; and *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*.

2. Semi-structured interviews with eight high profile interviewees about the development and implementation of the strategy: Dr. Peter Archer, Director of the Education Research Centre (ERC); Dr. Sarah FitzPatrick, Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

(NCCA); Dr. Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector; Mr. Edward Murtagh, retired Assistant Chief Inspector; Ms. Sheila Nunan, General Secretary of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO); Mr. Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director of the Teaching Council; Ms. Jan O'Sullivan, TD, Minister for Education and Skills (2014 – present); and Mr. Ruairí Quinn, TD, former Minister for Education and Skills (2011-2014).

3. Questionnaire survey of 144 primary school teachers about their beliefs and use of assessment.

4. Two focus group interviews of five sixth class pupils from two schools (one urban, one rural).

The concluding chapter summarises the findings in each of these areas. It also outlines the significance of this study and offers implications for research and practice in assessment in primary education.

10.2 Assessment in primary schools and *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* – how policy indicates purpose

The literature review in Chapter 2 highlights many differing opinions that are currently held on the nature of assessment. These are intrinsically linked to theories of learning. Four conceptualisations of learning are reviewed:

a) Behaviourist-empiricist: in which learning involves demonstrating correct behaviours. Knowledge is deemed to exist outside of the learner.

b) Cognitive-rationalist: in which knowledge consists of development in the human mind. This can be imparted by the teacher and can be objectively measured.

c) Socio-constructivist: in which learning is a social enterprise and is impacted by the relations between the pupils and teacher. Knowledge exists in the mind and is created in the social world.

d) Sociocultural: in which learning is a relational exercise and knowledge resides in the relations between pupils, teacher and the classroom, not within the mind.

10.2.1 The dichotomous view of assessment in Irish primary education policy: Assessment for Learning (AfL) and Assessment of Learning (AoL)

The four conceptualisations of learning outlined above lead to different types of assessment, for example checklists, standardised tests, attainment tests, diagnostic tests, portfolios, profiles, peer assessment, self assessment. These are different assessment methodologies as they assess different conceptualisations of the mind and of learning. Traditionally, education policies in Ireland do not engage with theoretical viewpoints. This study reveals that assessment is perceived of in a dichotomous nature in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* (DES, 2011). There is no explanation of the conceptualisation of learning on which the document's approach to assessment is based. The section on assessment offers a description of the form of AfL and AoL. It states that, with AfL, teachers "share this information with their students, and they use this information to plan the next steps in their teaching and their students' learning" (DES, 2011, p.74). The documents contends that AoL consist of "approaches that provide an indication of the progress that the

student has made in achieving the learning outcomes that are set out in the curriculum" (DES, 2011, p.74). The document presents this dichotomous view as accepted practice, even though it is highly contested in the literature on assessment.

This separation is also apparent in the interviews with the high profile policy makers who were involved in the drafting and development of the strategy. Each of them points to the AfL and AoL aspect of assessment. However, this is not a harmonious division. Instead of being conceptualised as being complimentary and working with one another, a number of policy makers felt that there is tension between these aspects. Dr. Archer, Dr, FitzPatrick, Dr. Hislop, Mr, Murtagh and Ms Nunan all identify a tension or conflict between AfL and AoL. It is little wonder that this tension is noted by the policy makers as it is present in the literature review. What is notable, however, is that this tension is not alluded to in the actual strategy itself.

By presenting AfL and AoL without critique or analysis, the literacy and numeracy strategy is in danger of underestimating the difficulties that teachers have in implementing and reconciling both elements of assessment successfully. A number of policy makers note that assessment has been traditionally an underdeveloped aspect of primary education (Dr. Archer, Dr. Hislop, Ms. Nunan). The dissertation demonstrates that this underdevelopment is still at play when it comes to clearly stipulating the nature and purpose of assessment in Irish primary education. In the absence of such a clear articulation, there is a danger that the type of assessment tool prioritised by the strategy may become seen by teachers, pupils and parents as the definitive assessment methodology by which teaching and learning is to be judged. Both Ministers for Education and Skills that were interviewed argued that, historically, assessment was seen as a method to rank or

judge pupils and that many parents have this understanding of assessment. This is a difficult conceptualisation to alter. However, the strategy prioritises an assessment tool that reinforced this notion.

10.2.2 A lack of balance in assessment in primary education policy

The nature of assessment is highly contested by educational philosophers and theorists (2.6). This includes confusion over the language of assessment, the exact nature of formative assessment, the difference between classroom and official assessment, and arguments about assessment's theoretical basis in epistemology – be it behaviourist, cognitive or constructivist. The draft plan, *Better literacy and numeracy for children and young people* (DES, 2010), does not engage in any of these issues. It states that gathering and using assessment data needs to take place at the level of the individual learner, the school and the whole system. However, it does not debate the nature of the assessments to be employed or the form of the data which is to be gathered (DES, 2010, p.39-40). The submission of the NCCA in response to the draft plan highlights this critical lack of theory:

> "issues of definition—identifying the challenges ahead and the things that need to be done—are of no small importance. Indeed, their significance resides not only in the terminology that is explicitly defined but also in the assumptions implicit in language used to talk about curriculum, assessment, and how educational change happens" (p.9).

The finalised strategy offers an expanded view of assessment which includes AfL and AoL (DES, 2011). However, it does not engage with the NCCA's point about the importance of definition and language regarding assessment. In the absence of a clear theoretical framework, the system situates assessment as a

messenger for the values inherent in it, especially regarding the assessment techniques prioritised in policy. Assessment techniques offer value signals at a macro (whole system) and micro (school) level. The strategy also prioritises a particular type of assessment data by including systemic targets based on standardised tests. The strategy also directs teachers to present aggregated findings of such tests to their Boards of Management and that the Board should report these findings to the DES. Many educationalists have criticised this type data for its inherent bias. They also found that a prioritisation of this type of data can result in a narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test and coaching (2.3.2). However, these views are not discussed in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*, and there are no indications of any safeguards to prevent the most detrimental consequences of this type of data collection which transpired in a number of jurisdictions. The data is uncontested in the strategy and is viewed as objective and easily quantifiable (a view also expressed by both Ministers for Education and Skills who participated in interviews for this study).

The form of data conceptualised in standardised tests is also present in the PISA assessments. These tests have developed into an accepted indicator of quality in Irish education and are cited as one of the reasons for the need of the literacy and numeracy strategy (DES, 2011). The effect of Ireland's poor performance in PISA 2009 is debated by the policy makers. Dr. Archer, Mr. Murtagh and Mr. Ó Ruairc believe that the strategy was being developed before the results were announced. Others (Dr. Hislop and Ms. Nunan) assert that the PISA results provided a huge political impetus. This is demonstrated by Minister Quinn's assertion that:

> "the benefit of the 2009 PISA results was it opened the door – hey guys we have a problem, what's the extent of it? Is the problem overstated? Is the problem understated? But nobody doubted that

> we did have a problem. We did. And that was the great positive effect of PISA 2009".

An interesting point to note is that the PISA results were used to develop and implement the literacy and numeracy strategy but now some policy makers are sceptical about whether they were truly representative of standards in Irish education. Dr. Archer, Dr. Hislop and Minister Quinn all question whether PISA 2009 was an aberration. It is noteworthy that PISA 2012 presented a readjustment in Ireland's scores. This realignment was met with little response by the DES. It can be argued that the results of PISA 2009 represented useful data for a number of policy makers in their attempt to realign Irish education in light of a 'quality agenda'. This dissertation contends that the 'quality agenda' does not contain appropriate balance in its presentation of assessment.

10.2.3 The emergence of a policy elite

Most of the policy makers who were interviewed (Dr. Archer, Dr. Hislop, Mr. Murtagh, Mr. Ó Ruairc and Minister Quinn) emphasise the substantial consultation period that occurred between late 2010 and early 2011, which fed into the development of the final strategy. This dissertation demonstrates that some aspects of the draft plan changed for example the description of assessment was expanded and the *Schools Like Ours* initiative was removed. While it is undeniable that there was a high level of interest in the consultation period, this was in response to the publication of a draft strategy, *Better literacy and numeracy for children and young people*. The Department had set the agenda for the consultation and narrowed its parameters considerably by using this approach. This approach to policy development is discussed in the literature review. The draft plan contains a number

of reform elements which are present in the finalised version, including target setting, the prioritisation of standardised tests for report to Boards of Managements and the DES, and the increase in tuition time for literacy and numeracy. As outlined previously the conceptualisation of assessment is not examined in either document, which indicates that the DES believes that this is an uncontested area.

Ms. Nunan believes that the policy development of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* demonstrates a shift in consultative policy making in Ireland. The nature of the NCCA's involvement in the development of the strategy is a significant finding of this research project. Ms. Nunan argues that the Department "*grabbed back the literacy and numeracy strategy*" from the NCCA, and that "*It became a very political instrument and that is worrying*". Dr. FitzPatrick states that the NCCA are "*not the authors of the strategy*" and that their submission was the "*first official response*" to the policy development process. Dr. FitzPatrick also comments that it was "*very significant for us to broker and to argue for in response to the draft plan was the piece around standards in particular...I suppose for us the particular concern was that standards, if introduced, would ultimately take the place of curriculum*". It is highly significant in this regard that the NCCA, the agency responsible for advising the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment was not involved in the initial stages of the development of the draft strategy. The NCCA takes a research based approach to its contributions to policy making and debate in Irish education. It can be argued that, had the NCCA been involved at an earlier stage in the policy development process, the conceptualisation of assessment and the tools prioritised would be more nuanced.

Another significant finding of this study is the apparent emergence of a policy elite in the development of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*.

Minister Quinn and Dr. Hislop agree that there were a number of people in the right place at the right time in the development of the strategy. Those people included the Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairí Quinn, TD; Dr. Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector; Mr. Alan Wall, the Director of the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Unit at the DES; Mr. Edward Murtagh, Assistant Chief Inspector; the Secretary General of the DES, Ms. Brigid McManus; and the Director of the ERC, Dr. Peter Archer. This can be viewed in parallel to the diminished role of the NCCA in the development of this particular strategy.

10.2.4 Implications for policy makers and researchers

The lack of engagement by this particular policy with the current debates in research in area of assessment is very stark. It is troubling that a national policy which has the intention of positioning the Irish educational system between the years 2011 to 2020 does not demonstrate a clear understanding of the arguments implicit in any articulation of a particular approach to assessment. This lack of engagement has the potential to lead to, at the least, confusion amongst teachers, and potentially much more hazardous consequences as have resulted in other jurisdictions across the world. Policy makers in Ireland should be especially conscious of the potential negative effects of assessment policies. Irish history contains numerous examples of such negative effects, such as the Payment by Results system and the Primary Certificate. We should be cognisant of the issues that these systems led to when introducing any new assessment policy. Policy makers should also re-examine the consultative approach to assessment policy development. While it is impractical to offer everyone equal say in the system, nevertheless a process can be developed

whereby priorities for the policy are discussed at an initial stage. This point is particularly true in relation to the NCCA, which is the statutory body responsible for advising the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment in Ireland. The NCCA undertakes, uses and shares research as a basis for advice and debate on education. It should play a stronger role in the development of assessment policy in Irish primary education based on this approach.

The targets relating to systemic improvements in literacy and numeracy for Irish primary education set by *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* were met four years early, in 2012. In response to this, the Minister for Education and Skills, Ms. Jan O'Sullivan, TD, has brought forward the review of the national strategy from 2016 to 2015. This is an example of the use of data as a control mechanism for the system and is an element of the governmentality approach outlined by Foucault. The notion of governmentality in Irish primary education is an area that warrants further research. This includes (among others):

- The datafication of Irish primary education through target setting
- Teachers' positionality in relation to policy making
- The notion of consensus and agreed terminologies across the stakeholders
- The influence of global international tests on policy making

10.3 Primary teachers and assessment: views of purpose and their actual practice

It is significant, if unsurprising, that the results of the questionnaire with teachers found a similar lack of balance in relation to assessment as to that which appears in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. National policy directs teachers at a local level and it also indicates the prioritisation of values when it comes to assessment methodologies and data. It is also noteworthy that teachers place a priority on the use of the assessment information for the benefit of the children in their class.

10.3.1 The question of balance in assessment policy at primary school level

In the teacher survey, 93% state that their school's assessment policy addresses standardised tests, 85% state it addresses AoL and 76% state it includes AfL. There has been a strong historic use of standardised tests in Irish primary education for screening and diagnostic purposes. For example, the literacy and numeracy strategy mandates that standardised tests be administered at 2nd, 4th and 6th class level in primary schools. The survey of teachers reveals that standardised testing is widespread in First, Third and Fifth class also (86%, 84%, 85% respectively). The fact that the use of standardised tests is so prevalent is problematic if one considers that these same tests are now being used to evaluate schools. There is a possibility that these tests may be seen as devices by teachers, parents and pupils by which the standard of education is valued at a local level. Standardised tests are one indicator of the work which a teacher does in the primary classroom. If teachers come to believe that this is the only indicator by which their

work is judged, there is undoubtedly the chance that these tests will become a *de facto* curriculum. The dissertation has also explored how standardised tests received priority in the provision of CPD in the area of assessment in the past ten years (4.3). This can be interpreted by teachers as an indication of the priorities of the DES.

It is encouraging that there appears to be a balance between Assessment of Learning and Assessment for Learning approaches in these teachers' school policies on assessment. However, the question regarding the conceptualisation of assessment arises again. School's assessment policies follow national policy. As outlined previously, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* does not engage with the debate in academic circles on the nature of assessment. It is hard to imagine that schools would be in a position to explore this issue locally without leadership at a national level. The NCCA's guidelines (2007) highlight a broad spectrum of approaches to be implemented in primary schools but this has been superseded by the literacy and numeracy strategy. In their responses to the questionnaire, teachers appear to highlight the importance of using assessment information for the benefit of their pupils, as opposed to using it to report to the DES. For example, 43% of teachers believe that the most important purpose of assessment is to identify pupils' strengths and needs and 28% believe that the most important purpose is identifying pupils who have learning difficulties. 0% of teachers surveyed believe the most important purpose of assessment is to provide information to the DES.

10.3.2 Teachers' assessment practice

The most prevalent form of assessment used by the teachers surveyed was teacher observation. 95% of them utilise it on a daily basis. Observation is one of

the disciplinary techniques outlined by Foucault and can be used as a tool to normalise the subjects under observation. In this understanding, the subjects internalise the behaviours and values expected of them. If observation is to be used as a pedagogic tool, as opposed to a behavioural or managerial one, it is vital that the pupils understand and negotiate the criteria under which they are assessed. The key to the effectiveness of this approach to assessment is the quality of the teacher feedback once the action/task has been observed. For this type of assessment to best assist learning, it must be followed by feedback which focuses on the process of learning and the effort of the pupil, not the product. A limitation of this study is that it does not provide teachers with the opportunity to provide detail of their approaches to the use of observation in their classrooms. However, this dissertation does contain other indications of some element of difficulty regarding the utilisation of assessment for learning approaches in the teachers' responses to the questionnaire. For example, 19% of these teachers never negotiate targets with learners; 40% of the teachers do not use peer assessment at any stage; and 17% do not use self assessment strategies. The teachers' use of assessment implies a conceptualisation of learning as well as a conceptualisation of the role of the pupil in the process. The teachers surveyed appear to focus on using assessment to assist teaching and learning (Graph 10, section 9.4.2). However, only 8% thought the most important purpose of assessment was to inform pupils about their progress. 14% of teachers indicated that this was the least important purpose in their responses. This highlights a certain ambiguity in teachers' understanding of the pupils' role in assessment and its effect on their learning.

Just as pupils are acted upon by the teachers' operation of assessment procedures, the teachers are similarly acted upon by the policy which is implemented

nationally. *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* contains a number of reforms of Irish primary education. For example, 87% of teachers acknowledge that the tuition time for literacy and numeracy has been increased. This stipulation was contained in the first circular that the Department sent to schools regarding the literacy and numeracy strategy. 44% of teachers state that the tuition time for other subjects has decreased. This was a fear that was mentioned by a number of stakeholders when the strategy was being developed. When wide-scale testing regimes are implemented in other jurisdictions it has led to the narrowing of the curriculum and a teaching to the test approach. It can be argued that the curriculum has been reduced in the Irish context due to the alterations in the curricular time allocations as part of the national strategy. A significant finding of this study is that 44% of the teachers surveyed have not heard about *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. Although teachers are not only aware of, but indeed have implemented many of the reforms contained within the strategy, almost half of those surveyed do not know about the document itself. This is significant on two levels: i) a number of teachers are unaware of the 'quality agenda' at play in Irish education (which they are enacting as a result of policy developments nationally); and ii) a number of teachers may feel anxiety about a changing educational landscape which they do not understand. This may lead to a lack of understanding of the reasoning underlying these changes and an inability to engage with the pressing issues in Irish education at present. It is also important to note that teachers mediate policy through their implementation of it. Even though standardised testing has been increased in primary schools in Ireland and this data is now aggregated and reported to Boards of Management and the DES, the teachers surveyed as part of this study did not place value on the use of assessment data to report to the DES or to compare performance

to national standards. They did, however, note the value of using this assessment data to assist pupils. An important point to examine in this context is the manner in which teachers use this data to assist their pupils, as was previously outlined.

10.3.3 Implications for teachers and researchers

A recurring theme during the high profile interviews is that assessment is an underdeveloped aspect of primary education and it is in need of considerable enhancement in CPD. As outlined previously, in recent years CPD in the area of assessment has been limited to developing a professional awareness amongst teachers of the administration, recording and use of standardised tests. This dissertation recommends that the area of Assessment for Learning be prioritised for CPD for current teachers. This CPD should emphasise the role of feedback in the assessment process to assist learning. I also suggest that any CPD in the area of assessment must highlight the debate in academic circles on the nature of assessment and how differing conceptualisations of learning lead to differing assessment practices. The positionality of teachers in policy development and implementation is a topic of considerable study in a number of jurisdictions. While reform may be instigated by policy makers or governments, it is teachers who are the agents of change at a local level. It is incumbent on all of us as a profession to be aware of the changes that are taking place in primary education at a national and international level, and to understand the reasoning behind these changes.

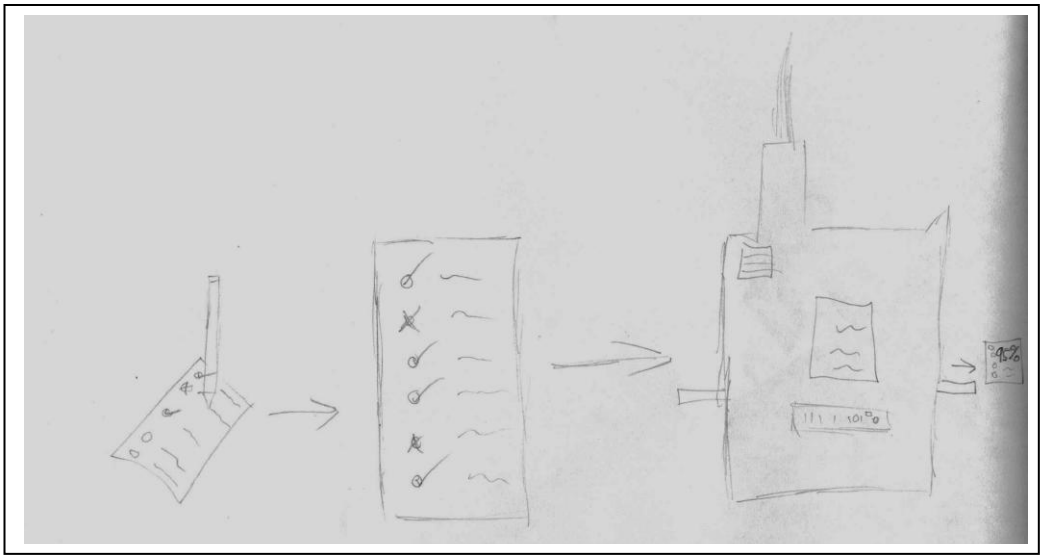
As outlined previously, teacher observation is the most common assessment tool used by teachers according to this survey. However, the questionnaire does not make clear the uses to which these assessment data are put. Further research is

required to investigate teachers' use of observation as an assessment tool, particular the timing and purpose of the observation, and whether this information is relayed to the pupil to assist their learning. A further limitation of this study is the lack of a longitudinal element to track teachers' perspectives and use of assessment over time. A longitudinal scale would provide evidence of changes (if present) in teachers' practice. This could be supplemented with an attitudinal survey to investigate reasons for any changes. Research in other jurisdictions has revealed that teachers change their use of assessment tools in response to mandated standardised testing (particularly with regard to increased coaching and teaching to the test). It would be worthwhile to examine whether teachers' use of assessment alters in Ireland, particularly in relation to standardised tests, as a result of the reforms contained within *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*.

10.4 The impact of assessment practices on primary school pupils

The NCCA (2010) is critical of the DES' lack of engagement with learners in the development of the national literacy and numeracy strategy. A significant aspect of this study is the participation of primary school pupils through focus group interviews. It is the children who are the recipients of the changes that are made to assessment policy at a national level. The interviews and drawings presented in this study demonstrate that pupils are very articulate and knowledgeable about the issues that affect them at primary school.

10.4.1 The assessment machine



Pupil: "*I drew someone filling in their tests, then the test completely answered goes into a machine and then it comes out with their grade*".

One of the significant findings of the focus group interviews with primary school pupils is their sense of isolation in relation to the assessment process. This isolation consists not only of the actual physical practice (children describe sitting by themselves) but also of their feelings of a lack of ownership or involvement in the process. This is encapsulated by this pupil's drawing of the assessment machine. There is no interaction in this approach to assessment. It is clinical and objective. It appears to be value-free and a neutral approach. This is very reminiscent of the type of assessment prioritised by the DES in *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. This view of assessment contains one conceptualisation of learning. This view of learning (cognitive-rationalist) is the one that the children perceive as being prioritised in their assessment experiences. This is deeply problematic from a Bourdieuian perspective as this approach designates certain cultural capital as the most important and thus rewards those children with access to this capital. The

pupils in these focus group interviews demonstrate a traditional view of the pupils' role in assessment. For them, tests are given by the teachers and their responsibility is to revise for them and try to do as well as possible. Learning is an individual activity which can be assessed objectively through tests. These pupils do not discuss a partnership approach to assessment – to be involved in what is assessed or how. They view assessment as an exercise to be undertaken in isolation – alone within the group. The pupils outline that the teachers' role in assessment is essentially one of judgement. This judgement has both behavioural and academic connotations. This is reminiscent of Foucault's notion of the examination as a disciplinary technique. In this account, individual subjects internalise hierarchical power relations through the completion of examinations in schooling and the desire to achieve the 'correct' results.

The choice of assessment approach reveals the values of those who are making policy decisions. These pupils named certain assessment approaches as having more value than others within the system. The pupils interviewed identify standardised tests as the most important for the teachers. They give three reasons as to why they believe that teachers view these tests as priority items: 1) the teacher tells the pupils that they are important; 2) standardised tests are given more time than other tests; and 3) the results of standardised tests are reported directly to their parents. By so doing, the pupils identify how teachers are also positioned by standardised tests. The pupils believe that assessment techniques provide an insight into the school subjects which are prioritised by teachers and the wider education system. They state that English and Mathematics are the most important subjects as they are the areas in which standardised tests are administered. The pupils regard the teachers as the principal agent in assessment practices that they have encountered in

primary school. No participant mentioned self assessment or peer assessment during the focus group interviews. They view assessment as an external activity that is performed on them. It is viewed as competitive, normative and insular. This is highlighted in Table 2 (section 10.4.2). The language that the pupils use indicates that they view themselves as a group which is being enacted upon by the teacher ('Us' and 'Them'). Yet, whereas the pupils view themselves as a collective that is powerless in the activity, they perceive themselves as individuals within the collective when completing the assessment tasks that are required of them.

10.4.2 Pupils' preference and emotions in the area of assessment

The pupils view assessment as a process by which they can improve their learning. All of the pupils interviewed stated that they preferred either weekly or monthly tests, with a large majority (seven out of ten) expressing a preference for weekly tests. The main reason that the children gave for this was because they wanted information about how they were learning and it also provided them with the opportunity to revise more often. As outlined previously, the key to the effective use of assessment is the quality of the feedback to the pupils. The pupils name a number of ways that they receive feedback from their teachers: oral appraisals, notes in their copies, results from weekly or monthly tests, yearly reports. The feedback identified by the pupils focuses on the socialisation, classroom management, performance orientation, and mastery orientation aspects. The pupils did not identify a learning orientation in teachers' feedback, which is integral to assist learning. All of the pupils state that their preferred form of feedback would consist of private discussions with the teacher above written comments or public oral feedback.

The area of assessment raised a number of emotions amongst these children. The pupils are very much aware of the social and affective purposes of assessment. Whereas some state that they are happy to complete tests because they know the answers or they like finding out how they achieved, a number of negative emotions were also expressed. These ranged from nervousness and annoyance to embarrassment, stress and fear. Consequential validity in relation to assessment can highlight the problems that arise when tests are utilised for reasons for which they were not designed. The pupils are aware of and highly concerned with the social purpose of assessment. They understand that tests are used for selection and certification purposes (a large part of the interviews was spent discussing 'entrance exams' into secondary school) and they identify a number of users of assessment information. They know that assessment can position them in relation to their peers as relatively stronger or weaker (one of the interviewees was described by a fellow interviewee as being "one of the slow workers").

10.4.3 Implications for primary school pupils and researchers

This dissertation recommends that if an educational policy has an impact on primary school pupils, then pupils must be part of that policy making process from the first instance. The lack of involvement of pupils in policy development is a significant criticism of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. On a local level, I recommend that school management involves primary school pupils in the review and development of assessment policies in their primary schools. I believe that this dissertation has demonstrated that children are very cognisant of the role

that assessment plays in primary education and that they have a vital contribution to make for teachers' understanding of the dual nature of assessment and learning.

A limitation of this study is the fact that only ten primary school pupils participated in the focus group interviews. Although these interviews give this study a sense of how assessment impacts upon children, a wider consultation with pupils is required. I recommend a large-scale, longitudinal study of primary school pupils' perspectives on assessment, especially in relation to how assessment approaches position them and impact on their self-identities as learners. This study also demonstrates the affective aspect of assessment on primary school pupils. I recommend as a matter of some urgency an investigation into the prevalence of 'entrance exams' for secondary schools to be completed in upper primary school and an examination of their emotional effects on the pupils who are required to sit them. Finally, *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* contains a number of reforms in relation to standardised tests. Further research is required to ascertain whether these tests are becoming 'high stakes' amongst primary school pupils.

10.5 Conclusion

This dissertation analysed the area of assessment in primary education in Ireland, with particular reference to *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life* (DES, 2011). The dissertation has three main findings and recommendations:

i. There is a lack of clarity in the definition of assessment in the national strategy and a lack of engagement with debates about the nature of assessment. This lack of clarity is also demonstrated in the policy makers' and teachers' responses. It

results in a lack of balance in assessment in Irish primary education, which is emphasising quantitative, evaluative practices such as standardised tests. This dissertation recommends that policy should engage with the complex and messy debate on the nature of assessment, and acknowledge that differing assessment techniques hold different purposes. There is no such thing as a perfect system but difficult concepts should not be simplified. It also recommends that the DES provides CPD to all practising teachers, with a particular emphasis on the differing guises of assessment and the importance of feedback to pupils to assist their learning.

ii. The research demonstrates that pupils are passive participants in both assessment policy and practice. This is shown in the policy itself as well as the responses of the policy makers, teachers and pupils. It is depicted starkly in one pupil's drawing of the assessment machine. Pupils must be at the heart of any assessment practice or policy. This dissertation recommends that any future policy development in the area of assessment should include pupils' opinions as a compulsory requirement. Teachers must also consider the consequential validity of their assessment choices. CPD needs to be provided to acknowledge the impact of assessment on pupils and how to include them in the process.

iii. The study shows that PISA 2009 had a considerable impact on the development of *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life*. The effect of international tests on national policy is examined in a number of empirical articles. This dissertation offers evidence of the same effect in the Irish context but demonstrates that this is mediated as an example of an Irish vernacular of global education policy. It also identifies the establishment of a policy elite in recent years. It recommends that the results of comparative international tests should be

scrutinised carefully before they are used to inform policy decisions. It also suggests that there is too much emphasis on one particular type of assessment data to inform policy and evaluate the system.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Information sheet for principals and teachers regarding the survey

Dear _____,

My name is Alan Sheehan and I am completing a PhD in Education through University College Cork. I am a primary school teacher and am very interested in the nature of assessment in primary schools. My project is examining the national literacy and numeracy strategy, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, particularly the role and purpose of assessment of literacy and numeracy in primary schools.

I have compiled a questionnaire about teachers' attitudes and practices regarding assessment. I believe it is important that teachers' opinions are elicited and included in the study of assessment. The questionnaires are distributed to twenty schools in the Cork area. I have included your school as I believe it is representative of a number of schools throughout the country. Participation is entirely voluntary and I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. On completion of the thesis, they will be retained for a further six months and then destroyed.

The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the course. The study may be published in a research journal. Approval must be given by the Social Ethics Research Committee at UCC before studies like this can take place. Completion of the questionnaire indicate consent to participate in the study.

I would be extremely grateful if you could accommodate me in this project. I feel that it will be a valuable addition to research on assessment policy and practice in Irish primary education, an area that has been neglected in the literature. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the research.

Yours sincerely,

Alan Sheehan

Appendix 2 Assessment in primary schools (survey)

All responses are strictly private and confidential

Section A: Biographical Information

Please tick all answers that apply to you.

1. Gender: Male ___ Female ___

2. Years of service:
   0 – 5 ___ 6 – 10 ___ 11 – 15 ___ 16 – 20 ___

   21 – 25 ___ 26 – 30 ___ 30 + ___

3. Current position within your school:
   Substitute Teacher ___ Temporary Teacher ___ Permanent Teacher___

   Assistant Principal/Deputy Principal ___ Principal ___

4. Qualifications held: *(tick all that apply)*
   B.Ed ____ Post-Graduate Diploma in Education ____

   Post-Graduate Diploma in Special Education ___ M.Ed ___

   Doctorate ___ Other (please state): _____

5. Class currently teaching: (*tick all that apply*)
   Junior Infants ___ Senior Infants ___ First Class ___

   Second class ___ Third class ___ Fourth class ___

   Fifth class ___ Sixth class ___ Special class ___

   Resource/Learning Support ___ Administrative role ___

Section B: Assessment Policy

6. Does your school have a written policy on assessment?
   Yes ____ No ____ Don't Know ___
   (*If 'No' or 'Don't Know', skip on to Q.8*)

7. If 'yes', does the policy address the following?

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Assessment **for** learning	___	___	___
Assessment **of** learning	___	___	___
Standardised testing/screening	___	___	___
Diagnostic testing/screening	___	___	___
Peer/Self-assessment	___	___	___
Other: _____	___	___	___

Standardised Assessment

8. Standardised tests in literacy and numeracy are now required at the end of second, fourth and sixth class. Does your school have a policy of carrying out standardised tests in other classes?

   Yes ___ No ___ Don't Know ___

   If 'yes', please indicate which class(es)

   Jnr Inf ___ Sen Inf ___ 1st Class ___
   3rd Class ___ 5th Class ___

9. Does your school inform parents of the dates that standardised tests are being administered to the pupils?

   Yes ___ No ___

Section C: Assessment Practice in your Classroom/SEN room

10. Rank the following purposes of assessment in order of importance, from 1st to 10th, for you in your classroom/SEN room?

    To inform other teachers about pupils' progress ___
    To inform parents about their child's progress ___
    To inform pupils about their progress ___
    To group pupils for instructional purposes ___
    To identify pupils who have learning difficulties ___
    To identify pupils' strengths and weaknesses ___
    To compare the school to national performance ___
    To monitor the school's progress from year to year ___
    To identify aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved___
    To provide information to the Department of Education and Skills (DES) ___

11. To what extent do you use the following assessment approaches? *(tick all that apply)*

	Not at all	*Daily*	*Weekly*	*Monthly*	*Termly*	*Yearly*
Diagnostic tests						
Negotiating targets with learners						
Peer assessment						
Pupil portfolios						
Pupil profiles						
Self assessment						
Standardised tests						
Teacher-designed tests						
Teacher observation						
Other (please state)						

12. To what extent do standardised tests achieve these purposes?

	Not at All	Not well	Unsure	Well	Very well
To inform other teachers about pupils' progress					
To inform parents about their child's progress					
To inform pupils about their progress					
To group pupils for instructional purposes					
To identify pupils who have learning difficulties					
To identify pupils' strengths and weaknesses					
To compare the school to national performance					
To monitor the school's progress from year to year					
To identify aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved					
To provide information to the DES					
Other (please state)					

13. Is it important that pupils perform well in standardised tests?

Yes ___ No ___

Please explain your answer further:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Section D: Continuing Professional Development and Assessment

14. The following is a list of changes that have taken place in some primary schools recently. Please tick the changes that have occurred in your school and name some examples:

Changes	Yes	No	Examples
Increased tuition time for literacy and numeracy			
Decreased tuition time for other subjects			
Implementing School Improvement Plan			
Use of *Aistear* plan for Infant classes			
Increased use of standardised tests			
Changes in reporting to parents			
Changing the provision of SEN			
Other (please state):			

15. Have you heard of the *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* strategy?
    Yes ___ No ___

16. Rank in order from 1st to 10th whose responsibility it should be to provide Continuing Professional Development to teachers about changes in assessment policy (1st being the most responsible).
    - Department of Education and Skills (DES) ___
    - Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) ___
    - Inspectorate ___
    - Local Education Centres ___
    - National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) ___
    - Professional Development Support for Teachers (PDST) ___
    - School management ___
    - Teacher educators (University/College) ___
    - Teachers themselves ___
    - Teaching Council ___

17. What form of further professional development would you like in the area of assessment?
    _____

18. Please add any further comments that you may have.

_____

_____

Appendix 3 Interview protocol regarding *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*

General questions about assessment • What are your views on the role of assessment in primary school? • Where are the most pressing issues in this area? • How do you deal with the tension between assessment for learning and quality assurance? • How do you persuade teachers about the importance of quality assurance?
Consultation on the literacy and numeracy strategy • Do you feel that there was an appropriate consultation period? • Were all the partners involved? • Do you believe that the partners had an equal say in the consultation period? • How were controversies/difference of opinion handled? • What, in your opinion, is the need for the *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* document?
Writing process of the strategy • What do you think were the main influences in the writing process? • Do you feel that your opinions are represented in the strategy? • Why were standardised tests chosen above other assessment tools as a device to measure improvements in the system? • In your opinion, do the recommendations of the strategy tackle the pressing issues in literacy and numeracy education?
Implementation of the strategy in primary schools • How do you believe that the strategy will be implemented at primary school level? • How will teachers be affected by it? • What will its effects be on pupils? • Do you think that the targets are achievable? • Do you think that it will raise standards in literacy and numeracy? • If so, could you explain further how this will happen? • If not, could you explain why you believe this?
Benefits • What do you think are the main benefits of the implementation of the strategy?
Challenges • What are the main problems posed by the implementation of the strategy in your opinion?
Summary • Are there any further comments that you wish to make?

Appendix 4 Consent form for high profile interviewees

I _____ agree to participate in Alan Sheehan's research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with Alan Sheehan to be tape-recorded.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that a transcript of the interview will be sent to me which I can amend and return to Alan Sheehan within one month of the receipt of the transcript.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that the interview data will be kept for six months after the completion of Alan Sheehan's thesis and then destroyed.

I understand that extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

Signed _____

Date _____

Appendix 5 Information sheet and consent form for parents regarding the focus group interviews

My name is Alan Sheehan and I am completing research for a PhD in Education at University College Cork. I am a primary school teacher and am very interested in the nature of assessment in primary schools. My project is examining the national literacy and numeracy strategy, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, particularly the role and purpose of assessment of literacy and numeracy in primary schools. It includes interviews with policy-makers, questionnaires of teachers, and group conversations with pupils.

The existing literature calls for greater attention to pupils' views on assessment. Pupils have rarely been consulted in the policy making process in Ireland. My project aims to tackle this issue in a small way as it will contain the views of pupils on assessment through focus group interviews. Focus group interviews are conversations with a group of six participants. The interview will take no longer than 60 minutes and will take place in your child's school. All the children in your child's class will be invited to participate, with five of those who have given consent being chosen by lottery. The children who were not selected in the lottery will be asked to contribute through drawing images of their experiences of assessment.

Participation is entirely voluntary and your child's name will not appear in the thesis. Your child can withdraw from the interview at any stage without prejudice. The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. On completion of the thesis, the data will be retained for a further six months and then destroyed.

The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the course. The study may be published in a research journal. My research plans have received approval from my supervisor and the Social Ethics Research Committee at UCC.

I would be extremely grateful if could accommodate me in this project. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the research. If you agree to your child's participation in the study, please sign the consent form overleaf.

Yours sincerely,

Alan Sheehan

Consent Form

I, _____, agree to my child, _____'s, participation in Alan Sheehan's research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

My child is participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my child's focus group conversation with Alan Sheehan to be tape-recorded

I understand that my child can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while he/she is participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data of my child's interview within two weeks of the conversation, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that my child's identity will not be revealed in any reports of the research.

I understand that disguised extracts from the group conversation in which my child participated may be used in the research if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my child's focus group interview ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my child's focus group interview ☐

Signed_____ Date_____

Appendix 6 Information sheet and consent form for pupils regarding the focus group interviews

My name is Alan Sheehan and I am completing a PhD in Education at University College Cork. I am a primary school teacher and am very interested in the nature of assessment in primary schools. Assessment means everything from spelling tests to folders of work to MICRA-Ts and Drumcondras.

Pupils are rarely asked for their opinion about assessment in school. I am trying to find out what pupils think. I will be using focus group interviews. Focus group interviews are interviews with a group of people, like a conversation about one topic. The conversation will take no longer than 60 minutes and will take place in your school. All the pupils in your class will be invited to participate. If both you and your parents want to participate, your name will be put into a lottery for selection. Five names will be chosen to be interviewed together in a group.

Participation is voluntary and I will ensure that no-one can find out what you said. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any stage. Your ideas will be part of the research but your name will not be revealed.

I will present the results in my thesis, which is a book containing all my research. This will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and another examiner.

I would be extremely grateful if could help me in this project. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the research. If you agree to participate in the study, please sign the consent form on the next page.

Yours sincerely,

_____

Alan Sheehan

Consent Form

I _____ agree to participate in Alan Sheehan's research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my group conversation with Alan Sheehan to be tape-recorded

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission up to two weeks after the group conversation, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that my name will not be revealed.

I understand that disguised extracts from my group conversation may be used in the research:

(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

Signed _____

Date _____

Appendix 7 Interview protocol for focus group interviews

Types • Name some types of assessments that have been used in your time in primary school. • How often do teachers assess the pupils? • Do some teachers assess the pupils more than others? • What types do you think are best? Why? • What types are worst? Why?
Purposes • Why do teachers assess pupils? • Does assessment help you or make it harder to learn? • Tell me about one time when assessment helped you. • Tell me about a time when assessment made it harder for you to learn. • Is it important to do well in assessments? Why/why not?
Consultation • Do teachers ask pupils about the assessment types to be used? • Is this a good idea? Why/why not? • What is the best way for a teacher to see if a pupil is learning? • What is the best way for a school to see if a teacher is doing a good job?
Feedback • How often do you get feedback on how you are doing at school? Daily Weekly Monthly Yearly • What kind of feedback do you prefer, written or oral? Private or public? • How does feedback on your work make you feel?

Appendix 8 Research approval from the Social Ethics Research Committee (SREC) at UCC

UCC

Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh, Éire
University College Cork, Ireland

Oifig an Leas - Uachtaráin Taighde agus Nuálaíochta
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Mr Alan Sheehan,
School of Education

17th May 2013

Dear Alan,

Thank you for submitting your research (project entitled The nature, role and impact of assessment in primary school in Ireland, and its relationship with the Government strategy, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life #153*) to SREC for ethical perusal. I am pleased to say that we see no ethical impediment to your research as proposed and we are happy to grant approval.

We wish you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

S Hammond

Sean Hammond
Chair of Social Research Ethics Committee

Professor Anita R. Maguire BSc PhD CChem MRSC
Vice President for Research and Innovation

Ollscoil na hÉireann, Corcaigh
National University of Ireland, Cork