

Introducing school-based assessment as part of junior cycle reform in Ireland: a bridge too far?

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Abstract Assessments and examinations play a critical role in certifying student achievement in secondary education. Prompted by concerns about the negative effects of examinations on curriculum, teaching and learning, elements of School-Based Assessment (SBA) have been introduced into certification systems, sometimes modelled on practice in other jurisdictions. This case study investigates factors influencing efforts to introduce SBA in lower secondary education in the Republic of Ireland and reactions from the main stakeholders. Policymakers' perspectives were informed by national consultations, results of international assessments, trends towards skills-based curricula and practices in relation to SBA as part of high-stakes assessment internationally. Despite broad enthusiasm for the reforms from most stakeholders, teachers remained opposed. A series of compromise proposals shifted the reforms far from their intended nature, leaving in place a dual system of assessment that incorporates continued centralised examining by the state along with some non-certified SBA by teachers. The efficacy of this solution in relation to the original aims of the reform remains to be seen. The analysis explores relevant substantive and methodological issues. The complex interplay between international, national and very local influences on policy implementation is highlighted, suggesting the need for due diligence in anticipating and managing stakeholder responses to reform initiatives. Readers' attention is also drawn to the intricacy of undertaking qualitative case study inquiry and the need for awareness in relation to possible alternative interpretations of data.

Keywords Assessment reform · School-based assessment · Policy borrowing · Examinations · High-stakes testing

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1 Introduction

In September 1944 during Operation Market Garden, Allied paratroopers were dropped along a road corridor over 100 km through German-held territory in the Netherlands. The aim was to hold a succession of strategic bridges while waiting for ground troops and armour to arrive, thus accelerating the drive into the Ruhr. When briefed about the plan, British Lieutenant-General Browning said of the bridge at Arnhem, furthest from the front line: ‘I think we might be going a bridge too far’ (Ryan 1974, p. 67). Browning’s prophetic statement might well apply to recent attempts to introduce School-Based Assessment (SBA) into secondary education in the Republic of Ireland as part of broad reform of lower secondary education.

This paper looks at efforts by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in Ireland to introduce reform aligned with similar change internationally and the extent to which specific local contexts and powerful stakeholders interplay to amend the essence of the reform agenda. Approaches to assessment in Irish secondary education have been characterised as highly restricted, linked to maintaining pedagogies of conformity, predictable drill and rote learning (OECD 1991; Post-Primary Education Forum 2013). The paper charts a succession of national reports, debates and initiatives framed around possible amendment to long-standing assessment arrangements and structures. This lively debate goes back almost five decades during which there has been significant change in curriculum, some adjustment to pedagogy but relatively less adjustment to assessment. The recent reform was designed to dramatically reshape assessment and rebalance the examinations system and let teachers take more control over how their students are assessed, through SBA for certification purposes. Readers of *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* over the years will be familiar with investigations related to SBA in a number of Scandinavian education systems. Studies include Gustafsson and Erickson’s (2013) exploration of attempts to ‘fix’ perceived problems with teacher-marking of national tests and some unintended consequences of this remarking by the Inspectorate. Whereas such studies illustrate widespread practice of SBA in Scandinavia and desire on the part of teachers to retain responsibility for assessing their own students, this paper analyses why a majority of secondary teachers in Ireland preferred continued external, centralised assessment without SBA. Findings reveal assumptions and challenges underlying trends in many countries for greater teacher involvement in high-stakes assessment. The main objectives of the paper are to:

1. Identify national and some international influences guiding the conceptualisation of the reform of curriculum and assessment in lower secondary education in Ireland.
2. Identify key assessment elements associated with the reform and analyse stakeholder reactions, especially the negative position adopted by many teachers
3. Explore assumptions made by policymakers about the suitability and acceptability of reforms to the local educational and social contexts.

2 Overview of student certification in Irish secondary education

Students in the Republic of Ireland typically attend secondary ('post-primary') school between the ages of 12 and 18, with compulsory schooling to 16. Secondary education is structured in two phases: lower secondary known as *junior cycle* (3 years) and upper secondary known as *senior cycle* (2 or optionally, 3 years). Curricula are developed centrally by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), a statutory agency that advises the minister for education and skills on matters of curriculum and assessment at pre-school, primary and secondary levels. Student enrolment and retention rates in secondary and tertiary education are high by international standards: almost all students complete lower secondary education and over 90% complete upper secondary education. (DES 2015a).

Formal certification of students' progress in secondary school is undertaken at the conclusion of both cycles. The *Junior Certificate*, recently revised as the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (DES 2015b, 2017a) and *Leaving Certificate* are awarded at the end of lower and upper secondary education respectively. Assessments and examinations are generally set and scored by the State Examinations Commission (SEC), a statutory agency responsible for the operation of key State examinations largely at the secondary level. Stakes attached to leaving certificates grades are high as they are used for selecting applicants to courses in universities and other tertiary educational institutions. Examination processes for junior cycle, also co-ordinated by the SEC, have traditionally mirrored those for the upper-level exam. Students typically study 11 or 12 subjects at Junior Cycle, with a recent reduction to 8 to 10, and they sit certificate examinations in June. Until the reform subjects and associated examinations were tiered at two or three different levels of challenge: *higher*, *ordinary* and in three subjects, *foundation*. Student responses are graded anonymously by examiners hired by the SEC. Teachers do not assess their own students for state certification purposes. Both examinations attract considerable media interest during the administration period and again some months later when results are reported to students. Since 1992, student achievement in junior cycle examinations have been reported as one of fourteen grade bands, but since June 2017, this has been reduced to just six.

3 Theoretical perspectives

Reform of education is not far from the top of political agendas in many education systems, not surprisingly given that education is frequently at the heart of national identity and transmission of related 'beliefs, ideas and knowledge from generation to generation' (Ward and Eden 2009, p. 1). Adjustment to policy and practices in education are increasingly frequent, often in response to actual or perceived needs or deficits. Reforms can take a bottom-up embryonic trajectory with initiatives spawned at school or local level or reflect a more top-down model with guidelines handed from central authorities or the state (Chapman and Mahlck 1997). Porter and Hicks (1997) highlight what they consider to be a widespread but flawed traditional stage model conceptualisation of education reform consisting of six sequential steps: identification

of problem, agenda setting, formulation of proposals, adaptation through political and related action, implantation of policies through bureaucratic systems and evaluation of implementation and impact. Bell and Stevenson (2006) also identify problems with this linear model, including unpredictability of events during policy reform and insufficient attention to implementation long term. One key concern in policy reform is the fidelity of implementation at local level. If reform is to achieve its aims, the message must be clear and communicated accurately to those who are expected to implement it at local level who must then interpret the reform in the way intended by policymakers. Frequently, this is problematic for reasons associated with policy ambiguity, ambitiousness of instructional ideas, institutional and individual capacity, push-back from stakeholders (Elmore 2003; Coburn et al. 2016), teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning and what is important for their students (Goodson 2001; Siskin 2003; Datnow and Hubbard 2016). Chapman and Mahlck (1997), while acknowledging that education ministries play a crucial role in initiating change, identify seven particular obstacles to influencing actual change in school and classrooms. These include

1. Policies may not actually be communicated to the schools.
2. The policy is communicated in such vague terms that leave teachers unsure about what they are supposed to do.
3. Teachers view the policies as inappropriate and not relevant to the realities of their teaching context.
4. The policies place excessive demands on teachers who are unwilling to meet them.
5. Supports for policy implementation are not sufficient.
6. Policymakers are unaware of on-going pedagogical practices at the classroom level.
7. Different policies proposed by the Ministry may be incompatible and interact in unexpected ways

Any one or a combination of these obstacles may hamper or amend implementation of new policy and practices in a myriad of ways. Gleeson (2010) noted how poor prevailing economic circumstances in Ireland restricted the availability of funding for continuing professional development (CPD) to support implementation of the fledgling Junior Certificate in the early 1990s (obstacle 5). He also highlighted the position of one powerful teachers' union who rejected proposed changes to assessment in 1999, in part, because of fears that the policy would lead to legal accountability by teachers for the marks awarded in school-based assessment (obstacle 4). Granville (2004) identified assessment, particularly examinations at the end of upper secondary education, as one of the few curriculum issue to generate public interest in Ireland. He outlines a transformation in relation to formulation of educational policy. Initially very much the preserve of a small number of officials within the education ministry, this evolved to employing wider more participative processes from the mid-1980s with the establishment of the Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) and then the NCCA, an organisation very influential in policy development as will be seen later in this paper.

In formulating new policies, education systems frequently look to other systems for potential ideas. Borrowing policies tried out elsewhere is a long-standing hallmark of educational policy-making. Motivation for policy borrowing typically relates to innovating and improving processes at home combined with a desire to remain

educationally and economically competitive. There was keen interest in instructional practices across Europe during the nineteenth century such as enhancing literacy levels in Iceland (Sprigade 2004) and the use of monitors to supplement the work of teachers in large classes (Caruso 2004). The advent of large-scale international surveys of achievement from the 1960s facilitated comparison of the relative attainment of students in different countries. Although frequently reduced to ‘horseraces’ between competing systems, much of the value of international studies derives from comparative information about curricula and pedagogical practices (Husén 1967; McKnight et al. 1987; Travers and Westbury 1989; Oldham 2003; Mullis et al. 2012; Sellar and Lingard 2013; Rožman and Klieme 2017).

Successors of the earlier studies such as TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA have increased interest in practices in other educational systems, particularly systems that are perceived to be ‘high-performing’ (Darling-Hammond and McCloskey 2008, p. 263). Policymakers frequently seek to emulate the ‘success’ of high-achieving countries by adopting policies regarded as helpful in bringing about such performance (Grek 2009; OECD 2011; Wiseman, 2013; Waldow et al. 2014). To this end, Mourshed et al. (2010) reviewed what they considered to be 20 of the world’s most improved school systems to identify common interventions. Reforms include: revising policy documents, education laws, curriculum and standards, improving the capacity of principals and teachers through CPD, assessing student learning, data-led instruction and reviewing reward and remuneration structures.

Ochs and Phillips (2004) identify four stages in policy borrowing: cross-national attraction, decision-making, implementation and internalisation. *Attraction* reflects the motivations for interest in the policies of another system; *decision-making* indicates use of the policy or practice from elsewhere to inform decision-making. *Implementation* addresses challenges with borrowing, reactions from stakeholders and modifications to the policy. A policy may not necessarily be transferred in its totality from one location to another; the influence may be more nuanced and the policy may be part-borrowed instead. Therefore, a system might engage with stages 1 and 2 (cross-national attraction, decision-making) yet achieving the final two stages with any degree of fidelity can be more challenging. Some of these challenges relate to what Cohen and Neufeld (1981, p. 70) term ‘social geology’: existing layered ideas, practices and institutions built into education systems over many years that constitute a type of geological strata. Previous policies and routines remain despite the overlaying of new policies, limiting what people in the present can see and do.

Social geology is a useful metaphor for analysing the reform of the junior cycle of secondary education in Ireland where the local ecosystem reflects a careful evolution and fit of policies and practices. To succeed, policy borrowing requires commensurate policy learning where national/local histories, cultures and political processes need to be anticipated (Lingard 2010; Salokangas and Kauko 2015; Harris et al. 2016). In relation to assessment, Black and Wiliam (2005) highlight the differential influences of political and societal factors on assessment practice across different jurisdictions. Policies found promising and welcomed in one education system may be perceived differently in another, leading to dilution or rejection of the reform. Accordingly, as outlined ahead, the investigation in the present paper provides illustration and cautionary advice to any system undertaking radical change, especially where the prevailing ecosystem is stable.

Central to the present investigation is the proposed adoption within the Irish education system of SBA as part of student certification at the end of lower secondary school. A notable cluster of SBA practice is to be found in Scandinavia where teachers in many instances assume primary if not total responsibility for assessing their own students, especially in primary and lower secondary education. Sweden, for example, has a strong legacy of using national tests—graded by the students' own teachers—to be used for certification purposes. National and international reviews of practice (e.g. OECD 2012) highlighted some concerns about the stability of scores awarded by teachers on these national tests and also about the correspondence between student scores on the national tests and final grades reported by teachers at the end of the year, leading to greater levels of oversight by the national schools' inspectorate. Novak and Carlbom (2017, pp. 685–686) highlight potential negative effects of additional moderation by central education authorities: establishment of 'legalistic discourse', 'control policies', mistrust of teachers' professionalism, compromised teacher autonomy and reduced 'pedagogical autonomy and initiative' on the part of teachers; points echoed by Rasmussen and Friche (2011) in relation to the addition of formal examinations to more school-based tests at the 9th grade level in Denmark. Similarly, Gustafsson and Erickson (2013) recognise discrepancies in teacher marking of assessments in Sweden, despite the existence of extensive guidelines for marking. However, taking issue with methodology employed in remarking samples of scripts by the Inspectorate, and with the levels of support offered to teachers for grading, the authors do not find convincing evidence to conclude that systematic bias by teachers or schools is evident.

In Norway also, teachers are afforded considerable autonomy in relation to assessment during the secondary school years, with education ministers emphasising the centrality of trust and dialogue to successful reform of assessment. Some teachers express reservations about more formalised systematic use of assessment for learning that might introduce greater accountability by national authorities (Hopfenbeck et al. 2015). The education system in Finland also places very considerable responsibility and trust in teachers to assess and provide feedback to their own students throughout basic school (Andersen 2010). This applies to assessments carried out during the year and to certification at the end of each term, year and at the conclusion of basic education at the end of grade 9 (Eurydice n.d.). Sahlberg (2015, p. 95) argues that the absence of high-stakes testing in basic education in Finland enables teachers to 'focus on teaching and learning without the disturbance of frequent tests that have to be passed'. Interestingly, he notes that report cards issued by different schools in Finland may not be 'necessarily fully comparable' (Sahlberg 2015, p. 94) due to differences in interpretation of national student assessment guidelines, but that this level of non-comparability is preferable to a strict regimen of standardised testing.

However, teacher involvement in grading their own students in high-stakes or national testing contexts is not unproblematic. Optimism about increased validity is tempered by sometimes unknown levels of reliability even where moderation is employed (Harlen 2005; Brookhart 2011; Johnson 2013; Tisi et al. 2013) and by potential demands on teacher workload and professional development (De Lisle 2016). In focusing on a case study of reform in Irish lower secondary education, this paper investigates the shaping of national policy, in part, by policy borrowing from other jurisdictions and what happens when key local stakeholders reject the policies borrowed and do not want the autonomy associated with SBAs.

4 Assessment reform and policy borrowing in Ireland

4.1 Reforming assessment practice

The place of an external examination at the end of lower secondary education in Ireland can be traced back at least to the establishment of the Intermediate Certificate Examination in 1924, soon after the establishment of an independent Irish state. With secondary education the domain of a relatively small proportion of the cohort until the introduction of ‘free education’ in 1967, the curriculum and secondary examinations were relatively unchanged throughout the early and middle twentieth century. A number of reviews and suggestions for reform emerged throughout the 1970s and 1980s. These included investigations and reports by Madaus and Macnamara (1970), Heywood et al. (1980) and the Curriculum and Examinations Board (1986), but the appetite for radical change in relation to school-based assessment by the Department of Education meant that little change ensued, perhaps because it was ‘outside the prevailing plausibility structure’ for many teachers and the public (Heywood 2012, p. 90). One significant curricular change was introduction of the Junior Certificate Programme in 1989, expected to serve the needs of almost all students in lower secondary education.

Whereas the 1989 curriculum reflected change in structure and content, arrangements for student assessment and certification changed little. Limited, optional provision for coursework by students in some subjects attracted negligible uptake by schools so that most subjects were examined on the basis of terminal exams at the end of the third year of the programme. Exceptions include a mandatory action project completed by students in civic, social and political education (CSPE) contributing 60% of the marks and coursework in religious education and science worth 20 and 35%, respectively. However, grading of all such non-examination work by students is carried out by the SEC and not by their own teachers.

4.2 International influences on reform

Educational policymakers in Ireland have frequently framed priorities and initiatives aligned with ideas elsewhere (Barry 2014). The origin of a number of reforms can be traced to initiatives borrowed from specific countries or, as Waldow (2012, p. 415) conceptualises policy borrowing, adapted from prevailing international best practice in the form of ‘various types of international organisations, transnational processes such as the Bologna Process and international studies such as PISA’. Encouragement to school staff to themselves appraise school functioning and effectiveness drew on international trends towards school self-evaluation (McNamara and O’Hara 2005; DES 2012a). The collation of primary schools’ aggregated standardised test results by the DES, though lacking some of the overt accountability apparatus of other jurisdictions, nonetheless reflects practice in many systems. Target setting for students identified as disadvantaged is framed, in part, against various level bands on PISA (DES 2017b). Re-formulation of the mathematics curriculum in lower secondary education (DES 2013) bears striking similarity to work by the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics (2000) in the USA, specifically in relation to mathematical competencies. Integration of key skills into

curricula was informed by work on similar competencies by the OECD and European Commission (Johnston et al. 2015) while radical reform of teacher education partially reflects practice in Finland (International Review Panel 2012).

Changes in curriculum and assessment in Ireland also reflect developments internationally. Standard-based curricula have been introduced in many systems (Fuhrman 1999), and this is reflected in approaches to revised language and mathematics curricula in Irish primary schools (DES 2015c; NCCA 2016, 2017). The work of the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) in the UK during the 1990s and since has figured largely in policy and practice re-orientation in many countries including Ireland. A number of individuals associated with that group have provided advice to Irish policymakers over recent years and the nomenclature of assessment *for* learning (AfL) and assessment *of* learning (AoL), promoted by the ARG has been adopted in Irish discourse. Benefits attributed to AfL in relation to teaching and learning (OECD 2005) have also informed the development of Irish policy (NCCA 2007; DES 2012b). Benchmarks for teacher competency enacted in many education systems, including Ireland, emphasise relatively similar dimensions of assessment literacy (Murchan and Shiel 2017). An increased role for SBA as part of certification processes is evident in many systems (see The Scottish Government 2011, for example) with the promise of greater involvement of teachers in the formal assessment of their own students, broader types of learning in class and enhanced inferences in relation to students' results (Collins et al. 2010; Baird and Black 2013).

Key to the present paper is the role played by teachers in formally certifying student achievement at junior cycle, specifically in the context of reforms proposed by the DES in 2012 and modified in 2015. Those reforms envisaged a changed role for teachers whereby schools and teachers would replace external SEC examiners in certifying students' learning, using classroom-based assessments and examinations. Whereas teachers have traditionally facilitated students in completing coursework in a small number of subjects, they were not directly involved in assessing the work for State certification. The bulk of assessment marks, therefore, continue to be generated from student responses on terminal written exams administered to students during a 2-week period in June at the end of lower secondary education and graded by the SEC.

5 Data and methods

In October 2012, the DES published *A Framework for Junior Cycle*, a radical blueprint for reform of curriculum and assessment in junior cycle education. The policy aimed to: reduce curriculum overload, introduce short courses developed by schools, address the curriculum needs of students with special educational needs, promote AfL and reform procedures for certifying student achievement. Whereas there was broad support for most curricular changes, issues arose about the assessment/certification proposals, notably from the two teacher unions that represent secondary teachers. The present paper explores the antecedents to that policy, the debate on assessment over a prolonged period, responses by stakeholders to the initiative and efforts to broker agreement on a modified policy acceptable to teachers so that the reform could be implemented.

5.1 Research design

Given significant contestation associated with the reform proposals, a constructivist interpretative paradigm was adopted in the study, recognising the multiple understandings of reality inherent in qualitative inquiry (Rapley 2007). It was apparent that some groups associated with the reform viewed things differently, and this needed to be reflected in the conceptualisation and design of the study. Furthermore, the challenge for a researcher in maintaining an objective standpoint within any such analysis of multiple realities needs to be acknowledged, as qualitative data are always the product of a process of interpretation (Denscombe 2010).

In keeping with Cohen et al. (2011), a descriptive case study approach, bounded by specific temporal, geographic, cultural and policy context parameters, was employed. This enabled specific investigation of this one national initiative where a diverse community of stakeholders were all focused on one reform process. Thus the case in question is the Junior Cycle reform, including both the immediate contemporary policy initiative and aftermath and also incorporating events in the recent past that help understand the issues (Yin 2014). Exploration of the debate prior to the reform therefore provides a longitudinal element to the research through analysis of documents and archival records (Bryman 2004). One advantage of the case study, identified by Nisbet and Watt (1984, cited in Cohen et al. 2011), is that it can be undertaken by a single researcher. A disadvantage in such a study is the risk of observer bias where data are reviewed by only one researcher rather than where multiple researchers are employed, a limitation that will be revisited later.

5.2 Data

Data were derived from policy documents, research reports, books, academic and professional journals, press releases, parliamentary records, speeches, print media and stakeholder websites. These sources reflect two forms of data—documents and archival records—frequently found in case studies (Yin 2009 cited in Cohen et al. 2011). Whereas additional useful data might have been yielded by interviews with participants or observation of interactions between actors, such approaches were not incorporated in to the study design due to a combination of the longitudinal nature of the phenomena of interest, the contemporaneously contested and somewhat raw nature of the issues, and researcher capacity in terms of time and available resources. A systematic trawl of documentation covered the years 1990 to 2017, since introduction of the existing junior cycle curriculum. Thematic analysis of the data focused on the rationale for change in assessment policy, key stakeholders' perceptions of the implications of change and reaction to it. Analyses grouped aspects of the reform and subsequent responses under two broad 'push' and 'pull' categories and resultant themes were used to help frame the challenges of educational reform and policy borrowing academically in the specific case of proposed SBA in Irish secondary education.

A number of data sources were used for the investigation and specific criteria were applied for inclusion in the analysis. The sources needed to be available in paper or digital form (such as copy of a ministerial speech), it needed to be publicly available and it needed to address either fully or in part issues of assessment in

second level education. Sources consulted had, in general, to be published since the introduction of the Junior Certificate curriculum in 1989, with some exceptions made for key documents from State agencies that informed development of that curriculum. Major policy documents were accessed. These were limited to reports published by the NCCA and DES that dealt substantially with secondary school assessment since publication of the NCCA's *Programme for Reform*, thus covering the period 1993 to 2017. Digital records from websites were reviewed from 2011 to 2017, the earlier date being the year when the NCCA published its concrete proposals for reforming junior cycle. Webpages of the 'partners' represented on the Council of the NCCA were included. These were limited to organisations who have significant interface with secondary education issues, including: the NCCA, DES, SEC, Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI), Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI), Joint Managerial Body and the National Parents' Council Post Primary. Website and print records of two prominent national newspapers, the *Irish Times* and *Irish Independent*, from 2011 to 2017 were also accessed, along with issues of the professional journals *ASTIR* (published by the ASTI) and *TUI News* since 2011.

These sources led to analysis of a range of research reports, professional journals, webpage commentary and position statements, press releases and speeches. The review is largely of Irish data, though combined with the broader international literature in the discussion. In searching for documents, keywords in the national professional and public narrative were employed: *Junior Cycle* and *Junior Certificate with Reform and Framework*. Given the high profile and contested nature of the reforms during the time the research was carried out, relevant webpages were typically within two to three clicks from organisations' homepages and contained links to additional previous data. For example, the 'News' tab on the homepage of the ASTI teachers' union contained a link to a 'Campaigns' page that was frequently updated in relation to the union's on-going response to the reform. Similarly, the News and Events tab on the homepage of the TUI union linked to material of relevance to this study. Initial review of targeted sources as outlined above led to identification of additional sources relevant to the investigation, illustrating the connectivity of documents to wider narrative, in keeping with Prior (2011). For example, the website of the NCCA led to identification of relevant testimony given by members of that organisation contained in the records of a parliamentary committee and to a number of studies commissioned by the NCCA but undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). Similarly, some speeches from officials in the DES led to analysis of relevant OECD documents in relation to key competencies and skills and to earlier media reporting of PISA outcomes for Ireland.

In identifying the 'documents' forming the database for this study, great effort was made to ensure that the sources consulted met Scott's (1990 cited in Bryman 2004) criteria for evaluating the quality of documents: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. The full list of documentary sources is provided in the list of references, and it is hoped that the reader can explore this database and evaluate the extent to which the views presented in this paper are shaped by any undue personal interpretation on the part of the author and thus gauge what Denscombe (2010, p. 301) highlights as the 'confirmability' or objectivity of the findings.

5.3 Data analysis

Data were almost entirely in narrative form, for example, published reports, position papers, digital webpage documents, transcripts of speeches and press releases. Qualitative methods were used to identify and extract relevant sections from the data that dealt specifically with the reform of assessment in junior cycle. For example, most of the published reports were omnibus in nature, containing analysis, discussion and recommendations in relation to broad educational issues at secondary level, including mission and goals, curriculum, initial teacher education, CPD and assessment. The analysis for the present study focused largely on chapters and sections of reports that dealt specifically with assessment and was carried out in chronological order based on publication date. The sequential analysis, coupled with presentation of some of the findings in chronological order (see Sect. 6.1) reflects Cohen et al.'s (2011) identification of such an approach as a hallmark of case study and is consistent with one of Yin's (2014) five analytic techniques associated with case study. Text was read and re-read, reflecting advice to become thoroughly familiar with the case, thus enabling the construction of a rich description and contextual positioning of the case followed by identification of relevant issues or themes (Creswell 2005; Cohen et al. 2011).

Analysis of websites drew on text extracted from pages that featured content largely in relation to junior cycle reform. Much of this featured official positions of agencies (unions, managerial associations) and press releases hosted on the agency websites. Clearly, much data emanated from non-peer-reviewed material, but given the significant focus in the paper on stakeholder reactions to the reforms, the views of stakeholders were most clearly articulated on the fora used by organisations to communicate with their constituencies. In the main, professional journals and newsletters were accessed electronically through agency websites and relevant articles were extracted using the junior cycle-related keywords highlighted above.

Prior (2011) provides a useful framework for analysing documents, focusing on two interpretations of document (as resource, as topic) and on two elements associated with documents (content, use and function). The present study drew specifically on the dimensions of content and use. Documents were reviewed and coded by hand on the basis of what was contained in the text itself. The analysis also focused on how the documents were used as a resource by various actors associated with secondary education and policy in Ireland to promote certain viewpoints. This duality of analysis facilitated identification of themes that looked both at what documents contained and how they were used to shape the debate in relation to assessment. What became clear during the analysis stage was that the documents themselves, particularly the policy position papers, reports and research reports became part of the story of the reform, with actors drawing on the reports or contributing to them to articulate their preferred positions. This is reflected in a number of themes drawn from the policy documents that helped identify a number of themes emanating from within the system ('push' factors) along with elements of policy borrowing presented later in Sect. 6.2 ('pull' factors) Therefore, the documents included in the analysis were "studied as components in networks of action rather than as independent and inert 'things' that can be approached 'unobtrusively'" (Prior 2011, p. 98).

5.4 Inferential integrity and study limitations

As mentioned earlier, a strength of case study research is that it can be undertaken by a single researcher (Nisbet and Watt 1984 cited in Cohen et al. 2011). This strength, evident in the present study is not without drawbacks, one of which, *confirmability* (Denscombe 2010), examines the extent to which qualitative research can produce findings that are free from the influence of the researcher. In the present study, the process of identifying, analysing and interpreting the data was undertaken by one researcher as resources were not available to secure multiple readers to sift through the data, thus providing considerable responsibility on one reader.

Therefore, it is necessary to approach this study's interpretations with appropriate caution, despite strategies employed to ensure that the interpretations are as free from bias as possible. This reflects also the 'crisis of legitimacy' (Rapley 2007, p. 128) in the data themselves where multiple understandings of reality permeated discussions about assessment reform and its impact in particular on students and teachers and on public perception of the certification outcomes. Rapley (2007) offers some solutions to help re-assure readers of the integrity of document analysis, particularly pertinent to the present single-researcher study. These include providing the reader with detailed access to the materials that formed the basis for the claims and providing quotes from the primary data. Thus, a comprehensive list of sources is presented in the references to this paper, reflecting the totality of sources used in the study and the description and analysis is widely illustrated with quotes from the documents and participants. This study, therefore, can form the basis of an archive of material related to junior cycle reform 'sufficiently rich to admit subsequent reinterpretation' (Cohen et al. 2011, p. 292), especially if combined in a possible future and larger study with interviews with key actors, perhaps when sufficient distance is reached from the contested issues. Readers, therefore, can consult the sources themselves and engage directly with the material and may well generate reasonable rival interpretations for the study as a whole and indeed for individual findings and interpretations within it. This represents one form of respondent validation where others, and particularly actors in the process, can respond to this text by reference to the original dataset used.

6 Findings and analysis

6.1 Rationale for interest in SBA evident in policy reports

Cohen et al. (2011) characterise case studies as providing a chronological narrative of events relevant to a case and blending description of the events with the analysis of them. Accordingly, analysis in this study included a chronological analysis of key documents produced by State policymakers, focusing on the case built for SBA and the responses of some stakeholders throughout that process. It is helpful in some case studies to unfold and unpack events in sequence (Cohen et al. 2011), and this principle was adopted in outlining a chronological analysis of key policy documents from 1992 to 2017.

Original conceptualising around the junior certificate prior to 1989 envisaged some element of SBA, but this was dropped by the time the first cohort of students was

examined in 1992. The new curriculum was in its first year of implementation before serious debate began in relation to how it would be assessed. The dominance of written, externally scored exams carried over from the previous *Intermediate Certificate* programme created some anomalies. For example, whereas the syllabus in French (NCCA 2003, p. 1) is characterised as a *communicative syllabus* that will equip students to cope effectively in a native speaker environment, the oral examination was optional for schools and only a handful of schools administered it.

Soon after the new curriculum was introduced in schools in 1989, a succession of reports queried the suitability of assessment arrangements, highlighting the negative backwash effect on teaching methodologies and classroom organisation and the dominance of rote learning. In 1992, an Irish government consultative document, *Education for a changing world. Green paper on education* (Government of Ireland 1992) queried the effects of restricted assessment techniques on programme implementation and soon the NCCA advocated SBA in the form of ‘greater diversification of assessment modes [at] school level’ supported by CPD for teachers and appropriate moderation systems (NCCA 1993, p. 34). Similar sentiments were echoed by a Government white paper, *Charting our education future* (DES 1995), that recognised the impact of the terminal examinations system in truncating the range of teaching methodologies employed by teachers and recommended that SBA needed to be part of the solution.

In that period also, a national education convention was convened in 1993 to help build stakeholder consensus around principles of education articulated in the 1992 green paper. The convention captured the tensions surrounding the form and function of assessment for certification at junior cycle, noting that while the new programme of study enjoyed widespread support ‘the main concerns lie in the area of its assessment’ (National Education Convention 1994, p. 74). The convention recognised the distorting effect of the exam on students’ curricular experiences and heard calls for change in the system, including a role for SBA. The final report from the convention prophetically noted, however, ‘the concerns of teachers in terms of the extra burden which school-based assessment would place on them and the pressures that might be brought to bear on them’ (National Education Convention 1994, p. 74). Teachers’ reservations, raised at the convention, focused on: potential lowering of the credibility of the certification if teacher-generated marks were included; change for the worse in the relationship between students and teachers when teachers undertake some assessment of students; and concern amongst teachers that they might be open to charges of bias and possible pressure from parents if they were actively involved in assessing their own students. These arguments, advanced in 1993, also formed the bedrock of teacher opposition to reforms in 2012, 2015 and up to the time of writing. Despite the conclusion of *teachers* that the examination should remain in its existing form the report of the education convention accepted criticisms of existing assessment processes and recommended more SBA.

This call was reflected again in two significant documents published in 1999. The NCCA’s *Junior cycle review: Progress report: Issues and options for development*, coinciding with publication of a new primary curriculum, highlighted a widening mismatch between the educational aims, pedagogy and modes of assessment at primary and junior cycle level, noting the dominance of rote learning at junior cycle in preparation for terminal exams, with particularly adverse impact on students from

disadvantaged background. Though recognising the reservations of some teachers, the NCCA again recommended introduction of some SBA into assessment practices, characterising the junior certificate as a ‘low-stakes’ examination (NCCA 1999, p. 46), given increasing numbers of students continuing into senior cycle. The DES (1999, p. 11) responded quickly with its junior certificate *Issues for discussion* paper, agreeing with the NCCA’s analysis and recommendation on SBA combined with external assessments, though recognising the challenges in altering state examinations perceived as ‘national icons’ by teachers. By the time of the next major update on the junior cycle review (NCCA 2004), the nomenclature of Assessment for Learning had entered the discourse with calls for an increased role for formative assessment in the context of a smaller junior cycle course to help reduce overload on students. Amongst further analyses of the junior cycle, longitudinal research by the ESRI highlighted problems of declining student interest and engagement in lower secondary school, tracking of students, restricted teaching methods and excessive emphasis on drill and practice for the terminal exams. Some of the blame for this was laid squarely on the nature, format and structure of the exams (Smyth et al. 2004, 2006, 2007; Smyth 2009), and these criticisms informed proposals contained in the document *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle* published by the NCCA in 2011.

With the exception of teachers, broad consensus emerged amongst stakeholders over time in relation to junior cycle education. Two overall conclusions that can be drawn from national reports and commissioned research in the period 1992 to 2011 are that (i) there was a significant negative backwash effect of the examination system on teaching and learning that, in turn, undermined the principles of the curriculum and student experience of the junior cycle and (ii) introduction of SBA would help alleviate these negative impacts. In December 2012, the DES (2012b) produced *its* blueprint for reform, an ambitious *Framework for junior cycle* that built on previous reports and consultations but, crucially, outlined radical proposals to amend assessment practices and student certification. Main elements of the DES reforms included:

- Reduction of the number of main subjects to be studied by students.
- Role for schools in developing short courses of 100 h duration over 3 years; courses would be on topics not currently on the curriculum such as Chinese and digital media literacy.
- Reduction in the length of written examination papers (2 h maximum).
- Elimination of tiered examinations in most subjects.
- Dedicated curricular programmes for students with special educational needs.
- Standardised tests in language, mathematics and science.
- Greater use of formative assessment in class.
- For certification: 40% of marks allocated for SBA; 60% for examination; after a phase-in period, all assessment in all subjects to be set and marked by teachers.
- Reduce number of grade categories from seven to four.
- Certification provided to students by the school, not by the State.
- Provision of CPD for teachers.

Whereas there was broad welcome for many aspects of the proposed reforms, teachers focused immediately on changes in assessment, and particularly on the

proposed involvement of teachers in grading their own students for certification purposes. In criticising the proposals, they highlighted what were, in the view of the unions, crucial and unacceptable changes made by the Minister that departed from recommendations made by the NCCA in 2011 (TUI 2012). These discrepancies set the stage for what would become a protected and bitter dispute between the DES and teacher unions with residual effects to the present day and this is further explored later in Sect. 6.3.

6.2 Policy-borrowing themes

Whereas the issues discussed above can be framed as ‘push’ factors from within the Irish education system, a number of external or ‘pull’ factors can be identified also. These include increased focus on AfL, reframing of curricula around transferrable skills, the influence of PISA results and practice elsewhere in relation to SBA. Some of these are illustrated below in relation to the recent reform experience in Ireland, reflecting the borrowing of policies and practices from other countries or from ‘international points of reference’ (Waldow 2012, p. 415). Lessons, influences and policy borrowing from elsewhere in relation to educational curricula, assessment and certification are evident in the NCCA (2011) proposals for reform and also in subsequent policy published by the DES in 2012 and 2015 (DES 2012b, 2015b).

6.2.1 Cross-curricular competencies

One key international referent is the promotion of cross-curricular competencies in secondary education. Drawing on models developed by the OECD’s (2001) Definition and selection of competencies initiative and by the European Union (2006), eight key cross-curricular skills were prioritised in Irish secondary education. These key skills drew on practice in other countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand (Halbert 2011), promising more holistic education for students across cognitive, social, emotional and physical dimensions. Key skills curricula have implications for assessment especially when trying to assess complex cross-curricular learning outcomes using externally assessed terminal exams.

6.2.2 PISA

A further external referent was PISA, especially the performance of Irish students in 2009. PISA rankings achieved by Ireland from 2000 to 2015, summarised in Table 1, reveal the relatively poorer results in 2009, in the period immediately before development of a number of major reforms at lower secondary level, the grade levels associated with PISA. Newspaper headlines post-PISA 2009 provide some contextual clues to policymakers’ later decisions: ‘Shattering the myth of a world-class education system’ (Flynn 2010); ‘Survey points to hard lessons that need to be learned—fast’ (Walshe 2010), as do contemporaneous calls from employers’ groups to address perceived deficiencies in standards, especially in mathematics and science (Engineers Ireland 2010).

Table 1 Ireland: PISA rankings among 34 OECD countries

	2000 (Shiel et al. 2001)	2003 (Cosgrove et al. 2005)	2006 (Eivers et al. 2008)	2009 (Perkins et al. 2010)	2012 (Perkins et al. 2013)	2015 (Shiel et al. 2016)
Reading (print)	5 ^a	6 ^a	5 ^a	17 ^c	4 ^a	3 ^a
Mathematics	15 ^c	17 ^c	16 ^c	26 ^b	13 ^a	13 ^a
Science	9 ^a	13 ^a	14 ^a	14 ^a	9 ^a	13 ^a
<i>N</i> in OECD	27	29	30	34	34	35

^a Above the OECD average

^b Below the OECD average

^c Not significantly different to OECD average

The impact of PISA is evident in moves by the DES to improve standards through introduction of a literacy and numeracy policy. A significant rationale for that strategy centred on PISA:

There has been a decline in the performance of post-primary students in Ireland in international literacy tests. In 2006, Irish fifteen-year-old students performed at the ‘above average’ level in the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) but in the 2009 round of the assessment, Irish students performed at the ‘average’ level, ranking 17th out of 34 OECD countries. The performance of students in Irish schools in international assessments of mathematics has been disappointing and has declined in recent years. (DES 2011, p. 13).

In the context of junior cycle reform, the acknowledgement by the then Minister that ‘previous PISA reports have informed the changes that we are introducing’ (Quinn 2014) and by the Chief Inspector that ‘PISA has ... been a useful spur to advancing changes in teacher education, curriculum and assessment’ (Hislop 2014, p. 9) reflects the *attraction* and *decision-making* stages of Ochs and Phillips’ model of policy borrowing. Two of the most significant policy documents guiding junior cycle reform (NCCA 2011; DES 2012b) both explicitly acknowledge the influence of PISA. The NCCA interpreted weak PISA scores as evidence that the junior cycle does not serve the needs of students in literacy and numeracy. The DES provided a firm commitment to continue participation in the programme to facilitate ‘national and international comparisons and provide indicative evidence of standards’ (DES 2012b, p. 28). The timing of this is significant: the relatively lower PISA results in 2009 contributed to the specific reshaping of policy on the junior certificate. What the implications might have been had the 2009 results been more in line with previous results, is hard to predict.

6.2.3 School-based assessment

Another external influence on the formulation of assessment policy in Ireland relates to support for the use of teacher-scored coursework in other jurisdictions. In 1992, the

NCCA had couched its advice to the Minister about changes to assessment noting that ‘Ireland is the only developed country which has a fully externally examined system of written assessment at the end of the junior cycle phase of post-primary education’ (NCCA 1999, p. 31). Interestingly, a recent policy shift in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has restored the final examination as the predominant form of assessment for certification at GCSE, replacing almost entirely tests and tasks administered throughout the period of lower secondary schooling.

When the 2009 results delivered Ireland’s version of PISA shock, policymakers reacted by promoting more decentralised autonomy, decision making and assessment by schools, not dissimilar to approaches adopted in Finland. Influenced by what the Minister characterised as the ‘best performing educational systems’ (Quinn 2012) who have introduced substantial elements of SBA into high-stakes assessment, little is left to the imagination in terms of who these systems are, with Finland, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Scotland and Queensland clearly identified by the senior policymakers including the Chief Inspector and an Education Minister (Hislop 2014; O’Sullivan 2014). Hislop (2014, p. 8), highlighting Queensland, noted that:

teachers in other countries have shown that properly supported and moderated teacher-assessment can identify levels of student performance just as effectively as externally administered pen-and-paper tests, and can help to build a reflective professional, culture for improvement as well.

As outlined earlier, SBA is more widely and enthusiastically adopted in countries in Scandinavia, and, in the case of Norway, in tandem with extensive efforts to scale up AfL nationally (Hopfenbeck et al. 2015). There, as in Sweden and Finland, teachers embrace the opportunity to take greater responsibility for the assessment of their students, believing that this provides greater autonomy. Why Irish secondary teachers are reluctant to take on such responsibility is an interesting question, one that we come to in the next section of the paper that analyses the reaction of stakeholders, especially teachers, to the proposals.

6.3 Stakeholders’ response to the reforms

There was reasonably broad welcome for many of the elements, especially: short courses, limiting the number of subjects to be taken, a wider range of learning to be assessed, key competencies, formative assessment, awards for students with special educational needs and reducing the number of grade categories. Proposals to amend the assessment of student achievement for certification purposes, however, drew quick criticism from teachers. Despite one newspaper opinion poll showing a majority of parents not in favour of teachers assessing their own students (Sheahan and Doyle 2014), representatives of parents, recognised ‘time for change’ in relation to junior cycle certification (Myers 2013, p. 1). A joint publication by the Post-Primary Education Forum (2013, p. 16), representing teacher unions, parents and school managerial authorities recognised the ‘vexed issue’ of assessment cautiously noting the imperative that an assessment system should promote rather than undercut the purpose of the curriculum.

Figure 1 graphically represents this author’s interpretation of the response of selected stakeholders to the reforms. Reprising the discussion in Sect. 5.4 about challenges in single-researcher qualitative inquiry and possible bias, it would be interesting to contrast the interpretation below with that of other researchers or readers of *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* who might explore the data. The four descriptors *enthusiastic, neutral, careful* and *not enthusiastic* summarise stakeholders’ general reaction to the reforms. The DES and the teacher unions are on opposite ends of this *enthusiasm* spectrum. Two teacher unions represent teachers’ interests. The ASTI represents about two thirds of the teachers, mainly located in *voluntary secondary* schools that are typically under the patronage of religious denominations. The TUI typically represents teachers in schools managed by *education and training boards* and in *community* and *comprehensive* schools numbering about one quarter of the schools nationally. Initially, both unions opposed the assessment proposals.

Parents and school management were particularly troubled at the prospect of industrial unrest in schools, especially for students undertaking state examinations. Therefore, their position was measured; enthusiastic about the prospect of reform but aware of the need to maintain positive working relationships with teachers. The Joint Managerial Body (2014), representing boards of management of 380 of the country’s 732 secondary schools, characterised the reform as ‘the most radical development in Irish education since the introduction of Free Education almost fifty years ago’, and cautioned that the project was ‘too important to fail’. Students recognised the potential of teachers coming under pressure from parents when assessing students but felt that the risk of ‘teacher bias ... shouldn’t be used as a reason to block the reform’ (Humphreys 2014b). The specific location for any of the actors within Fig. 1 illustrates the challenge in seeking positivist notions of ‘universal truth’ (Rapley 2007, p. 128), and each participant and reader can come to their own conclusions about relative positioning. It is likely that different people could come to different conclusions about where stakeholders belong on such a continuum. As a trigger for discourse about junior cycle reform, however, such representations can be useful to inform debate.

Crucially, while welcoming reform in general, unions opposed plans to involve teachers in the assessment of their own students and characterised some of the assessment proposals as ‘educationally unsound’ (King 2014). The two teacher unions initiated a range of industrial action. Key concerns included: (i) wish to

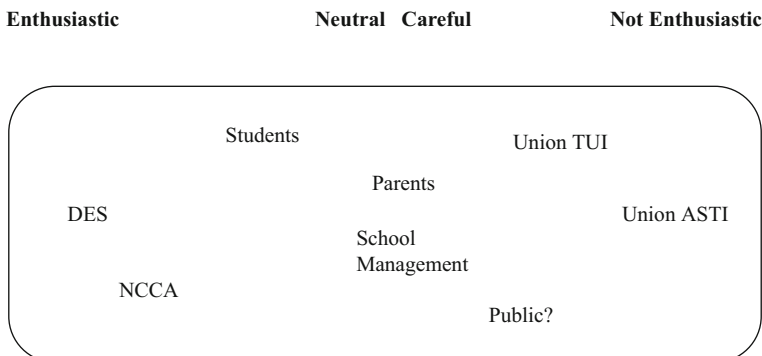


Fig. 1 Junior cycle assessment reform: stakeholder reaction continuum

retain a state certificate of student achievement, (ii) insistence that all student work is graded by external markers rather than students' own teachers, (iii) maintaining relationships between teachers, students and parents and (iv) teacher work load and conditions of service. Table 2 presents a comprehensive list of concerns with associated rationale for them.

Reservations about the potential impact of SBA on teacher-student relationships are evident in comments by teachers as part of a membership consultation by the larger ASTI union on the reforms:

This will lead to a 'distancing' of teachers from their students. This distancing and decoupling of the teacher-as-advocate relationship traditionally enjoyed by teachers and students may have a dramatic effect on the school environment. (ASTI 2013, p. 24).

Teachers' opposition remained steadfast from the launch of the proposals and precipitated a long-running industrial relations dispute, including brief strikes and protests. Negotiations resulted in significant amendments to the original 2012 assessment proposals culminating in the publication of a revised framework for junior cycle in August 2015 by a new education minister, Jan O'Sullivan.

The original DES proposals in 2012 marked a radical shift from existing practice to a position where all student marks would be provided by teachers themselves. Subsequent negotiations revolved around the 'fundamental objection of teachers to school based assessment for certification purposes' (Travers 2015, p. 2). Iterations of the proposals between 2012 and 2017 produced models for consideration by teachers. One proposal agreed between the DES and union leaders (TUI et al. 2015) formed the

Table 2 Key concerns raised by teachers in relation to assessment and certification

Teacher viewpoint	Rationale/comment
Retain State certification	Value of school certificates could vary from school to school.
All assessment for certification to be marked externally	To ensure reliability, consistency and objectivity. Teachers could come under pressure from parents in relation to marks awarded to students, especially if teacher resides in the area served by the school.
Retain teachers' role as advocate, not judge	Maintain existing relationships between teachers, students and parents.
Conditions of work	Increased workload with reforms.
Junior cycle exam useful as a practice for the subsequent Leaving Certificate	Leaving Certificate is largely examination oriented, graded externally.
Junior cycle grades can inform students in choosing subjects for senior cycle	Counter arguments highlight that many students have already chosen senior cycle subjects before JC grades are available.
Would result in lower levels of student motivation	Assessments marked by own teachers would have lower status and result in lower motivation levels by students.
Reform inadequately resourced	School and teacher capacity for SBA is limited.
Inadequate consultation	Some elements of the Ministry's proposal differed from previous NCCA proposals and were not discussed with teachers.

basis for a revised DES policy published in August 2015 but subsequently rejected by the ASTI membership in a ballot. Table 3 provides a summary of the evolving assessment elements in these proposals between 2011 and 2017.

The solution reached in Summer 2015 involved a formula to allow teachers avoid grading their own students as part of state certification. Teacher-generated grades from two proposed SBAs, one in second year and another in third, would be used by schools to report to students and parents directly, using a newly established grading system (four descriptors of achievement). For CBAs teachers would select from a range of tasks set by the NCCA. Parallel to this, students would continue to undertake a terminal assessment (normally an examination) set and graded by the SEC, using seven grade bands. In addition to the exam, the SEC would grade one written *assessment task* (coursework) in each subject completed by students in one class period based on the CBA in 3rd year. The aim was that the *task* would assess what students had learned and the skills and competencies developed when completing the second CBA. The CBA will cover a 'broad range of activities including oral tasks, written work of different types, practical or designing and making tasks, artistic performances, scientific experiments, projects or other suitable tasks' (DES 2016, p. 11). Results from the assessment task, undertaken in school but graded by the SEC, would be combined with the exam grade to provide a composite, externally generated measure of achievement in each subject. Thus the state certified component of students' learning would include only work externally assessed by the SEC who would provide a composite grade for each subject. Results from the SEC (exam plus one assessment task) and from the two teacher-graded SBAs would be included separately on a *Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement* issued by the school with the understanding that they would relate to different aspects of learning and would not be aggregated into one consolidated grade per subject.

In any event, that proposal was balloted amongst union members in Autumn 2015 and although TUI members were in agreement, ASTI members rejected the proposals. Planning for implementation of the proposals along with CPD for teachers proceeded in schools staffed by TUI members only, whereas in schools with all ASTI members or a mixture of both co-operation was withheld. Subsequently, opposition from the ASTI became part of a broader industrial relations campaign around three issues: junior cycle assessment, pay parity for all teachers, and additional payments to teachers for substitution and supervision duties. The details of the other two issues are beyond the scope of this paper. Conflict between the ASTI and the Government around those issues resulted in further strikes in the majority of schools in 2016 as another new Minister, Richard Bruton, sought to reconcile the long-running stand-off.

A further concession to teachers removed a significant barrier for students many of whom would have been unable to undertake the assessment task in English, the first subject in a planned phase-in of subjects to be completed by 2022. The task is worth 10% of the SEC total for English, Business Studies and Science; the other 90% is for the terminal examination. This further policy shift allowed students to complete the task for the 2017 examinations, even if their teachers had not administered the two SBAs. The ASTI (2017a, b) has not altered its fundamental position that all forms of assessment for the state certification, interpreted as the Junior Cycle Profile of

Table 3 Evolution of proposals for certifying student achievement: junior cycle reform 1989–2017

	Junior Cycle 1989	NCCA 2011	DES 2012	DES 2015	2017
Title	Junior Certificate	National Certificate of Junior Cycle Education	Initially School Certificate then Junior Cycle Student Award.	Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement	Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement
Awarding body	State Examinations Commission (SEC)	SEC	School	SEC	SEC
Levels subjects offered at	Generally 2 (ordinary, higher); 3 for English, Irish and Mathematics	Generally 1 common level; 2 for English, Irish and Mathematics	As for 2011	As for 2011	As for 2011
Main timing of assessment	End of year 3 for many subjects; some exceptions, e.g. Art.	Exam at end of year 3. Portfolio during course	End of year 3. Coursework in years 2 and 3	End of year 3. Some in years 2 and 3	During and end of year 3 (2 SBAs in years 2 and 3, not 'State certified')
Main assessment formats for certification	Largely terminal written exam. Some exceptions, e.g. Art, Home economics	Terminal exam (60%). Portfolio of schoolwork (40%) ^a	Final assessment at end of year 3 (60%)—assignment or exam conducted in school and lasting 2 h max. Coursework over years 2 and 3 (40%) ^a	2 SBAs per subject in years 2 and 3, common level ^b ; 1 written assessment task (AT) linked to second SBA (10%). ^c Terminal exam (90%) lasting 2 h max	Written assessment task (10%) and terminal exam (90%) in year 3 ^c
Who develops assessments?	SEC	Exam by SEC. Portfolio specifications by NCCA	Schools ^d	NCCA and SEC	NCCA and SEC
Who marks student work?	SEC	Exam—SEC; portfolio—teacher	Teachers in the school ^d	SBA—teachers in school; Exam and AT—SEC	SBA: teachers (SBA not 'State certified'); Exam and AT: SEC
Coursework moderation	All assessed externally	Internally by school. Some schools sampled by SEC	Internally by school. Provision for some cross-school moderation and national sampling by DES	In-school through subject learning and assessment review meetings.	In-school through subject learning and assessment review meetings ^e

Table 3 (continued)

	Junior Cycle 1989	NCCA 2011	DES 2012	DES 2015	2017
Grading scale	7 grades: A, B, C, D, E, F and NG	5 grades	5 points: distinction (90–100%), higher merit (75–89); merit (55–74); achieved (40–54); not achieved (0–39)	SBA, 4 descriptors—exceptional, above expectations, in line with expectations and yet to meet expectations. Exam and AT (combined): a set of grades' - scale not specified	SBA, 4 descriptors, as for 2015. Exam and AT (combined): 6 descriptors—distinction, higher merit, merit, achieved, partially achieved, not graded.
Appeals	SEC	Not addressed	School-based system	Exam and AT—SEC. SBA—school	As for 2015
Additional elements			Standardised tests in year 2: Reading, Maths and Science	Standardised tests in year 2: Reading, Maths and Science.	Role of standardised tests uncertain

^aThe split of 40% coursework and 60% final assessment in NCCA 2011 and DES 2012 is understood to vary somewhat depending on the needs of some subjects such as music or metalwork

^bExamples of SBAs include: oral presentations, written work, practical/designing activities, artistic performances, scientific experiments, projects etc. SBAs to be conducted in schools in accordance with nationally agreed timetable

^cThe split of 10% Assessment Task and 90% final exam is understood to vary somewhat depending on the needs of some subjects such as music or metalwork

^dSchools to take over responsibility for creating, administering and scoring final assessments in all subjects, after an initial period where the SEC would do so in relation to English, Irish and Mathematics

^eLargest union initially refused to implement SBA or participate in moderation meetings; embargo withdrawn in June 2017. This leaves all State certification based on SEC grades

Achievement, including practicals, portfolios and oral language examinations, cannot be assessed by the student's own teacher. Although the directive forbidding members from co-operating with the reforms was suspended in June 2017, the Union continues to advocate on the issue.

7 Discussion

A number of themes can be identified in relation to junior cycle reform in Ireland. Assessment was seen by policymakers as a necessary lever without which reform of teaching and learning would not be implemented in schools. We also see differing perspectives, by policymakers and teachers especially, in relation to the stakes attached to assessment and certification at lower secondary level. The extent to which existing practice shapes some stakeholders' views is also evident. And finally, teachers' efforts to retain existing arrangements relate strongly to beliefs about their role and relationship vis-à-vis students, to concerns with additional workload and to on-going conflict with Government on a number of job-related issues. These are further explored below.

7.1 Leveraging change in teaching and learning

From the perspective of policymakers, assessment represents an essential means to promote curriculum reform and change in students' educational experience. Policymakers wished to address problems—rote learning, waning student interest and engagement in school, restricted teaching methods and the achievement levels of the bottom half of the student distributions—and they felt that 'if assessment practice does not change, teaching and learning practice will not change either' (Hammond 2011, p. 2) This lesson was learned from previous curriculum reform in 1989, which in the absence of significant change in examination procedures left a 'new curriculum ... strangled by an old examination system' (NCCA 2011, p. 5). This time-round assessment was presented as the corner stone of the entire junior cycle reform. Such has been the emphasis on assessment change that it remains to be seen how the compromise version of SBA now evident can live up to the expectations for improvement of teaching and learning built up over 20 years or more of patient policy generation. We are left to wonder to what extent the NCCA's stark warning of effort without change will characterise lower secondary education in the years to come:

'... system wide change has to begin with the examination. Unless it does, attempts to renew teaching and learning, to build school and professional capacity, and support student engagement will absorb resources, time and energy but deliver little (NCCA 2011, p. 6)

Substantial resources are pledged to support implementation of the assessment model consisting of two SBAs, one assessment task and one exam. Whether the effort is worthwhile in terms of cost, resource allocation and loss of teaching time is debatable. For example, in most subjects, 90% of the weighting for the state

certification will be for a shortened terminal exam. The anomalous position of science is worth noting. Previously 65% of the marks were for the exam. Under the new arrangements, this will now be 90% (Junior Cycle for Teachers, *n.d.*), hardly compatible with the aims of either the science specifications (curriculum) or the original aims of the junior cycle reform.

7.2 Stakes associated with junior cycle assessment

A second theme centres on the stakes associated with the junior certificate examination and qualification. With over 90% of the cohort now completing upper secondary education some 2 or 3 years beyond the junior cycle, policymakers have long queried the continuing need for high-stakes external certification at the lower level (Curriculum and Examinations Board 1986; NCCA 1993; DES 2012b; Quinn 2012).

the Junior Certificate examination does not have a ‘gatekeeper’ function. It is an important certificate for students and for schools, but it is, in common with similar certification in other lower secondary systems, a ‘low stakes’ examination. (NCCA 1999, p. 46).

the junior certificate is expected to serve a purpose that no longer exists in the system. (DES 1999, p.6).

For most students, the junior certificate is not an exit qualification from secondary school. It is perhaps surprising that the message about stakes is not accepted by other stakeholders, particularly teachers who might then more easily warm to the idea, principles and practices of SBA. In framing the 2012 assessment reform proposals, the DES (2012b, p. 3) identified but might well have underestimated the ‘mindset’ challenge in relation to assessment. To win over teachers in relation to new forms and approaches to assessment, perhaps more groundwork needed to be done with teachers, parents, students and the wider public around the function of assessment and certification at lower secondary education.

7.3 Teachers’ identity and role

Teachers’ professional identity features significantly in analyses of union websites, press releases and media reporting associated with the contested reforms. Teachers sought to project and protect their own perception of their role in relation to their students and parents and this identity conflicted with attempts to modify the stakes associated with the exam. Teachers have reservations about the potential adverse impact of SBA on existing teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships. The essence of these relationships conceptualise the teachers and their students in an alliance, working to secure optimum performance on the external state exams, echoing the OECD’s (1991) characterisation of teachers as coaches for examinations. Using different language but perhaps acknowledging the same role, a

teacher responding to a union consultation on the reforms (ASTI 2013, p. 24) stated that SBA would:

change [the] dynamic between parents, students and teachers. We cannot be advocate and judge. Very difficult to fail your own students.

Such views illustrate the importance to teachers of being ‘on the same side’ as students. Teachers articulated concerns about being put in positions of failing their own students, being vulnerable to pressure from parents and having to deal with perceptions of bias, especially for those teachers living in the community in which they teach. No amount of persuasion and promise of robust moderation procedures by the DES have altered some teachers’ belief that SBA will draw them into a different relationship with students and possible conflict with parents, encapsulated in the comment from one teacher reported in the media:

Can you imagine you will be assessing your colleague’s child, your neighbour’s child, your sibling’s child, your own child, your principal’s child. Now that is real pressure. (Humphreys 2014a)

Teachers need to be vigilant however that their student advocacy is in the best interests of learners who should benefit from full access to the richness of the junior cycle curriculum. Such advocacy/coaching should fall within the bounds of well-worn canons of ethical test preparation practice (Popham 1991, 2014; Cizek 2001; Koretz and Hamilton 2006). Given the opposition of the majority of teachers (or at least those in the larger union) to assessing their own students for certification purposes, the most likely outcome of the phased implementation process now underway will consist largely of a shortened terminal examination. To say that this is a significant development from the pre-reform approach is debatable. More significantly, the student experience may not change and teaching to the test may apply as much to the new examination as to its predecessor. Drawing on Jennings and Bearak (2014), two potentially troubling consequences are (i) validity consequences where the inferences drawn from a student’s junior cycle SEC exam score may not reflect that student’s actual learning in relation to the domain of knowledge and skills and (ii) experiential consequences, where the quality of a student’s educational experience may be impacted by excessive focus on coaching. Issues identified in the present paper suggest that, as with the 1989 junior cycle, the principles, skills and approaches to teaching and learning associated with the revised junior cycle may well be undermined in as-yet unknown ways by the decisions eventually agreed in relation to how students are assessed.

7.4 Trust and collegiality

Teaching is considered a relatively trusted profession in Ireland. One poll rated teaching as the third most trusted profession, after doctors and nurses (The Teaching Council 2010). Another survey by the Irish Medical Council (2014) placed teachers second to

doctors, a ranking identical to that from a more recent poll by Ipsos MBRI (Loscher 2017). Teachers seem troubled by participating in professional practice that might alter existing relationships and bring them into conflict with students and parents. Reservations about assessing their own students have been to the forefront in teachers' views on junior cycle reform from the outset. The complexity and perhaps irony of this position may reflect teachers' insecurity about their own capacity to maintain impartiality in the face of pressure from parents, evident in the analysis of members' responses to the consultation on junior cycle reforms:

The classroom teacher is indeed arguably the person best placed to assess a student's progress in each subject area over time. In any relationship, personal feelings come into play—and these feelings invariably affect the decisions one makes. Moreover, even if a teacher's assessment is fair, it may not be perceived as fair by the students or parents. Perceptions of favouritism or victimisation could quickly emerge—leading to an erosion of trust in the assessment process itself. Relationships between teachers and students would invariably be negatively affected. (ASTI 2013, pp. 25–26)

Thus, whereas teachers recognise that they are best placed to assess students' learning, their need to retain the trust of students and parents motivates a greater faith in external assessment. As evidenced in this study, SBA depended on the co-operation of teachers. Their long-standing reluctance to engage with SBA for certification purposes illustrates one central element of teachers' professional identity namely, working on behalf of students to help them perform well on state examinations. Teachers see themselves as advocates for the students, a belief that can be framed in terms of Bryk and Schneider's (2003, p. 41) concept of *relational trust*, the 'distinct role relationships [that] characterise the social exchanges of schooling'. Such trust highlights the important social relationships amongst all members of the school community: teachers, students, principal and parents. It clusters around four interrelated concepts: professional and personal *respect* between the parties, personal *regard*, perceived *competence* in role and personal *integrity*. Bryk and Schneider argue that school effectiveness and the capacity of schools to embrace reform is critically dependant on the amount of relational trust amongst participants. In rejecting SBA for certification purposes, teachers in Ireland in effect queried the impact that such a role change would have on the trust especially between teachers and students and teachers and parents. This became an important hurdle for teachers. Although policymakers reassured teachers that SBA as part of a reformed junior cycle would not undermine such trust, teachers remained unconvinced.

The junior cycle campaign by teachers indicates considerable solidarity amongst secondary teachers on the issue of assessment while simultaneously presenting an anti-SBA argument centred on retention of existing positive relations with students and parents. Whether this sense of community reflects relational trust as conceptualised by Bryk and Schneider (2003) is not clear. There is evidence of some deterioration anyway in relations between teachers and students, particularly during the year leading up to the junior certificate examination (Smyth et al. 2007). This is linked to pressure on students and teachers combined with narrowed curriculum coverage and restricted teaching

methodologies. Without articulating relational trust per se, teachers seem to feel that a SBA-induced change in the role relationship between teachers and students would somehow shatter relational trust in schools. A more complete understanding of relational trust focuses as much on each party's understanding of the other's role and obligations as on merely maintaining cordial relations between teachers, students and their parents. It can be argued that the relationship argument by teachers offered a restricted perspective on the form and function of the relational trust that is associated with school climate and effective schools. Perhaps a more nuanced interpretation is evident from the Joint Managerial Body (2012) who recognised the need for parents, students, teachers, school management and the wider community to come to a shared understanding of and develop confidence in the new approaches to assessment.

7.5 Pay and conditions

A final theme in the analysis of teachers' reaction to the junior cycle reforms relates to residual ill-feeling between teachers and the DES stemming from disputes about pay and working conditions since 2010. Then, a serious banking crisis prompted austerity measures by government as part of a financial bailout by the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund. In 2011, the government used emergency legislation to overcome vigorous teacher union objections and implemented salary cuts amounting to some 14%, followed with further cuts of up to 8% in 2013. Adjustments to the teacher contract also meant that new entrants to the profession were paid less favourable rates than their more established colleagues. Bruising encounters, including strikes, between government and unions on issues of pay, restricted middle-management career opportunities and additional productivity requirements did little to engender teacher support for *any* curriculum and assessment reforms, especially ones that brought potential increased workload for teachers. Though ill-feeling around pay and conditions may not explain all of teachers' negativity towards the reform, it would be naive to think that they are unrelated entirely. This is not to say that the assessment reform would have been more successful in a different economic and industrial relations climate, but it can perhaps be said with hindsight, that there could hardly have been a worse time to initiate the reform, especially one that brought perceived increased workload for teachers.

8 Conclusion

The recent assessment reform proposed in Ireland was predicated on the belief that real change in teaching and learning only happens when there is real change in assessment. Radical change to the certification of students' learning in lower secondary school was evident in proposals by the DES in 2012 and to a lesser extent by the NCCA in 2011. Negative reaction to the proposals by teachers resulted in significant modification to the policy, changes that leave in place many of the elements, and the challenges associated with the pre-reform arrangements. Where the present situation vis-à-vis junior cycle reform sits in relation to Ochs and Phillips' (2004) continuum of policy borrowing might not make for comfortable reading, from a policymaker's perspective. Certainly

policymakers were attracted to SBA throughout a long period of investigation in the period 1992 to 2011. Decisions encapsulated in the 2012 *Framework for Junior Cycle* hailed SBA as a cornerstone of the programme reforms overall, a decision that proved impossible to implement in the face of opposition by teachers. So, although borrowing informed two of the four stages, it proved difficult to implement and thus embed the policies in practice in schools. Perhaps this will change in the future, but the evidence is not encouraging, in the short to medium term at least. As is clear from the analysis, strong geological assessment strata run deep in the psyche of secondary teachers in Ireland and, to expand Cohen and Neufeld's metaphor, though the tectonic tremors have been great over the past few years, movement has been minimal.

The solution involves folding two sets of results, using different score scales, into one *Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement* that will contain results of external assessments conducted by the State alongside results from SBA provided by the teacher. Further discussions throughout early 2017 resulted, finally, in an agreement that enabled all students' work on the *assessment task* and the examination in English to be graded by the SEC (ASTI 2017b). The English examination on 7 June 2017 proceeded with no more than the usual media commentary (Mcguire and Ó Callaóí 2017) and somewhat higher grades than usual when students received results in September (Donnelly 2017). Production of the student profiles by schools was undertaken in December 2017 (DES 2017c). Although the dual-reporting system seems to have been enacted, the fallout from the struggle to date suggests that results from the SBA may not be afforded the same status as the external results, by teachers or perhaps by students and their parents. This seems to leave the old-style examination system largely intact with 90% of certified marks weighted towards the terminal exam for most subjects.

Were SBA to take hold in a credible form, there are some grounds for optimism. Students could demonstrate their learning in varied ways in the natural setting of the school and classroom: engaging in project tasks, oral language tasks, investigations and other assessments. For teachers, involvement in school-level meetings about standards and moderation can enable them to share assessment practices with colleagues through professional communities of practice proven to be powerful learning environments. The hybrid system proposed does not, however, free teachers from the strictures of preparing students for somebody else to assess, a freedom that could enhance their autonomy as reflective, thoughtful and creative professionals. For society, introduction of some meaningful SBA could keep alive the promise that the richness of the revised junior cycle curriculum might translate into a truly changed and enhanced student experience, something that did not happen at the time of last revision in 1989. The debate about assessment reform has dragged on for some time and the solution envisaged and partly implemented may be all that is possible at this time. The reform might be worth the substantial time, effort and investment in professional development required. It might work if all teachers agree to engage with SBA in addition to the more traditional examinations. It might work if students, parents, teachers and the wider public value the teacher-generated *descriptors* from the SBA in the same way that the examination grades will be valued. That is a big if. The way this reform has evolved, policymakers may regret not having abolished the junior certificate examination and certification altogether. That might yet be the best solution of all.

What the Irish example illustrates is that the introduction of policies and practices tried out elsewhere require careful analysis if it is to succeed. Teachers in Ireland were not convinced by international examples of active teacher involvement in high-stakes assessment. Research or ‘best practice internationally’ did not sway the majority of teachers into embracing the change. Amongst the proposals in 2012, the two that generated most controversy (SBA and short courses) were those designed to give teachers greater responsibility and autonomy about curriculum and assessment. Policy formulation and implementation is frequently shaped by an amalgam of factors internal and external to any one education system. This paper described and critically examined a case study of the attempted reform of assessment practice at a national level, illustrating the complex interplay of local political, social and economic factors in determining the outcome of one such initiative. In the end, and though the finish line in this intriguing policy joust between two powerful stakeholders is arguably not yet reached, key and very local factors combined to frustrate the Department’s effort to reform practice in a particular direction. Overall, the analysis confirms Black and Wiliam’s (2005) argument around political and societal impacts on assessment practice. The move towards SBA for certification in Ireland illustrates the complexity associated with framing educational policies in light of local prevailing circumstances and expectations. The findings of the paper provide cautionary advice to any system undertaking radical change, especially where teacher solidarity and public respect for teachers are high. Like the prophesy of Lieutenant-General Browning in relation to the bridge at Arnhem, perhaps Bell and Stevenson (2006, p. 17) might well have had junior cycle reform in their mind when they noted that:

policy development is not a neat process in which educational leaders simply digest policy from above and translate it into practice in the institution. Rather, policy development is fuzzy, messy and complex. It is the product of compromise, negotiation, dispute and struggle as those with competing sometimes conflicting, values seek to secure specific objectives.

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