

Teacher Perspectives on Standardized Testing of Achievement in Ireland

Objectives

In the years since 2007 the role of standardized testing in Irish primary (elementary schools has become increasingly prominent. All schools are now required to administer tests in English reading and mathematics in 2nd, 4th and 6th grades, and to report aggregated results to their Boards of Management and the Department of Education and Skills (DES). Schools are also required to share the results with parents/guardians at the three mandatory testing points and to do this in written format using end-of-year school reports DES, 2011. As of September 2017, the results are used at national level as part of the process involved in determining the allocation of special educational teaching resources to schools DES, 2017.

The research described in this paper represents a collaboration between the Centre for Assessment Research, Policy and Practice in Education (CARPE) based at Dublin City University and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) - the largest teachers' trade union in Ireland representing 95%+ of all teachers at the elementary level. In examining elementary teachers use of and attitudes to standardized tests at a time when the stakes associated with this form of assessment are growing, the research exemplifies the AERA 2020 conference theme: "The Power and Possibilities for the Public Good When Researchers and Organizational Stakeholders Collaborate."

Four research questions developed by the partnership were:

1. How are teachers using standardized tests in English reading and mathematics in Irish primary schools?
2. What are teachers' perceptions about the impact of standardized tests on (a) student learning and (b) their professional practice?
3. What are teachers' beliefs about and attitudes towards standardized testing?
4. What are the professional development needs of teachers with respect to standardized testing?

Theoretical Framework

It is generally accepted that standardized tests bring value over and above other kinds of assessments in allowing the benchmarking of every individual pupil's performance against national norms. Such information is important in broadening the focus of decision-making about teaching and learning within classrooms and across schools. In addition, when achievement data from sample-based national assessments are not fine-grained enough for some policy decisions, aggregated data from standardized tests across a census of schools can be useful. However, experiences with standardized tests all over the world show that there is a very real danger of undermining their potential benefits when the stakes associated with them are raised.

The international literature suggests that when test scores are shared widely and used for purposes beyond internal planning, the associated sense of accountability and pressure to perform can lead to a culture of "teaching to the test" (e.g. Haladyna, 2006). This involves teachers spending excessive amounts of class time engaged in test preparation activities. When the stakes associated with standardized tests are high, or if they are merely perceived to be high, there is a risk that it will introduce 'pressure to perform' amongst teachers, students and parents. Indeed, if teachers feel under great pressure to improve their students' standardized test scores, even those with the utmost integrity may inadvertently resort to practices such as 'teaching to the test'. To suggest otherwise would be, as Madaus (1988a, p.40) put it, a "staggeringly optimistic view of human nature".

There are also concerns that a heightened focus on standardized tests may inhibit pupil learning through "narrowing of the curriculum" – a phenomenon that encompasses classroom practices such as a reduction in the amount of time spent on non-tested content, the fragmentation of knowledge into discrete facts, and the increased use of teacher-centred pedagogies (e.g. Berliner, 2011). Although it must be emphasised that the "stakes" attached to standardized testing in Irish primary education remain relatively low in comparison to some other countries, recent policy changes have undoubtedly increased the focus on these instruments. And it was in the wake of these changes, that a decision was taken to conduct this study.

Methods and Data Sources

Following a series of pilot studies, a questionnaire incorporating mainly closed-ended questions was developed and, using the INTO database, was administered to a simple random sample of 5,000 teachers in May 2017. Half of the sample was randomly selected to receive a hard copy of the questionnaire using the mailing addresses in the database. The other half was sent a link to the online copy using email addresses in the database. A total of 1,564 questionnaires was returned – a response rate of 31% which can be considered acceptable given the rates achieved in past INTO studies. The percentage of questionnaires completed online (52%) and in hard copy was roughly similar. For the most part, the sample achieved was reflective of the population of teachers in Irish primary schools.

Results

RQ1: The majority of teachers indicated that they used standardized test results to identify students' strengths/weaknesses/progress, to inform the preparation of IEPs, to group and grade students, to make adjustments to their planning and to evaluate their own teaching effectiveness. These practices were likely to occur once or twice a year, however, up to a quarter of respondents indicated that they never used standardized tests for many of these purposes. Respondents were much more likely to discuss standardized test results with other teachers or with parents than with students. The overwhelming majority of teachers reported that standardized tests results were used in their schools to select students for learning support and for broad whole-school evaluation purposes. Fewer indicated that their schools used test data to select students for gifted/talented programmes and for checking that teachers were emphasizing skills that needed to be improved based on past test results. Approximately three out of every four respondents noted that standardized test results were used at least once in the school year to generate discussion among staff about how to strengthen teaching and improve test scores.

RQ2a: Just under two thirds of teachers reported that standardized test scores had either improved or remained constant over the preceding three years. Large percentages of teachers cited factors including changes in teaching strategies, policy changes focused on literacy and numeracy and changes in teacher effectiveness, as influences on their schools' test scores. Other factors deemed to be relevant included changes in internal evaluation practices, changes in textbooks, changes in pupil demographics and alignment of curriculum with test content. Up to one in four felt that a focus on test-taking skills, familiarity with test content, changes in test preparation and administration practices were factors.

RQ2b: The vast majority of teachers maintained that they were unaware of questionable test preparation and administration practices occurring in their own school. About one in four said that they were aware of what might be described as low-level 'teaching to the test' in their school, such as focusing teaching and students' attention on content that was on the standardized tests. Less than one in ten claimed that they were aware that some students in their school were receiving grinds prior to standardized testing. Relatively small percentages of teachers also said that they were aware that, in their schools, students were given more time than allowed, had questions rephrased for them, had access to potentially helpful materials during testing, or were given inappropriate support e.g. hints during testing. However, one quarter indicated that they were aware of questionable test administration practices occurring in schools other than their own. The vast majority of teachers claimed that they felt pressure from within themselves to improve their students' standardized test scores. About half reported feeling pressure from

parents, a third from inspectors, their principals, or their teaching colleagues with a quarter feeling pressure from students and the media.

RQ3: Findings regarding teachers' beliefs about and attitudes to standardized tests are organised around four themes: validity, communication/reporting, positive effects and negative effects.

Validity: the majority of teachers agreed that some students in their class were not capable of taking standardized tests due to learning difficulties and that performance differences in standardized tests reflected differences in the characteristics of students as opposed to differences in teacher effectiveness. The majority also held the belief that standardized test scores were not an accurate measure of EAL students' achievements. There was a lack of consensus on whether or not standardized test scores were an accurate reflection of their students' mastery of basic skills and whether or not there was a difference between what should be taught and what the standardized tests emphasised.

Communicating and reporting: two thirds agreed that standardized test scores should be included on summer report cards with just over half feeling that age-based rather than grade-based STens were sometimes more appropriate for reporting purposes. A majority disagreed that parents had a good understanding of standardized test scores or that the results helped prospective parents evaluate a school. Teachers held divided opinions on the use of standardized test scores for school accountability and educational policy-making purposes.

Positive effects: about half of the respondents agreed that standardized testing had focused their attention on both basic and higher-order skills in reading and mathematics but disagreed that

standardized testing had led to improvements in their own teaching or had challenged weaker teachers to do a better job. Divided opinion was evident with respect to teachers' beliefs on whether or not standardized testing had helped them clarify which learning goals were important, was an appropriate way of focusing attention on the impact of teaching on pupil achievement or improved the quality of teaching and learning in their schools.

Negative effects: three out of every four teachers agreed that some students in their classes were extremely anxious about taking standardized tests and about half felt that the parents took the results of standardized tests too seriously. Three quarters disagreed with the idea that their school was more interested in increasing standardized test scores than in improving overall pupil learning. One in four felt that standardized testing encouraged 'teaching to the test'.

RQ4: The vast majority of teachers expressed a very strong desire for CPD in the area of standardized testing. Priorities included guidance on how to use results to make decisions about children with special needs, how the tests could be used to guide planning, teaching and learning and how to communicate the results to parents. CPD on the more technical aspects of standardized testing such as the meaning of different standardized scores, validity and the application of the Standard Error of Measurement (SEM) were also considered important.

Significance

This study, led by CARPE and the INTO, is the first large scale investigation of Irish primary teachers' practices, beliefs/attitudes, policy advice and professional development needs with respect to standardized testing in English reading and mathematics. Data from the survey provide

a snapshot in time that highlight the increased status of standardized testing in the primary system. The findings give educators and policy makers much food for thought and, potentially, a basis for informing decision-making, planning and action pertaining to the following:

1. Consideration should be given to changing mandated testing from the summer term to the autumn to alleviate the pressure/anxiety felt by teachers and students while increasing the possibility of test data being used for formative purposes.
2. Standardized test scores should be communicated in writing as part of a narrative text that describes pupil performance, interprets it in light of other assessments and acknowledges the imprecise nature of standardized test scores.
3. Irish standardized tests should be re-normed and updated more often than is currently the case.
4. A system of criterion-referenced in addition to norm-referenced interpretations should be considered for use in disadvantaged schools and for students with special educational needs and English as an additional language. Percentages of students meeting particular benchmarked standards could be reported to BOMs and the DES.
5. Attention needs to be paid to how the outcomes of standardized testing are used for teaching and learning purposes within individual classrooms and for whole-school decision and policy making.
6. A programme of professional development focused on improving teachers' assessment literacy more generally and with standardized testing as one linked component should be devised and made accessible to all teachers.

References

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