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# Burgeoning teacher assessment identity and learning to ‘play the system’: the realities of assessment-led reform at lower secondary level in Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, the lower secondary school curriculum in the Republic of Ireland has been subject to assessment-led reform, many elements of which, such as the increased focus on continuous school-based assessment, reflect those of similar initiatives introduced in other countries. This paper explores the extent to which this reformed approach is succeeding in meeting its aims, drawing on survey data from a representative sample ( $n = 471$ ) of teachers who have been involved in its implementation over the past seven years. The findings suggest that the increased diversity of assessment approaches has given rise to a greater emphasis on skills, such as creativity and critical self-reflection, but concerns are raised regarding the authenticity with which these skills are being developed, and several practical and logistical difficulties associated with the new system are also noted. Implications for both local and international policy and practice are discussed.

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formative assessment; lower  
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teacher assessment identity

## Introduction

Assessment policies and practices in various education systems worldwide have been subject to reforms in recent decades, in line with the growing recognition that assessment can support and enhance learning, in addition to measuring it. As Berry (2011) outlined, reforms have typically involved efforts to replace or complement the use of summative, high-stakes testing with continuous, classroom-based assessments. Emphasis has also been placed on diversifying the modes of assessment used, the provision of formative feedback rather than grades, and involving the learner in the assessment process to a greater extent. One example of this assessment-led reform has taken place at lower secondary level in the Republic of Ireland in recent years, with a series of changes introduced on gradual, phased basis from 2014 onwards.

Much has been written about the rationale for assessment-led reforms, and comparisons have been drawn between changes in different jurisdictions (e.g. Gleeson et al., 2020). Evidence suggests, however, that these policies have yet to succeed in influencing

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‘the realities on the ground’ (Isaacs & Lamprianou, 2018, p. 229), i.e., the institutional practices that occur, and ultimately, how curricula are implemented by teachers and experienced by learners. In this paper, we investigate the extent to which the specified aims of Ireland’s new *Junior Cycle* (Department of Education and Skills, 2012, 2015) are being realised, from the perspectives of the teachers involved in its implementation, seven years after the reforms were first introduced in Irish schools.

### ***The ‘new junior cycle’***

Traditionally, students at lower secondary level in Ireland studied up to 10 subjects over three years and completed a terminal examination in each. These examinations were offered at both higher and ordinary (and in some cases, foundation) levels of difficulty, were set and anonymously marked by an independent public body known as the State Examinations Commission (SEC), and resulted in the awarding of the *Junior Certificate*, with achievement in each subject measured according to a six-point grading scale. The new framework set out to replace this ‘one-shot’ approach to assessment with a dual approach.

The revised assessment structure involves: (i) two classroom-based assessments (CBAs) which are set and marked by teachers and undertaken during regular class time within the second and third years of the cycle, (ii) a written Assessment Task that is set and marked by the SEC, and (iii) a terminal examination (also set and marked by the SEC). According to the framework, CBAs may take various forms, including ‘oral presentations, written work of different types, practical or designing and making activities, artistic performances, scientific experiments, projects, or other suitable tasks’ and are intended to allow students ‘demonstrate their understanding and skills in a way which would not be possible in a formal examination’ (Department of Education and Skills, 2015, p. 37). The Assessment Task is intended to facilitate the student in reflecting on the knowledge and skills they developed through the completion of their second CBA, and identifying how they might apply this learning in the future. Of note is that the terminal examinations are shorter in duration than their traditional counterparts and are offered at one common level (with the exception of English, Irish and mathematics, which continue to be assessed at higher and ordinary levels). The framework emphasises that the examinations should be viewed as ‘one element of a balanced, broader approach to assessment’, and not as being of greater importance than the other elements.

Students do not receive a numerical score for their performance in their CBAs, rather, achievement is reported using one of four grade descriptors (exceptional, above expectations, in line with expectations, yet to meet expectations). Although teachers are solely responsible for marking their own students’ CBAs, they are required under the new framework to engage in Subject Learning and Review (SLAR) meetings with colleagues to support them in building a common understanding about the type of work associated with each descriptor. Results in the Assessment Task and the examination, each of which are expressed as a percentage score, are combined (weighted 10% and 90% respectively) to arrive at an overall percentage for each subject.

These changes to assessment did not all happen immediately, rather, the new structure has been gradually introduced on a subject-by-subject basis. Although they form the most significant aspect of the new Junior Cycle, the framework also introduced some

curricular changes. For example, students now have the option to study ‘short courses’ in diverse areas such as digital media literacy, physical education and philosophy, in conjunction with traditional subjects. Schools may also offer programmes suited to students with mild-to-moderate general learning disabilities that focus on skills such as communication, personal care, and living in a community. Finally, ‘wellbeing’ has been introduced as a key area of learning for all. Achievements in all of these areas, and also in extra-curricular areas are documented and reported alongside the results of CBAs and state examinations in a comprehensive *Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement* (JCPA), which is intended to represent a more holistic picture of the young person’s learning and achievement than that provided by the traditional Junior Certificate.

### ***Aims of the new junior cycle***

The underlying aims of the new Junior Cycle are similar to those of many other assessment reforms internationally and have been informed by recent trends in international educational research and policy (Gleeson et al., 2020), as well as a series of national consultations. They are described below, however, the reader is also directed to MacPhail et al. (2018) for a comprehensive account of the origins and developments of the reforms.

One aim of the new Junior Cycle is to introduce greater flexibility, by recognising and catering for a wider diversity of student abilities, interests and needs. This is in line with current understandings of inclusive education, *i.e.* ‘transforming education systems to reach all students – and not vice versa’ (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020, p. 1). A second aim is to improve the relevance of the programme. A prominent theme in the educational research literature in recent years is that today’s young people need to acquire a different set of skills than the generations before them if they are to be adequately equipped for contemporary society. Such skills include critical thinking, problem-solving, digital literacy, communication, collaboration and cultural sensitivity (Geisinger, 2016; Griffin & Care, 2015; Rios et al., 2020; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Voogt & Roblin, 2012). By complementing examinations with a richer range of assessment formats, the intention is that the new Junior Cycle will achieve a better balance between supporting both the acquisition of knowledge and the development of these complex skills. Indeed, the framework states that ‘learners will be enabled to use and analyse information in new and creative ways, to investigate issues, to explore, to think for themselves, to be creative in solving problems and to apply their learning to new challenges and situations’ (Department of Education and Skills, 2015, p. 7).

A third aim of the reforms is to reduce the dominance of, and consequently, the ‘backwash effect’ (Broadfoot, 1979) associated with terminal examinations. As MacPhail et al. (2018) highlighted, the old Junior Certificate examinations were unusual, in that, despite their ‘low-stakes’ nature, they were persistently regarded as ‘high-stakes’ by the public. The results were not used to determine a student’s subsequent trajectory in their education, nonetheless, the examinations were often viewed as a ‘rehearsal’ for the *Leaving Certificate* (school-leaving) examinations, performance in which is the main criterion for entry to higher education. Consequently, many negative phenomena that have been associated with high-stakes testing, such as narrowing of the curriculum, use of teacher-centred pedagogies, and high levels of pressure and anxiety, were dominant features of Junior

Cycle students' experiences in the years leading up to the reforms (Smyth, 2009). In the new Junior Cycle, the introduction of continuous assessments, combined with the reduction in duration and weighting afforded to the examinations and the acknowledgement of a broader range of achievements on the *JCPA* are all intended to address this issue.

A fourth aim of the new Junior Cycle is to strengthen the focus on formative assessment. The framework suggests that this should not be viewed merely as an inevitable by-product of efforts to reduce the emphasis on terminal examinations, but as a conscious aim in and of itself, in recognition of the central role that assessment can play in the learning process 'when teachers provide feedback that helps students to understand how their learning can be improved' (Department of Education and Skills, 2015, p. 7). Indeed, one of the key findings of a progress report in the early stages of the reforms was that Irish secondary teachers traditionally had minimal responsibility for assessment, and no formal training in how to use it to support students' learning (NCCA National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999). This was at odds with the situation at primary level, which had seen a significant focus on Assessment for Learning (AfL) introduced in the revised curriculum in 1999. Significant efforts were thus made to improve secondary teachers' assessment literacy through web-based CPD amongst other supports (see NCCA (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment), 2005a, 2005b). There are two implications here: (i) that assessment is a key competency which all teachers are expected to possess and (ii) that CBAs, the Assessment Task and other informal assessments should not simply provide interim 'performance' events. Rather, they should facilitate the provision of high-quality feedback that will support learners to improve as they progress through the cycle.

The extent to which each of the above aims are being realised may not be clear for some time. A survey of 764 Junior Cycle teachers conducted in the early stages of reforms (Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland, 2018) revealed predominantly negative perceptions of the new system. However, as the study authors acknowledged, 'curriculum change is a complex, multi-layered process which takes place over the medium to long-term' (Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland, 2018, p. 4). Although many of the respondents expressed a lack of confidence in the rationale for the changes and frustrations with increased workload, it is possible that some of these concerns may have begun to subside in the years since this report was published, particularly if evidence of positive change has started to emerge.

The current study was conducted between January and May 2021, almost seven years after the new Junior Cycle was first introduced in Irish schools. It is acknowledged that a separate large-scale research study on the implementation and impact of the new Junior Cycle was commissioned by the NCCA shortly after the completion of our data collection. Notwithstanding some overlap with the interim findings of this work (McGarr et al., 2022, 2023), this paper aims to provide an updated sense as to whether the reforms are succeeding in influencing the 'realities on the ground', from the perspectives of those who are immersed in these realities. There are, however, a number of contextual factors that need to be taken into account to provide a sufficient backdrop for understanding teachers' experiences.

## Contextual considerations

Despite widespread agreement amongst various educational stakeholders that the Junior Cycle was in need of refinement, the process of identifying the precise nature of the changes to be made was fraught with difficulty, and, as a result, some aspects of the new Junior Cycle are somewhat removed from what was initially intended. In particular, the fact that CBAs do not contribute to students' grades is a notable departure from the initial version of the framework, which had indicated that they would contribute to 40% of the grade (Department of Education and Skills, 2012). This model was met with significant opposition from teacher unions, stemming from concerns about reliability and objectivity, impact on student-teacher and parent-teacher relationships, resourcing issues, and increased teacher workload (Murchan, 2018). Notably, in an exploration of the different dimensions comprising *teacher assessment identity*, Looney et al. (2017, p. 14) contended that some teachers 'based on their prior experiences and their context, may consider that some assessment processes should not be part of their role as teachers', which is precisely the stance that seems to have characterised this cohort. Periods of industrial action and negotiation followed, ultimately resulting in what could be described as a diluted version of the original plan. Indeed, Murchan (2018) suggested that what has unfolded illustrates the difficulties associated with 'policy borrowing'. That is, Irish teachers were, for context-specific reasons primarily related to their assessment identity, disinclined to engage with the decentralised approach to assessment that had been welcomed by those in other jurisdictions (e.g. Finland, Hong Kong, New Zealand), and this prevented the policy from progressing as initially intended. Similarly, MacPhail et al. (2018, p. 13) described the new Junior Cycle as 'a compromise, rooted, at least in part in the desire to restore a semblance of industrial relations peace'. Both expressed concerns about the extent to which the aims of the reform were likely to be realised.

This issue of teacher involvement in assessment undoubtedly dominated the discourse surrounding the reforms and had a significant influence on shaping the 2015 framework. It is important, however, to acknowledge some additional factors that, although not as 'visible', are nonetheless significant, and may play a role in determining the extent to which the new Junior Cycle is likely to be deemed a success. For example, as Gleeson et al. (2020) outlined, the Irish education system is rooted in the Classical Humanist tradition, and the focus on 'key skills' in the new framework is arguably at odds with this, reflecting a more utilitarian, market-driven approach to education. Indeed, in a critical analysis of the rationales underpinning the new Junior Cycle, Printer (2020, p. 321) suggested that the 'neo-liberal ideals of efficiency, economy and competitiveness' have played a much more significant role in shaping the framework than has been publicly acknowledged. Precisely how this may have influenced day-to-day interactions in the classroom remains to be seen. However, Irish teachers, as Gleeson et al. (2020) pointed out, have typically favoured a pedagogy of knowledge transmission, and responses to a survey of union members carried out shortly after the framework was released suggest some discomfort with the concept of a skills-based curriculum. Specifically, although the framework emphasises achieving a *balance* between knowledge and skills, many seemed to interpret this as a reduction in subject specifications, and expressed concerns about potential 'dumbing down' of standards (Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland, 2015, p. 14).

Finally, interruptions to the rollout of the new Junior Cycle as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic need to be considered. All secondary schools in Ireland were closed between March and May 2020, and again between January and March 2021. During these periods, teaching and learning continued through a combination of pre-recorded teacher presentations, independent assignments, and live online classes, though the exact nature of provision varied considerably across schools (Scully et al., 2021). Revised arrangements were made for assessment, with students only being required to complete one CBA in each subject (NCCA, 2021), and both the Assessment Tasks and final examinations were cancelled. This pause in programme implementation is a caveat to keep in mind when evaluating its success.

## This study

This study aims to provide a comprehensive insight into teachers' perceptions of the new Junior Cycle, seven years after its phased introduction began. It seeks to uncover whether teachers believe these assessment-led reforms are providing 'a truly changed and enhanced student experience' as intended (Murchan, 2018, p. 124); and more specifically, the extent to which each of the aims outlined above are being achieved, *i.e.* have the reforms

- introduced greater flexibility?
- facilitated an appropriate balance between knowledge acquisition and skills development?
- reduced the focus on terminal examinations?
- increased the prominence of formative assessment?

Furthermore, it explores teachers' attitudes towards and experiences of their increased involvement in assessing their own students, *i.e.*,

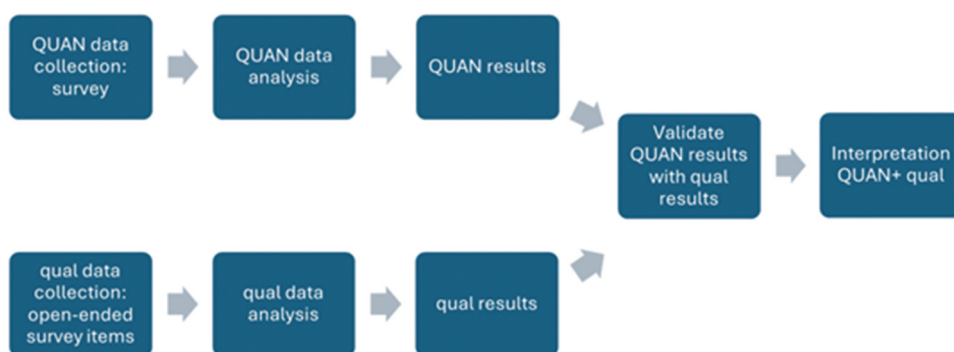
- how confident/competent do teachers feel in assessing their students' work?
- do teachers believe that their 'assessor' role is negatively affecting their relationships with students and parents?
- do teachers favour their increased involvement in student assessment?

## Materials and methods

### Research design

A mixed-methods triangulation design was employed, specifically, the validating quantitative data model (Figure 1). This involves the collection of predominantly quantitative data, supplemented by some qualitative data that is ultimately used 'to validate and embellish' the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007, p. 65). This design was chosen to facilitate the collection of a breadth of information from a large sample in a transparent and standardised manner, whilst simultaneously providing participants





**Figure 1.** Triangulation design: the validating quantitative data model (reproduced from Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007, p. 63).

with the opportunity to share aspects of their experiences that would be difficult to capture through exclusively quantitative data.

All data were collected using a survey instrument. The anonymity afforded by a survey was deemed desirable, as, given the media and union attention the new Junior Cycle has attracted, it could be regarded as a somewhat vexed issue amongst teachers. Furthermore, on a practical level, neither face-to-face interviews nor observation methodologies were feasible due to COVID-19 restrictions ongoing at the time of data collection.

### **Instrumentation**

A bespoke questionnaire comprising predominantly of multiple-choice and Likert-type items was created. An introductory section gathered demographic and contextual information. This was followed by three distinct sections, pertaining respectively to (i) teachers' overall impressions of the new Junior Cycle (e.g. *'In comparison to the old Junior Cycle, the new Junior Cycle achieves a better balance between knowledge acquisition and skills development'*), (ii) aspects pertaining specifically to teacher-graded assessment (e.g. *'my participation in SLARs has improved my understanding of the quality of students' work'*) and (iii) aspects pertaining specifically to externally graded assessment (e.g. *'the move to a common level paper for the final examination has brought about positive changes'*). A concluding section invited respondents to rate the appropriateness of the current assessment arrangements, to select their preferred option from a number of alternative arrangements, and finally, to share additional comments by means of an open-ended question.

Item content was aligned with the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (Department of Education and Skills, 2015), to ensure it related to the major aims of the reforms, as stated in formal documentation. A particular focus on teachers' feelings regarding their involvement in student assessment was also included. As the focus of the instrument, much like the reforms themselves, was intentionally 'assessment-led', some aspects of the new curriculum (e.g. short courses, wellbeing) were not specifically addressed; however, the 'general impressions' section and open-ended questions ensured that respondents



had ample opportunity to share their experiences relating to these aspects should they wish. The study was granted ethical approval by Dublin City University's Research Ethics Committee in January 2021 (DCUREC/2020/272). Following this, the instrument was piloted by a small group of Junior Cycle teachers ( $n = 8$ ) and, after some minor revisions, uploaded to a secure online platform for circulation to prospective respondents. Informed consent forms were embedded within the survey link.

The total number of secondary teachers in Ireland at the time of this survey was 32,145 (Department of Education, 2024); however, as only those teaching at Junior Cycle level were eligible for this survey, the figure for the population of interest is likely to be slightly lower than this. In the first round of sampling for the main study (February/March 2021) the survey link was forwarded to the staff of eight schools with which the researchers had personal and/or professional connections. In the second and third rounds of sampling (April/May 2021), the link was distributed to all members of the two main teacher unions representing secondary teachers, the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) and the Teacher's Union of Ireland (TUI). In each instance, the link remained active for three weeks, with a reminder issued at the halfway point.

## Sample

A total of 471 teachers completed the survey. Teachers from all four school 'types' in the second-level sector were represented, and a range of experience was also evident (Table 1). The vast majority of respondents had taught the old Junior Certificate course prior to the introduction of the reforms. From a validity perspective, this was favourable, as all of the aims of the new Junior Cycle involve some degree of change or departure

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the sample.

Characteristic	%		%
Gender:		Type of school <sup>a</sup> taught in:	
Female	79	ETB	69
Male	19	Voluntary (fee paying)	2
Prefer not to say	2	Voluntary (non-fee paying)	29
No. years teaching:		Subject taught:	
0–5	19	Modern Foreign Languages	25
6–10	18	English	14
11–15	17	Irish	10
16–20	19	Science	10
21–25	15	Maths	8
26+	12	Business Studies	7
		History	5
		Geography	4
		Home Economics	3
		Other <sup>b</sup>	10
Experience teaching old JC:			
Yes	89		
No	11		

<sup>a</sup>Voluntary schools are privately owned and managed, whilst ETB schools are run by local Education and Training Boards. Although the former have traditionally been associated with academic education and the latter with practical education, these distinctions have become much less pronounced over time.

<sup>b</sup>Subjects grouped under this heading include Art, Craft & Design, Classical Studies, Engineering, Graphics, Metalwork, Music, Physical Education, Religious Education, Technology and Wood Technology, each of which represented < 3% of the total sample.

from the prior situation. Teachers of Modern Foreign Languages (*i.e.*, French, German, Italian and Spanish), English, Irish, Science, Mathematics and Business Studies were well represented. This is unsurprising, as, with the exception of Mathematics, all of these subjects were among the earliest to be implemented under the new specifications. As such, these teachers have more experience of the new Junior Cycle when compared with those of other subjects.

### **Data analysis**

All data were collected and stored securely in line with the university's procedures. Quantitative data from the survey platform were imported to SPSS (Version 27) and cleaned. Descriptive statistics (percentage of respondents selecting each response option) were computed for the Likert items. These are reported below, with the items grouped according to the overarching research question with which they are aligned. Small numbers of participants skipped certain questions. In these cases, valid percentages are reported.

Data from the open-ended question, to which 41% of participants (*i.e.*, 191 of 471) responded, were thematically analysed. Nowell et al. (2017) describe thematic analysis as a flexible approach that can be modified to suit the needs of a particular study. As this study sought to draw on these data to validate the findings arising from simultaneously-collected quantitative data, a codebook thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2021) was conducted. The coding template was directly aligned with the research questions, with data coded according to 'flexibility of curriculum', 'knowledge/skills balance', 'focus on terminal exams', 'formative assessment' and 'feelings re: assessing students'. Teachers' perspectives regarding each of these issues, initially identified through the quantitative data, were interpreted and expanded upon in greater detail through analysis of the qualitative data.

## **Findings**

### **Curriculum flexibility**

One key aim of the assessment-led reforms at Junior Cycle was to ensure that a wider diversity of student abilities, interests and needs were catered for. With respect to 'abilities' (which, in this context, refers to both natural abilities, *i.e.*, aptitude in a given subject and acquired abilities, *i.e.*, knowledge/skills that have been learnt), there was a strong consensus from the teachers surveyed that certain aspects of the reforms, such as the introduction of examinations, and CBA grade descriptors, were having the opposite effect. Indeed, 84% of respondents stated that common exams are not sufficiently challenging for higher-achieving students, whilst 64% regarded them as being inaccessible for lower-achieving students. As for grade descriptors, just 28% agreed that they adequately capture the range of student abilities (Table 2).

These concerns were echoed in the qualitative data. The common level paper is evidently a source of great frustration, indeed, it was described as 'insane', 'ridiculous',

**Table 2.** Participants' responses to closed questions pertaining to the extent to which the reforms have introduced greater flexibility.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	%			
The move to a common level paper means that higher achieving students are no longer appropriately challenged in the final examination	4	13	29	55
The move to a common level paper has made it more difficult for lower-achieving students to succeed in the final examination	12	27	28	34
CBAs broaden the range of students' learning experiences	15	23	49	13
The new Junior Cycle provides more opportunities for students with special educational needs to engage successfully with the mainstream education system	20	35	34	11
The new Junior Cycle offers improved learning experiences for all students	17	39	35	9
The new Junior Cycle provides more opportunities for exceptionally able students to participate in appropriately challenging learning activities	25	32	31	12
The new Junior Cycle affords greater flexibility in terms of tailoring programmes to suit the particular context of the school	17	40	35	8
The grade descriptors for marking CBAs are appropriate for capturing the range of student abilities.	32	40	25	3
The move to a common level paper for the final examination has brought about positive changes.	48	34	16	2

and 'one size fits nobody'. Many expressed concerns about higher-achieving students struggling with the transition to Senior Cycle, whilst others underlined the unsuitability of common level for those with special educational needs:

A common exam holds no value to an AEN (additional educational needs) ... student ... as you are comparing them to the more academically able

It was also evident that the introduction of common papers had created a sense of misalignment with the ethos of differentiation that is encouraged in the classroom:

we're expected to continually differentiate the work in order to motivate and encourage our students ... until the end

With respect to the CBA grade descriptors, many teachers believed they were not sufficiently granular:

You cannot bracket together students achieving 75% with those getting 89% - the amount of talent and work involved deserves recognition

Others regarded the *exceptional* descriptor as problematic, describing it as 'out of reach' or 'unattainable' for the vast majority of their students. This sentiment was especially common amongst teachers of languages:

Examples of students who got the top descriptors all had native/near native ability ... honestly, there's nothing exceptional about a German 15-year-old who can speak German

In terms of flexibility with respect to *interests and needs*, the findings were slightly more promising. Sixty-two percent of respondents agreed that the introduction of CBAs has succeeded in broadening the range of students' learning experiences, whilst 43% agreed that the new curriculum affords greater flexibility to schools in terms of tailoring their

programmes to suit their students' particular needs (Table 2). That said, the qualitative data revealed practical difficulties that arose from this increased flexibility:

It is extremely difficult to manage up to 24 experiments in the lab at one time . . . it is quite challenging as a teacher to have to mentally switch from thinking about one investigation to a different one

I teach in a . . . school with very little ICT so we weren't able to give the students the resources they should have had to do their CBAs

Perhaps it would be implemented better if . . . class sizes were more aligned with the European average (i.e. below 20)

One teacher questioned the added value of diversified assessment formats:

In general, the majority of able students produce higher graded CBAs and vice versa. Are there any significant evidences of lower achievers reversing this?

### **Knowledge acquisition and skills development**

In terms of whether or not the reforms are increasing the focus on developing students' transferrable skills, respondents were quite positive, with more than two-thirds agreeing that their students were now being afforded more opportunities to develop skills in investigation, analysis, creativity, and collaboration (Table 3). This seemed specifically linked to the new assessment structures, with 65% indicating that CBAs allowed students to demonstrate these skills in a way that written examinations do not. These gains in terms of skills development, however, appear to have been made at the expense of knowledge acquisition. Indeed, less than half of respondents believed there was an appropriate balance between knowledge and skills, and just 29% felt that students were afforded the opportunity to gain a deep knowledge of their subject area through engagement with CBAs.

**Table 3.** Participants' responses to closed questions pertaining to the extent to which the reforms are facilitating an appropriate balance between knowledge acquisition and skills development.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	%			
The new Junior Cycle facilitates a greater degree of active learning (e.g. students investigating issues or analysing information for themselves, being creative and or applying previously learned knowledge to new situations	10	20	48	22
The new Junior Cycle facilitates a greater deal of collaborative learning amongst students	9	25	46	20
CBAs allow students to show their understanding of concepts, skills and/or their ability to apply them in ways that would NOT be possible in one externally assessed written examination	16	20	50	15
The Assessment Task develops students' skills in reflection	19	30	45	6
The new Junior Cycle achieves a better balance between knowledge acquisition and skills development	18	34	35	13
CBAs allow students to gain a deep knowledge of my subject	24	38	30	8
The new terminal exam adequately facilitates the assessment of student's ability to apply skills learned in the subject area	30	41	26	3

Again, the qualitative data provided further insights. Some teachers perceived there to be real improvements in students' 'soft skill' development as a result of the reforms

The new Junior Cycle offers much more scope for creativity and self-development as it encourages students to reflect and learn from each other

I feel like Junior Cycle students come out of their shell earlier than they used to

However, this was somewhat overshadowed by frequently expressed concerns regarding diminished knowledge acquisition, or an unacceptable level of vagueness associated with the skills-based approach:

Their standard of knowledge is far inferior to that of students who followed the old Junior Cert

The course . . . has no definite constraints, is interpreted differently by everybody and results in much poorer knowledge of the subject

Working on skills without content is like teaching in a vacuum

Some argued that the skills targeted by the reforms were not being assessed authentically, whilst others questioned whether it is even possible to assess these skills, or whether students of this age have the capacity to develop them:

Many students just (write) what their teacher tells them to write in relation to reflection

One cannot assess something as intrinsically deep and introspective as reflection . . . the result is that teachers and students learn to play the system by learning the language of assessment but not necessarily doing it

I feel at this young age most students do not have the brain development to undertake (reflection) appropriately

Undoubtedly the most prominent concern associated with the skill-based nature of the new Junior Cycle was the contrast between this and the knowledge-based approach still dominant at Senior Cycle:

The skills based new JC has some merits, but we are not preparing them well for their LC

Many parts of the old course have been left out, leaving a massive gulf in what they need to know for sitting the subject in senior cycle

Until LC changes, JC skills can't be realised

We need to reform senior cycle ASAP . . . to make it align with junior cycle

Finally, in relation to languages, significant and widespread concern was evident regarding the removal of formal oral examinations, a decision that was described as 'baffling', 'a travesty', 'an abomination' and 'a definitive negative'. Several teachers expressed fears regarding the detrimental effect this would have on students' language production skills:

The key point of learning a language is speaking it and it should have been made an external examination worth significant marks

It will not do our young people any favours in terms of international employability

**Table 4.** Participants' responses to closed questions pertaining to the extent to which the reforms have reduced the focus on the terminal examinations, and the associated problems with this.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	%			
Students view CBAs as being less important than the externally graded components of the Junior Cycle (i.e. the Assessment Task and the final examination).	7	11	31	51
Students regard the externally graded components as being more important than the CBAs	5	15	33	47
The new Junior Cycle has increased my students' workload	3	27	32	38
The new Junior Cycle has reduced my focus on the terminal examination	26	46	22	6
The new Junior Cycle has reduced my students' focus on the terminal examinations	31	45	18	6
The new Junior Cycle has resulted in less anxiety for students	39	48	10	3

### **Focus on terminal examinations**

The findings strongly suggest that Junior Cycle reform has not succeeded in reducing the focus on terminal examinations for either teachers or students (Table 4). Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of respondents (87%) reported that the reforms have not alleviated student anxiety levels – something that is frequently attributed to exam-oriented systems.

The qualitative data provided insights into what teachers believed to be the major sources of anxiety for students. Most pointed to the sheer volume of work associated with multiple CBAs, whilst others cited issues relating to the exams:

CBAs are very well intentioned but they create a system of constant deadlines which causes a considerable amount of stress for students

The level of anxiety that presentations is causing students is immense

Today I had 5 absent who were due to 'perform' their CBA. And a student who had a panic attack!

One serious problem for the final examination is the fact that there is no choice in questions for the students . . . this causes much stress

**Table 5.** Participants' responses to closed questions pertaining to the extent to which the reforms have increased the practice of formative assessment.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	%			
The new Junior Cycle has increased the prominence of formative assessment in my classes	8	29	52	12
Students benefit from completing CBAs	18	23	45	13
The Assessment Task allows students to demonstrate an understanding of the knowledge and skills they developed during the second CBA	21	33	42	4
Students benefit from completing the Assessment Task	32	27	36	5

**Table 6.** Participants' responses to closed questions pertaining to their increased involvement in student assessment.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	%			
I feel confident in my ability to assess my own students' CBAs	4	7	53	36
The new Junior Cycle has increased my workload	2	11	32	55
SLARs help ensure consistency <i>within</i> schools in the appraisal of student learning	10	17	59	14
My participation in SLARs has improved my confidence in my ability to assess my own students	11	21	53	15
There is sufficient time allocated for the completion of CBAs	15	25	49	11
The NCCA exemplars of student work have been helpful to me in assessing the quality of my students' learning	21	22	49	8
SLARs help ensure consistency <i>across</i> schools in the appraisal of student learning	27	33	34	6
The fact that I am responsible for assessing CBAs has undermined my relationships with some of my students' parents	18	47	26	9
The fact that I am responsible for assessing CBAs has undermined my relationships with some of my students	19	50	22	9

### **Prominence of formative assessment**

Just under two-thirds of teachers agreed that the new Junior Cycle had succeeded in increasing the prominence of formative assessment. In terms of their benefits for students, CBAs were viewed considerably more favourably than the Assessment Task (Table 5).

The open-ended responses provided evidence to suggest that some rich formative assessment processes are occurring, but concerns were also evident in relation to specific subjects:

CBAS ... give students a way to scaffold their project, allows the long-term benefits of drafting and redrafting ... highlights learning as a process, not just an outcome

The new Junior Cycle and its methods and techniques has allowed students' minds to grow much quicker

The Irish junior cycle ... has far too much literature to make the classroom more formative and interactive

CBA1 in English is effective. CBA2 & AT are a waste of time and of no benefit to the English students

### **Teacher involvement in student assessment**

The vast majority of teachers (89%) expressed confidence in their ability to assess their students, and over two-thirds agreed that their participation in SLAR meetings had contributed to this (Table 6). SLARs were generally viewed positively in terms of their role in helping to ensure consistency of judgements across teachers within, but not between schools. Approximately, a third of respondents felt that their involvement in student assessment had a detrimental impact on their relationships with parents or students.



**Table 7.** Participants' responses as to what they regarded to be 'the most appropriate way' of determining a students' overall grade for their subject at junior cycle.

The overall grade should be determined solely by an externally-assessed terminal examination (i.e. no Assessment Task, no CBAs)	44
Less weight should be given to the externally-assessed components, with teacher-assessed CBAs also contributing to the overall grade	23
There should be NO externally-assessed components, with teacher-assessed CBAs determining the overall grade	19
The current arrangements are appropriate (i.e. 10% Assessment Task, 90% terminal examination, CBAs do not contribute to the overall grade)	15

Positive regard for SLARs was also evident in the open ended responses, but again, this was tempered by unease regarding lack of reliability and consistency:

I do like the SLARs. I feel they contribute to my teaching.

Very difficult to have a uniform approach across the board on CBAs and SLARs ... individual teachers and schools are doing their own thing ... which ultimately undermines the whole process

There was a roughly even split evident in the sample regarding whether or not teacher judgement *should* contribute to students' grades, with 44% calling for a return to externally graded assessment, and 42% favouring either increased or sole emphasis on teacher-assessed components (Table 7).

## Discussion

Ireland's *new Junior Cycle*, like many assessment-led reforms worldwide, was designed to foster a more skills-oriented approach to learning and to enhance the formative function of assessment. A gap often persists, however, between the intended and attained outcomes of such reforms (Isaacs & Lamprianou, 2018), possibly due to a degree of 'refraction' that inevitably occurs when globally influenced ideas are adopted in specific cultural contexts (Gleeson et al., 2020). This phenomenon was certainly evident in the case of the new Junior Cycle, whereby an ambitious initial framework became heavily diluted in the years prior to its eventual implementation due to stakeholder opposition (MacPhail et al., 2018). Indeed, it could be argued that the new assessment structure at Junior Cycle represents only a slight departure from its previous incarnation. With this and other contextual considerations in mind, this study sought to examine the extent to which the new Junior Cycle is succeeding in meeting its stated aims, from the perspectives of teachers who have been involved in its day-to-day implementation.

### *A shift towards skills*

The move away from a knowledge-based and towards a skills-based approach to education arguably represents the most significant and complex aim of the new Junior Cycle. A substantial majority of the teachers surveyed expressed the belief that, thanks to the introduction of diverse assessment approaches, their students are now being afforded opportunities to develop skills in investigation, analysis, creativity, collaboration, and

critical reflection. On the surface, this could be described as a promising finding, as much has been written about the need for young people to develop these skills if they are to effectively participate in the ‘knowledge age’ (e.g. Voogt & Roblin, 2012), or more recently, the ‘conceptual age’ society. McWilliam (2017, p. 9) posited that ‘the sort of young people who are thriving in the conceptual age are those who exhibit a range of non-traditional attributes to learning – risk-taking, self-criticality, a “seriously playful” approach to problem-solving’, and called for pedagogical and assessment approaches that support students in developing these skills as opposed to those that emphasise the acquisition of knowledge. Our findings suggest that the new Junior Cycle offers a step in this direction; however, they also reveal considerable complexities surrounding this issue.

Perhaps, the most pressing concern is that several teachers expressed doubts surrounding the *authenticity* with which skills are being developed. Many fear that the potential of new assessment formats is being undermined as ‘teachers and students learn to play the system’, with undesirable drilling and rote learning behaviours already starting to emerge. These concerns are most evident in relation to reflection, which is perhaps unsurprising, as this skill has long posed challenges for educators in terms of how it can be meaningfully assessed. Certainly, it seems that further consideration of how to safeguard the *Assessment Task* against superficiality is warranted. Some insights to this end could be drawn from Kember et al. (2008)’s four-category scheme for determining reflective depth and quality in writing. According to this scheme, critical reflection is present when there is ‘evidence of a change in perspective over a fundamental belief’ (p. 375). However, as this model was developed specifically for the higher education context, it may not transfer seamlessly to lower secondary education. Related to this is whether learners who do not possess deep disciplinary knowledge can even reasonably be expected to engage in critical self-reflection. This has been debated in the literature (see Moore, 2011) and is echoed in the sentiments of some teachers surveyed in this study.

An additional issue that warrants discussion is the role that existing practices and cultural values in Ireland may have played in influencing these teachers’ levels of comfort with the concept of a skills-oriented curriculum. As previously noted, such curricula have decidedly economic foundations that diverge from the concept of traditional philosophies regarding the purpose of education (Gleeson et al., 2020). Proponents of the skills-based approach argue that ‘what counts as useful, relevant or seminal knowledge has an increasingly limited shelf-life’ (McWilliam, 2017, p. 13); however, this view does not appear to be shared by some of the teachers in this study, who did not interpret skill gains as positive outcomes because of their impact on the depth of subject knowledge being achieved by their students.

Aside from personal beliefs about the purpose of education, it is clear that the shift towards skills at Junior Cycle, in the absence of aligned changes at Senior Cycle, is contributing significantly to teachers’ frustrations. Indeed, despite the retention of a relatively heavily weighted examination in the new Junior Cycle, changes have occurred in terms of the nature and demands of the programme, creating an apparent disconnect with Senior Cycle. There has been much discussion regarding Senior Cycle reform in recent years (e.g., Banks et al., 2018), and the urgency placed on this issue increased further in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (see O’Brien, 2021a). Until any changes are implemented, however, this perceived discontinuity between the lower and upper

secondary curricula is likely to remain. Ultimately, this may detract from the extent to which the skills focus can be fully realised, as some teachers may feel duty-bound to continue the ‘knowledge-transmission’ approach to ensure their students are prepared for what lies ahead at Senior Cycle.

### ***A shift in teacher assessment identity***

A somewhat unexpected finding was that teachers’ attitudes towards their involvement in assessing their own students were relatively positive. The fact that over 40% were in favour of CBAs contributing either partially or solely to students’ grades is particularly striking, given that initial iterations of the new Junior Cycle, which proposed assigning almost equal weightings to the teacher- and externally judged assessments, were vehemently opposed by teacher unions. One possible explanation is that the voices of this substantial minority were not adequately represented by the unions’ stances on this issue in 2012. Alternatively, perhaps in the intervening years, in light of ongoing efforts to enhance teacher assessment literacy, teachers in Ireland have become more positively disposed to playing the role of assessors.

Certainly, our findings indicate that initiatives such as SLARs have contributed to improving teachers’ confidence in their ability to assess their own students. Incidentally, the sudden and unprecedented involvement of Irish secondary teachers in determining their own students’ Leaving Certificate grades in both 2020 and 2021 due to circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic may also have played a role to this end. This ‘calculated grades’ process required teachers to provide an estimation of the percentage marks that each of their students would have been most likely to achieve had they sat the Leaving Certificate exam as normal, and to refine these on the basis of alignment meetings with their colleagues. Although teachers experienced some difficulties in its enactment (Doyle et al., 2021), and despite widespread media scrutiny and legal challenges, the process was deemed to have been a success (O’Brien, 2021b). This may have gone some way towards eroding elements of the established assessment culture within the Irish education system that underscored union opposition towards early iterations of the Junior Cycle framework. Of course, it should not be ignored that 44% of respondents expressed a clear desire for externally graded components *only*. Furthermore, a third indicated that relationships with their students have been compromised by the mere fact that they are responsible for assessing their CBAs, despite the fact that the outcomes of this assessment currently have no bearing on grades. This suggests that teacher and union opposition to this issue has some valid underpinnings, and that any potential move to increase Irish teachers’ involvement in the assessment of their own students for certification purposes in the future, would not garner unanimous support.

Interestingly, in a comprehensive documentation of the move from external examinations to school-based assessment in Queensland over a period of forty years, Maxwell and Cumming (2011, p. 191) noted that ‘teacher uncertainty and insecurity’ and ‘an erosion of relationships between students and teacher’s new gate-keeping role as assessor’ contributed to an initial negative view of the reforms, but that these are now regarded as having been ‘growing pains’, with widespread confidence in the system eventually achieved. With this in mind, if the assessment identity of Irish teachers has indeed

begun to evolve in recent years, the possibility of teacher-assessed components contributing to student' official grades at Junior Cycle could potentially be revisited at some point in the future. Teachers' expressed concerns, however, would need to be more thoughtfully considered should this happen.

### ***Persistent problems and unintended negative consequences***

It is encouraging that many teachers believe that the new Junior Cycle has increased the formative role that assessment is playing in students' learning. That said, it is also clear that teachers and students remain heavily focused on the terminal exam. Although some of the problems associated with exams, such as 'curriculum narrowing' appear to have been alleviated somewhat by the reforms, others, such as excessive stress and anxiety, do not. In fact, although teachers indicated that their students viewed CBAs as being less important than the terminal exams, there was a sense that 'over-assessment' has taken hold, with reports of students being overwhelmed by the demands of the new assessment schedule.

Two further aspects of the new Junior Cycle were identified as prominent sources of dissatisfaction; namely, the replacement of higher and ordinary level specifications with a common level in most subjects, and the removal of oral language examinations. The former was viewed as significantly detracting from one of the main aims of the reforms, *i.e.*, potential to adequately cater for a wide range of abilities, whilst the latter was regarded as devaluing a key skill in language learning.

### ***Limitations and future directions***

The findings of this study should not be regarded as a fully comprehensive account of the extent to which the aims of the new Junior Cycle are being realised; rather, they represent the perspectives of teachers regarding this matter. The voices of other stakeholders were not included in this research, and no observations of classroom practices or students' work were undertaken. In terms of representativeness, language teachers and those working in ETB schools were slightly over-represented in our sample, so it is possible that issues pertaining to less well-represented subjects or schools were not sufficiently highlighted. Finally, respondents in the first year of their teaching career would not have been in a position to comment on certain aspects of the programme, such as the terminal examinations, as these did not take place in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of the findings of this study will be of particular interest to policymakers in Ireland. Although it is inevitable that learning will create challenges and may elicit a certain level of stress in some students, the intensity of the concerns expressed by teachers about 'over-assessment' suggests that having just one CBA in certain subjects, or widening the window during which they can be completed may be worth considering. A return to higher and ordinary level papers and oral language examinations would also be prudent if the professionalism and expertise of these practitioners is to be acknowledged. Certainly, these issues, alongside the potential of teacher involvement in state certification, ought to be borne in mind by those involved in the proposed reform of the Senior Cycle.

More broadly and internationally speaking, if the shift in favour of skills-based school curricula continues to garner momentum, practical investigations into how the likes of creativity, collaboration and critical self-reflection can be validly assessed are urgently needed. As Geisinger (2016, p. 245) noted, this issue ‘has generated considerable thought and hypothesising, but far less empirical research’, and our findings provide further impetus for such research. Care et al. (2018) outlined some useful considerations and strategies for the design of appropriate and authentic skills assessments at a general level, but it is evident that individual education systems need to focus more attention on this issue with specific reference to their own curricula. This is essential if we are to move past the point whereby assessment-led reforms have little to no meaningful influence on the ‘realities on the ground’.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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