

**Junior Cycle English teachers' perspectives on recent assessment reform:
Issues for validity and reliability**

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Disclaimer 1

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to ascertain post-primary English teachers experiences of delivering recent reforms in the Junior Cycle (covering the first three years of post-primary education) English course. Notably, the thesis is concerned with teachers' assessment literacy skills in relation to the newly introduced classroom-based assessments (*CBA*s) and subject learning and assessment review meetings (*SLAR*s). Of particular interest is teachers' perceptions and understanding of the key assessment terms *validity* and *reliability*. The thesis is mixed methods in nature, predominantly qualitative with three data collection methods: a background survey (quantitative, N = 146), semi-structured interviews (N = 8) and a focus group (qualitative, N = 4). Research is being carried out through the constructivist-interpretivist epistemological paradigm. The research will contribute to the growing body of literature around recent curriculum and assessment reforms in Ireland, instigated by the *Framework for the Junior Cycle* (2015), and will be of interest to not only teachers and policymakers but also society as a whole.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents

Disclaimer 1.....	ii
Disclaimer 2.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Abbreviations.....	ix
1. Introduction/rationale	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background	1
1.3 Rationale	2
1.4 Research Objectives and Aims	3
1.5 Research site	4
1.6 Structure	5
2. Literature review and critique	6
2.1 Introduction	6
2.2 Structure	6
2.3 Grounds for reform	7
2.4 Experiences of reform	9
2.5 Teacher assessment competencies.....	11
2.6 Relevance and contribution	13
2.7 Conclusion.....	15
3. Methodology.....	16
3.1 Introduction	16
3.2 Research philosophy	16
3.3 Research approach.....	17
3.4 Methodological choices	18
3.4.1 Participants	19
3.5 Data collection methods	19
3.5.1 Validity and Reliability.....	20
3.5.2 Questionnaire	20
3.5.3 Semi-structured interview	20
3.5.4 Focus Group	21
3.6 Thematic data analysis – a check on trustworthiness	21
3.7 Ethical considerations	23

3.8 Researcher positionality.....	24
3.9 Conclusion	25
4. Research findings and data analysis	26
4.1 Introduction.....	26
4.2 Category One - Assessment, validity and reliability	28
4.2.1 Category One - Theme One - Varying interpretations of assessment, validity and reliability	28
4.2.2 Category One - Theme Two - The role of collegiality and school culture in moderation	32
4.2.3 Category One - Theme Three - The SLAR experience	34
4.2.4 Category One - Theme Four - Ipsative assessment risks.....	37
4.3 Research Question One - Justification	38
4.4 Category Two - CPD and assessment literacy	38
4.4.1 Category Two - Theme One - Strengths and weaknesses of CPD to date	39
4.4.2 Category Two - Theme Two - Views on future CPD and assessment literacy	42
4.5 Research Questions Two and Three - Justification	45
4.6 Category Three - Teachers as motivators, diplomats and advocates.....	45
4.6.1 Category Three - Theme One - Exercising professional judgement.....	46
4.6.2 Category Three - Theme Two - Motivating students for non-numerical assessment	47
4.6.3 Category Three - Theme Three - Merits of reforms.....	49
4.7 Research Questions Four and Five - Justification.....	51
5. Conclusions and recommendations.....	52
5.1 Introduction.....	52
5.1.1 Assessment, validity and reliability	52
5.1.2 CPD and assessment literacy	53
5.1.3 Teachers as motivators, diplomats and advocates	54
5.3 Summary	55
5.4 Conclusion	55
5.5 Recommendations.....	55
Bibliography	57
Appendices.....	68
Appendix 1 – The Features of Quality.....	68
Appendix 2 – Exemplars of students work.....	69
Appendix 3 – The Principles of Junior Cycle Education.....	70
Appendix 4 – The Key Skills of Junior Cycle Education.....	71
Appendix 5 – The Statements of Learning for English	72
Appendix 6 – The revised grading system for the new Junior Cycle.....	73

Appendix 7 - Sample Research Participant Consent Form.....	74
Appendix 8 - Information letter on the nature of the research project	76
Appendix 9 - Information sheet for semi-structured interview	78
Appendix 10 - Consent form for semi-structured interview.....	80
Appendix 11 - Amendments to consent form due to COVID-19 restrictions.....	82
Appendix 12 - Interview schedule for interviews/focus groups	83
Appendix 13 - Indicative questionnaire	85
Appendix 14 – Semi-structured interview transcript example	86
List of figures and tables	92
List of graphs	92

Abbreviations

AT – Assessment Task

CBA – Classroom Based Assessment

CPD – Continuous Professional Development

DES – Department of Education and Skills

FoQ – Features of Quality

JC – Junior Cycle

JCPA – Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement

JCT – Junior Cycle for Teachers

KS – Key Skills

NCCA – National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

SLAR – Subject Learning and Assessment Review

SOL – Statement of Learning

TA – Thematic Analysis

“The guest will judge better of a feast than the cook”
— Aristotle

1. Introduction/rationale

1.1 Introduction

Reforms to the junior cycle (lower-secondary cycle) were first initiated in 2014 on a phased basis, with English the first subject to be undergo change following the guidelines contained in the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES 2015a). Since then, the ways in which secondary teachers assess their students and prepare students for assessment has changed. Consequently, teachers now assess their own students' progress and make a value judgement on their progress in two classroom-based assessments (CBAs).

Since the introduction of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES 2015a) and the *Specification for Junior Cycle English* (NCCA 2015b), now widely known as the *Specification*, a new system of CBAs (Classroom Based Assessment) and SLARs (Student Learning and Assessment Review Meeting) have been introduced to assess students oral communication skills (CBA 1) as well as their written language skills (CBA 2). Student's own teachers award a descriptor from the *Features of Quality* (FoQ) (see Appendix 1, p. 69) to make a judgement on their efforts. SLARs are where teachers moderate their decision-making process, including also, that of their colleagues. SLARs are intended to ensure consistency when it comes to awarding a descriptor from the FoQ (NCCA 2019). The CBAs carry no numerical marks despite the large amount of time and effort put into them by students and teachers alike.

1.2 Background

The training afforded to pre-service and in-service teachers to prepare for and operate in this dual assessment approach, by the Department of Education support service; *Junior Cycle for Teachers* (JCT) and the colleges of education, has not been adequate in equipping teachers with the appropriate levels of assessment literacy to navigate the new assessment landscape. Additionally, the role of the teacher has changed as these new assessment methods were embedded into teachers' instructional styles and the classroom became more reflective of the CBA culture of drafting, practicing, tweaking and feedback. Teachers have experimented with their instructional style in the years following the introduction of the reforms. A dual approach is needed to equip teachers both with the assessment literacy and instructional methods to maximise teaching and learning opportunities.

1.3 Rationale

While a review, *Report of the review of the early enactment of Junior Cycle English* (NCCA 2018), has found issues pertaining to challenging learning outcomes, workload, time to achieve all of the learning outlined in the specification and the need for further CPD (Continuous Professional Development) in the area of SLAR facilitation little attention has been afforded levels of assessment literacy within the teaching population as a whole.

Despite the need and consensus to reform the Junior Certificate (DES 1999, NCCA 2011), anecdotal evidence (Byrne 2019, O'Brien 2020, Humphreys 2014a and 2014b) suggests that teachers remain opposed to the underlying change in summative assessment practices and the emergence of a dual-assessment approach; two CBAs and a final summative exam (Murchan 2018). There are concerns that teachers may feel obliged to award a descriptor based on their relationship with the students' parents, the student's themselves and more worryingly unconscious bias (Byrne 2019, Byrne and Prendergast 2019, Doyle and Sheahan 2014, Donnelly 2019, Humphreys 2014a and 2014b, NCCA 2018).

Only now, with reforms rolled out to all junior cycle subjects, is the risk of perceived CBA overload (O'Brien 2020) becoming more apparent – with both students and teachers feeling the impact of going from one CBA assessment window to the next with little time and space for reflection. Ironically, the reforms at junior cycle were seen as an answer to a system that had been criticised as ‘...content overload...’ (MacPhail 2018, p. 3). Now, with the content of many curricula reduced there is more opportunity for assessment – the nature of teacher's preparedness to step into this new assessment landscape varies.

The initial reforms proposed teachers awarding a numerical mark to the CBAs. Following industrial action and resistance from the teaching unions this was shelved in favour of the *FoQ* and the SLAR system of moderation which is in place today.

Research for this thesis will canvass teachers' opinions on their assessment literacy and their knowledge of key concepts in assessment such as validity and reliability. An assessment is said to be *valid* ‘if it measures what it purports to measure’ (Shepard, cited in Wolming 2010). *Reliability*, on the other hand, is best defined as when the same and/or different assessor reaches the same conclusion on varying occasions when shown similar evidence of learning (Freeman and Lewis 1998). Most English teachers have now taught three exam cohorts (2017, 2018 and 2019) and will have engaged in SLAR facilitation and the use of the *FoQ* and

exemplars of student work (Appendix 2, p. 70). A wealth of experience has now been amassed by the English teachers of Ireland as they have grappled with a sometimes-incongruous subject specification (NCCA 2018).

Insights into the working practices of busy teachers will become apparent and will give a valuable basis upon which recommendations will be made to improve the CBA and SLAR process for all involved. These insights will shed light on how decisions are made when it comes to choosing *FoQ*, what informs these choices and the thought process behind awarding an *FoQ* for a piece of work.

The experience of both teachers and students of CBAs has been overwhelmingly positive. Many teachers and students comment on the opportunities for real-world learning and a sense of pride in their work as they see the creative process through from beginning to end. While the experience of CBAs has been mainly positive for all involved it can be improved further with a greater cognisance of how decisions are made in SLARs. Only when teachers become consciously aware of their assessment practices can strides in consistency be made (DES 2015a). This will not only benefit students but also teachers who can better stand over their decision-making process as appropriately moderated, considered and informed by targeted CPD.

1.4 Research Objectives and Aims

The overarching purpose of this research is to survey teacher's knowledge of key assessment concepts of validity and reliability, analyse their decision-making process in SLARs and identify any gaps in knowledge that could be improved with targeted CPD. The central research question reads as follows:

What is the experience of Junior Cycle English teachers in assessing their own students work for CBA 1 and CBA 2?

From this central research question there arises a further five sub-questions:

1. How and when do teachers know that the appropriate Feature of Quality (*FoQ*) has been awarded?

2. How competent are teachers at assessing their own students' work? How have teachers been supported/trained in assessment literacy for SLARs to proceed in a manner that ensures effective moderation?
3. What supports have been offered to assist teachers in assessing their students' work? Have these supports been helpful? What other helps/CPD do teachers need?
4. What role does the teacher-student relationship play in the impartiality of a descriptor awarded from the Features of Quality (*FoQ*)?
5. What role does parental expectation/involvement play in the assessment process? To what extent do teachers feel pressured to provide a descriptor that will not cause worry to parents?

From the research questions four research aims emerge:

1. Evaluate the impact of the implementation of the *Framework* (2015) on teachers' conceptions of assessment
2. Assess the role that assessment knowledge and literacy play in effective moderation
3. Establish baseline data on teachers understanding of key assessment concepts such as validity and reliability
4. Analyse the effects on teaching and learning because of CBAs that do not carry numerical marks. For example, motivation levels.

The main objective of the research is to explore junior cycle English teachers experiences of assessing their own students work. There are three research objectives associated with the main objective:

1. Assess impact of integration of the Framework (2015) as it applies to the CBAs and SLARs.
2. Explore teacher's assessment literacy skills and how these skills impact upon teacher's confidence levels when engaging in moderation
3. Evaluate how teachers negotiate differences in opinions and reflect upon decisions taken in SLARs

1.5 Research site

The research will take place across several post-primary schools in North-West Donegal. A list of 7 schools in the locality has been drawn up and these will be targeted to

reach participants. Other schools across Donegal and Ireland may also participate as the survey is forwarded via email.

1.6 Structure

This thesis is divided into five chapters. They are as follows:

1. Chapter One – Introduction
2. Chapter Two – Review of the Literature
3. Chapter 3 – Methodology
4. Chapter 4 – Research findings and analysis
5. Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Recommendations

2. Literature review and critique

2.1 Introduction

This section analyses, describes and critiques the existing literature in the area of recent reform to the junior cycle, experiences of reform and teachers' overall preparedness levels to engage with the reforms. The reforms owe their presence to a DES document titled *A Framework for Junior Cycle*, of which there were two versions, 2012 and 2015. The two documents differ in scope, breadth and vision - with noticeable differences in ambition. The 2015 version of the *Framework* is a product of the industrial climate of which it was interrogated by. Of particular relevance to this thesis is the reality that the 2015 *Framework* is a document that is rooted in compromise and one which was contested from its' inception. The 2012 *Framework* proposed a phasing out of the old Junior Certificate examination with replacement by a classroom-based approach to assessment. The response by teachers to this proposal was one of entrenchment to the familiarity of the old exam system while also acknowledging that the current junior cycle was no longer fit for purpose (MacPhail 2018). The 2015 *Framework* is ultimately a product of the fraught industrial landscape between 2012-2015, compromise and the document that governs the dual-assessment policy in place today.

The 2015 *Framework* committed to the reporting of students' achievements by the State Exams Commission in tandem with more involvement from schools on the CBAs and other areas of learning. The new method of reporting, known as the *Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement* (JCPA), captures achievements from all areas of learning such as projects undertaken or volunteering as well as the traditional reporting on performance in exams.

2.2 Structure

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section, 'Grounds for reform', deals with the key documents and policy decisions which gave rise to JC reform. An examination of these documents will set the context of JC reform and clarify the changes in assessment that were envisioned as far back as 1999.

The second section, 'Experiences of reform', will deal with the lived experience of enacting curriculum reform with references both to opposition from teachers and research on some of the most recently reformed subjects.

The third section, ‘Teachers assessment competencies’, moves the argument towards addressing teacher’s confidence and knowledge in assessing their own students’ work.

2.3 Grounds for reform

The Junior Certificate was first introduced in 1992. The qualification was quickly adopted as the minimum requirement for getting a job in Ireland. Reform of the Junior Certificate into what we know today as the *Junior Cycle* flows from the findings of a 1999 DES report titled, *The Junior Certificate - Issues for Discussion*. The report found that there was too much focus on terminal examinations. This approach led teachers to teach in a didactical system otherwise known as *teaching to the exam* (King 2017). A key perspective in the report was that students had not experienced a wide range and mode of assessment strategies. It was argued that students, ‘have never experienced the Junior Certificate Programme as it was intended’ (DES 1999, p.2).

Twelve years passed before a more sustained effort at reform was published in the form of *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle* (NCCA 2011). This document once again acknowledged that there was a prevalence of summative assessment which narrowed the learning experience in third year. The document discusses the status quo and the need for a new vision of assessment and reporting to be introduced:

“...if the third year of junior cycle continues to be dominated by the prospect of the Junior Certificate examination and preparation for it continues to be focused on rehearsing questions and answers, then students, and their teachers and their parents will continue to believe that this approach is all that is required for success in this examination.” (NCCA 2011, p.4)

Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle (2011) had at its core a commitment to a dual assessment approach, with 60% for the terminal examination and 40% for school-based assessments. The framework also espoused a vision for a new system of principles, key skills (KS) and statements of learning (SOL) (see Appendices 3, 4 and 5, pp. 71 - 73) that would be central in redefining the experience of the learner in lower secondary education in Ireland.

This was an innovative, modern and well-intentioned piece of education policy which was formulated in consultation with students, parents, teachers and key education partners. For example, the KS of ‘Communicating’ would require students to ‘perform and present’ (DES 2012, p. 10) – a key skill needed, ‘to learn, to live and to work’ (NCCA 2011, p.4) in the twenty-first century.

The introduction of the *Framework* came at a critical time in Irish education. While the initial *Framework* was published in 2012 the most recent version was published in 2015. The rise of PISA scores as a comparative tool to assess literacy and numeracy levels of a country, as well as the publication of the *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011), the global recession and a drive to make the public sector more productive and accountable informed the final *Framework* document published in 2015. Simmie (2014, p.195) points towards a ‘knower attitude’ which is claimed was at the centre of the reform efforts to propel schools into a ‘competitive survival-of-the-fittest market’ (Simmie 2014, p.195).

The Minister for Education at the time, Jan O’Sullivan, made a commitment to supporting and resourcing professional development for teachers and school leaders to enable successful implementation. Reference was made to the need to support teachers with the ‘elements relating to school based assessment’ (DES 2015a, p.2). Hence, the effectiveness of the support to teachers offered by the DES forms one of the research questions for the project.

School-based assessment (CBAs) would supplement the ongoing preparation for external assessment. CBAs would take place in second and third year with an Assessment Task (AT) following CBA 2 (DES 2015a, p.8). CBA 1 would comprise 15% while CBA 2 would constitute 25% of a students’ overall marks. Following industrial unrest amid teacher’s concerns when faced with awarding numerical marks the Assessment Task would not be worth 10% and would be marked externally. Industrial unrest will be discussed in the next section of the literature review but is worth mentioning here as it plays a significant role in the final iteration of the *Framework* (2015) teachers are bound by today. Key to the reform efforts were the introduction of *Student Learning and Assessment Review* meetings or SLARs. SLARs will be discussed further in section three of the literature review.

The *Framework* (DES 2015a) has at its core, the vision of reporting on a broader picture of learning guided by the principles, KS and SOL. Central to this reform effort is a foundation in Piaget’s (1936) theory of constructivism. While not explicitly referencing Piaget in the document, the reforms were being pursued so that teachers could ‘...be conscious of improving the ‘learners’ capacity to communicate meaning’ (NCCA 2011, p.21). Teachers are now urged not to ‘be tied to the reductive exigencies of the exam system’ (Granville, cited in Dolan 2014, p.25).

2.4 Experiences of reform

The first subject to undergo reform was English, in September 2014. Teachers engagement in, experience of and willingness to embrace the reforms is set against the industrial relations climate which produced the compromised 2015 *Framework* as we know it. While there was initial goodwill and broad consensus (DES 1999, Dolan 2014, MacPhail 2018) that the old junior certificate was outdated this was soon tempered by the reality of the intention to scrap the old system of state certification and to have teachers assess all of their students' learning with certification carried out locally (DES 2012)

A new system of learning outcomes divides the learning into three areas of reading, writing and oral. Each area of learning consists of thirteen learning outcomes some of which are assessed in the final terminal examination while others are assessed formatively or through the vehicle of the CBAs.

The introduction of the new the *Framework* (DES 2015a) and *Specification for Junior Cycle English* (NCCA 2015b) was welcomed on one hand yet there were still reservations about its' practicalities. While the learning would change many teachers noted the need for targeted professional development and upskilling (O'Connor 2013) so that the transition of the role of teacher from '...advocate and ally to judge and jury...' (O'Connor 2013) could be managed and introduced in a meaningful way.

Other teachers struck a more defiant tone. The largest unions, the ASTI and TUI, set about organising strikes in direct opposition to the reform measures. This resulted in 35,000 teachers taking to the picket line in December 2014 over their legitimate concerns about marking up to 40% of their students work (O'Connell 2014). Teachers expressed fears over the legitimacy, impartiality, validity and transparency of the proposals (Hunt 2013). The message from the teaching profession was clear, under no circumstances would teachers countenance assessing their own students work by awarding numerical marks.

A mediation process was initiated which sought to solve the impasse between the DES and the teaching unions. The mediation process resulted in another document that would further dilute the original aim and vision of junior cycle reform. The document, *Junior Cycle Reform – A Way Forward* (Travers 2015), or the *Travers Report*, recommended several points which arose from the mediation progress between the two parties involved. Specifically, teachers' fears over awarding a numerical grade to their own students was to be averted by dropping this

proposed reform measure in favour of teachers only awarding a descriptor, ‘...not numerical marks...’ (Travers 2015, p.6), to their students. As a result, industrial action was immediately suspended by the teaching unions.

Despite teachers’ misgivings, for the first time an oral communication task would be assessed in the form of CBA 1. A portfolio style collection of texts would be assessed via the vehicle of CBA 2. A school-based AT would be linked to CBA 2 and would constitute 10% of a student’s final grade. Gone were the old grades (A-F) and instead a new system of *FoQ*, for the CBAs, and grade descriptors for the final exam would be introduced (See Appendix 6, p. 74).

The first comprehensive review of the new junior cycle English Course was published in 2018 by the NCCA. In the document, *Report of the review of the early enactment of Junior Cycle English (NCCA 2018)*, the views of teachers and students and other stakeholders were consulted. The NCCA acknowledge the impact of the ‘protracted industrial dispute’ (NCCA 2018, p.5) and the addition of the AT as a further consequence of the *Travers Report* (2015). The document gathered feedback on CBAs, SLARs, reporting, the *Specification* (NCCA 2015b) and examples of student work. Both students and teachers gave a broad welcome to the CBAs and the SLAR system which has arisen to moderate the awarding of the *FoQ* (NCCA 2018). Teachers and students reported that the purpose of the AT was ‘largely unclear’ (NCCA 2018, p.7) despite the value of reflecting on writing as process (NCCA 2018).

The report also makes an important point about the concept of ipsative assessment:

A strong instinct towards ipsative assessment (judging the work against the student’s previous performance) rather than criterion-based assessment (the work against the features of quality and a national benchmark) is a recurring feature in the feedback. (NCCA 2018, p.42)

Such a ‘recurring’ (NCCA 2018, p.42) issue would seem to suggest that the SLAR system for moderation of student work is influenced by unconscious bias which has implications for the CBAs validity. It can be proposed that teachers have not been taught how to consult the national benchmark and how to apply this appropriately to their own students’ work. It’s an important point and one that forms the basis for much of the research to be undertaken. While ipsative assessment is seen as radical it can influence a student’s motivation positively as they begin to piece together feedback on previous performances (Hughes 2011). As the *Framework* (DES 2015a) was not designed within the bounds of an ipsative assessment

regime it could be argued that teachers unconscious bias could have an impact on the validity and reliability of the CBAs (Magin 2011).

As Murchan (2018) postulates, the industrial impasse resulted in a series of compromises which has, 'shifted the reforms far from their intended nature' (Murchan 2018, p.1). As Lenihan *et al.* (2018) has proposed, perhaps what is needed is a bold re-evaluation of what we value as a society in terms of assessment. This requires a 'cultural shift' (Lenihan *et al.* 2016, p.1) that might then enable teachers to successfully implement the *Framework* (DES 2015a) in a system that would move 'towards assessment as a support of learning and teaching' (MacPhail *et al.* 2018, p.1).

2.5 Teacher assessment competencies

This section of the literature review will discuss teachers' levels of knowledge around assessment skills, assessment literacy and professional preparedness to engage in SLARs. Terms such as validity, reliability, ipsative and unconscious bias are not usually discussed by teachers. While they may be aware of the underlying expectation of fairness and legitimacy of assessment approaches in junior cycle there is a sense that much remains to be done to upskill teachers in the area of assessment literacy.

As discussed in chapter one, an assessment is said to be *valid* 'if it measures what it purports to measure' (Shepard, cited in Wolming 2010). *Reliability*, on the other hand, is best defined as when the same and/or different assessor reaches the same conclusion on varying occasions when shown similar evidence of learning (Freeman and Lewis 1998). Biggs (2003, p.1) states that *constructive alignment* occurs when the student has been 'trapped'. It is almost impossible to finish the module 'without learning what is intended to be learned' (Biggs 2003, p.1).

Popham (2009), Hattie (2009), as well as Black and Wiliam (1998), posit that assessment plays an important role in student learning. A key reform measure of the *Framework* (DES 2015a) states that teachers are required to be able to engage, 'in professional discussion to reflect on the quality of their own students' work' (NCCA 2019, p.1). As more and more comes to be expected of teachers there is a need to match this expectation with the appropriate training to avoid teachers making decisions 'without sufficient back-ground or training in assessment' (Xu and Brown 2016, p.149). Figure 1 (page 12) shows Xu and Brown's

(2016) conceptual framework of teacher assessment literacy in practice which points towards assessment knowledge as the basis for success in assessment literacy.

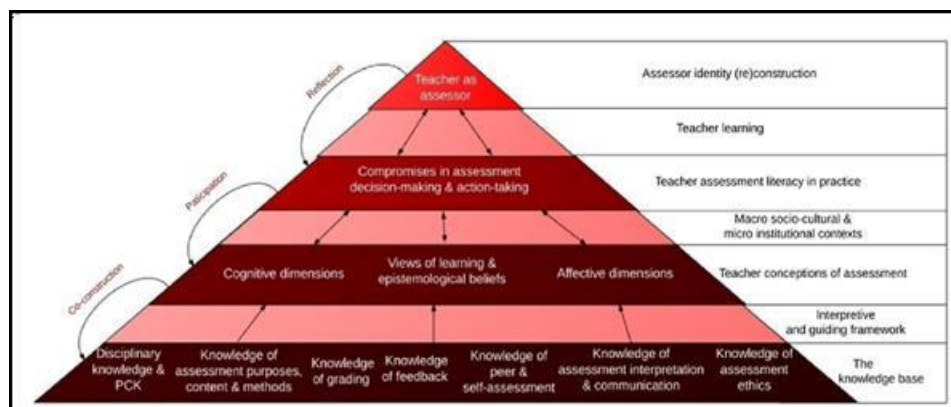


Figure 1 - A conceptual framework of teacher assessment literacy in practice

Avoiding ‘assessment illiteracy’ (Stiggins 2010, p.233) involves the design and implementation of professional development to ‘encompass all phases of teacher education and development’ (Xu and Brown 2016, p.149) not solely initial teacher education. To date, there has been no targeted CPD dealing specifically with teachers’ key assessment literacy around concepts such as validity, reliability, usefulness, practicality, authenticity, transparency and washback in preparation for assessing students via the CBAs.

As Looney *et al.* (2018) surmise, teachers assessment abilities are key to quality assessment practice. Similarly, in their research (n=594), Lysaght and O’Leary (2017) advocate that there is an ‘urgent need for high-quality teacher professional development to build teacher assessment literacy’ (Lysaght and O’Leary 2017, p.1). CPD organised and delivered by JCT tends to focus on the content of the new curriculum or curriculum planning. Few opportunities have been afforded to upskill teachers or indeed give a basic introduction to new assessment practices and expectations. As teachers negotiated their way through the *Specification* (NCCA 2015b), many were concerned with simply covering the course within the timeframe. Developing the assessment competencies needed for this new course was seen as a secondary skill rather than integral to the success of the reform envisioned.

DeLuca and Johnson (2017) and McLellan (2004), claim that despite the requirement for assessment adept teachers, a low level of teacher assessment literacy, knowledge and skills persists, particularly with recently qualified teachers. The need for teachers to embrace CPD on assessment literacy may have been hindered by the ‘...historical and ongoing resistance with the junior cycle reform agenda...’ (MacPhail 2018, p. 13).

2.6 Relevance and contribution

Having identified three main sections of research to date on CBAs a trend has emerged and a gap in knowledge has presented itself. There is little research in the literature that is independent of the teacher training service (JCT), the Department of Education or curriculum developers (NCCA). This thesis intends to address this gap in the literature by offering teachers a chance to express their view on recent reforms unhindered by the reform agenda the researcher or organisation. A gap in the literature has been identified and will be addressed by this thesis.

While it has been acknowledged in the 2018 NCCAs progress report that teachers have struggled with getting to grips with the reforms there is no firm commitment or call for widescale improvements to the CPD delivered to teachers. Beyond offering CPD on content-specific material teachers have not been afforded widescale and regular opportunities to avail of assessment competencies upskilling. Stiggins (2010) maintains that teachers spend an estimated one third of their professional time ‘involved in assessment-related activities’ (Stiggins 2010, p. 233). While there are some who state that teachers spend up to 50 percent of their time on assessment-related activities (Plake, cited in Mertler 2004). Research indicates (Stiggins 2010, Mertler 2004) that having the requisite skills and assessment literacy should have been a key consideration during the rollout of the *Framework* (2015). With the move to CBAs teachers were suddenly catapulted into a new system of moderation (SLARs) that required CPD and a knowledge of assessment literacy.

There was an expectation that teachers would engage in this SLAR system without the necessary background training. Such an expectation was unfair and may have hindered the rollout of the reforms. Preservice and in-service teachers report that many teacher training courses do not require specific modules or coursework on assessment practices (Campbell 2002, cited in Mertler 2004). Foisting new assessment practices upon teachers operating heretofore in a summative exam-based system was an ill-prepared move and only served to isolate and, in some cases, infuriate teachers who through no fault of their own had become accustomed to teaching and assessing in a particular style. Many teachers raised their concerns and are still raising their concerns today. Byrne (2019), a recently retired English teacher, in a letter to *The Irish Times* speaks of ‘widespread criticisms’ (Byrne 2019) of the new syllabus and assessment methods.

This thesis hopes to offer a constructive contribution to the field of education and assessment reforms initiated in the English syllabus since 2014. Key areas for improvement will emerge from the research which will feed into recommendations. From conducting a literature review the importance of teacher's assessment literacy has emerged as a key area of focus.

Grading and the reliability of grading scales have been an area of research since the 1800s and continue to be a topic of debate and research to the present day. As the research has progressed the relationship between instruction and assessment is becoming increasingly clear (William 2010, Hill 2017, Shepard et al. 2005). Teachers with an in-depth knowledge of assessment literacy will be more attuned to the most effective instructional methods.

Brookhart and Guskey (2019) have highlighted the perception that teachers grading practices vary widely and that much of what teachers *know* about grading may be based on 'personal philosophies' (Brookhart and Guskey 2019, p. 2). Rather, we should focus on evidence-based approaches to grading in our efforts to break away from our narrow perceptions of assessment that may be tied to long-held traditions. Brown et al. (2009) assert that assessment is a complex social activity whereby teachers and students are negotiating their own understanding of the term 'assessment'.

The reforms came about as a result of a 'neo-liberal discourse of 'efficiency' and 'competitiveness'...' (Printer 2020, p.1) which stemmed from the 2008 global economic crisis. While accountability is to be welcomed, applying approaches that might suit the business world may not necessarily suit the educational sphere – '...in education...the desired outcomes...are far more difficult to measure' (Nichols and Harris 2017, p. 1). As we face into the current coronavirus pandemic, we are faced with tough decisions on how to proceed with the assessment of our students. The junior cycle exams have been cancelled with in-school exams instead. This could set a precedent for the senior cycle reforms that are coming down the line. It is imperative that teacher's views are canvassed now so that their experience feed into any future decisions to introduce predicted grades or other assessment reforms at senior cycle level.

Assessment and the labels we use to assess students work can have a profound impact on the learner. As Stobart (2008) quite rightly points out, the language we use as assessors can either be transformative or inhibitive. As we transition out of the experience of junior cycle reform, we must be mindful of the opportunity to 'play a constructive role in creating...identities as people and learners' (Stobart 2008, p. i)

2.7 Conclusion

A broad outline has been offered of the conditions which gave rise to the current assessment practices in the junior cycle. The *Framework* (DES 2015a) arose out of the political, cultural, and economic ‘reform agenda’ (MacPhail *et al.* 2017. p.12) of the time. Notwithstanding the key aims of the 2012 *Framework* being omitted there remains in the 2015 *Framework* a move towards a ‘culture of delivery’ (Isaacs and Lamprianou 2018, p.1) where teachers have been made more accountable about their assessment practices, despite no numerical marks being awarded to students by their teachers.

Teachers experiences of the reform on the ground are tied to their exposure to professional development, especially assessment literacy (Xu and Brown 2016), to enable them to deliver the new curriculum in a meaningful way. The NCCAs 2018 progress report flagged the issue of ipsative assessment but did not offer any suggestions as to how this could be avoided in future nor did it comment on how this could affect the validity and reliability of the CBA process.

Finally, Ball’s (2017) observation about curriculum reform rings true for the junior cycle experience:

policies are contested, interpreted, and enacted in a variety of arenas of practice and the rhetoric, texts and meanings of policymakers do not always translate directly and obviously into institutional practices.... They are inflected, mediated, resisted and misunderstood, or in some cases simply prove unworkable’ (Ball 2017, p. 10).

Nonetheless, there have been positive changes in the experience of teachers and students with the introduction of the *Framework* (DES 2015a). Students report enjoying the oral communication task and developing their writing skills as a process (NCCA 2018). Parents are confident in the teacher’s ability to award the correct descriptor even when concerns about ipsative assessment were expressed.

As teachers are in only in the infancy of junior cycle reform, the cultural shift needed to move us towards higher levels of teacher agency, assessment literacy and confidence in making professional judgments, has not yet been fully realised. Perhaps, in time, we can begin to move towards an ‘epistemological shift concerning what it means to be an educator’ (King 2017, p. 169).

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the research philosophy, the research approach, the qualitative nature of the thesis, data collection methods used and the thematic approach used to analyse the data. A justification of the research philosophy is offered as *assessment* is a social phenomenon. Research philosophy concerns your ‘assumptions about the way in which you view the world’ (Saunders *et al.* 2009, p.108). Research philosophy also has to do with the ‘...development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge...’ (Saunders *et al.* 2009, p.108).

3.2 Research philosophy

Assessment is a concept that is open to interpretation and one which comes with multiple definitions within a society. Bryman (2012) puts forward the view that social ontology is a process by which social structures are analysed. There are two distinct ontologies: objectivism and constructivism. When it comes to considering what reliable and valid assessment is and how it is carried out, we can be helped by viewing this question from the constructivist standpoint.

This study will use the interpretivist paradigm to analyse data collected. Interpretivism views people as social actors that interpret the world around them in different ways. Interpretivism argues that ‘truth and knowledge are subjective’ (Ryan 2018, p.8). Therefore, researchers must view social phenomena from the perspective of the participant’s experiences.

While interpretivism allows for an empathetic researcher it can also lead to the research being overly informed by the values and beliefs of the individual researcher themselves.

Cohen *et al.* (2007) suggest that interpretivism allows the researcher to account for the ‘subjective world of human experience’ (Cohen 2007, p.21). As teachers make sense of the assessment instruments at their disposal, they attach their own meaning. Interpretivism allows for a range of different experiences to be represented and indeed different realities to be realised as Myers (2008) has hypothesized:

“...interpretive researchers assume that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments.” (Myers 2008, p.16)

This allows room for the interpretivist framework to offer divergent views around effective assessment practices.

3.3 Research approach

An inductive, mixed methods, cross-sectional, multi-site case study was conducted using the interpretivist epistemological paradigm. Bryman (2012) maintains that epistemology concerns our understanding of the world. Interpretivism, as opposed to objectivism, is the appropriate epistemological lens through which assessment, a human construct, can be explained and given multiple meanings by the research participants.

A mixed methods approach is favoured as it ‘provides a better understanding of a research project than either quantitative or qualitative data by itself’ (Creswell 2012, p. 22). As stated in the introduction, *assessment* is a social phenomenon which is open to many interpretations. People’s opinions on what assessment means can vary widely. Therefore, the approach being taken is interpretivism. The type of mixed method design that will be used is the Convergent Parallel Design Model. This method effectively allows the merging of data to better understand a problem (Creswell 2012).

The ‘Research Onion’ proposed by Saunders *et al.* (2009) (Figure 2, below) provides further clarification of where the proposed research is situated.

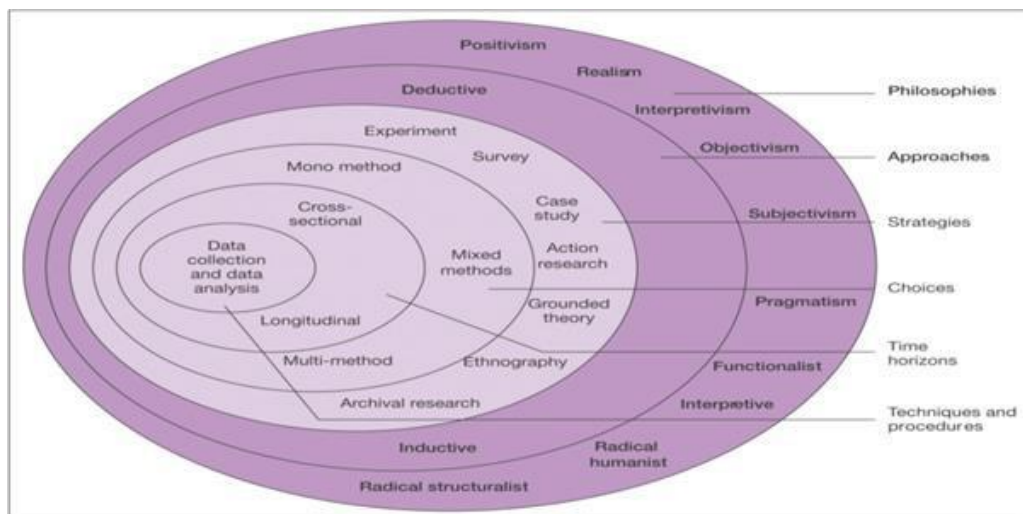


Figure 2 - The Research Onion (Saunders *et al.* 2009)

The research is a cross-sectional case-study located across multiple post-primary schools in Donegal as well as nationally. A case-study approach was chosen due to time constraints that action research demands (Saunders *et al* 2009). The central phenomenon (Creswell 2012) of assessment is under investigation. As Saunders (2009, p.119) states, we must ‘focus upon the details of a situation and the reality behind these details’, in order to unearth teachers ‘motivating actions’ (Saunders *et al.* 2009, p.119).

Yin (2009) and Robson (2002) both define case-studies as empirical investigations into a particular social phenomenon. This case-study is singular in nature as opposed to the multiple case-study form. Single case studies are often said to be limited in their scope due to a seeming lack of ‘quantification, objectivity or rigour’ (Yin 2009, p.xiii). Conversely, Stake (cited in Gomm *et al.* 2000) observes that case studies are a suitable method of social science research as they ‘highly statistical, allow naturalistic generalisation and can add to existing experience and humanistic understanding’ (Stake, cited in Gomm *et al.* 2000, p.24). Yin (2009) also believes in the power of high-quality case-study research that focuses on consistency, validity and reliability and in the lasting contribution the case-study can make to human knowledge.

Yin (2009) stipulates that for case-studies to be methodologically sound they must pertain to the 6 essential elements of case study research: the plan, design, preparation, data collection, analysis and reporting.

3.4 Methodological choices

The research will be carried out qualitatively, using a cross-sectional, mixed-methods, multi-site case study. Qualitative data is defined as using open-ended non numerical approaches such as text or direct quotation while quantitative data concerns the collection of purely numerical data (Saunders *et al* 2009, Creswell 2012). Both qualitative and quantitative research can employ similar approaches such as interviews or observations. Qualitative research allows the participant to shape the nature of responses to their own experience and therefore is more suited to the interpretivist stance taken in my research philosophy (Creswell 2012).

The research being undertaken is more qualitative than quantitative, however, by combining the two in a mixed-methods approach I will add credibility to claims and generalisations made. As Creswell has pointed out, quantitative and qualitative approaches should not be treated as dichotomous, rather they should be considered as part of ‘different points on a continuum’ (Creswell 2012, p.19).

The research will be split into two stages. Stage 1 will see the circulation of a quantitative background questionnaire to ascertain teacher's engagement with and experience of assessing their own students in the CBAs. As themes begin to emerge from the data, I can then modify my questions for Stage 2 of the research, the semi-structured interviews and focus group (Creswell 2012). The three data-gathering methods that are favoured will be discussed in further detail below.

During the research, the COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacted the original data collection methods. As a result, data collection migrated online and was conducted using video conferencing software. Additional guidelines were presented to participants and extra measures taken to ensure that anonymity and confidentiality were protected. These guidelines (see Appendix x. page x) were developed in consultation with the researcher's supervisor. Amendments and suggestions were incorporated into the guidelines so that the research objectives could be achieved as planned, albeit via a different data collection mode.

3.4.1 Participants

This dissertation will focus on the lived experience of post-primary English teachers with at least three years' experience of teaching the new curriculum. Three years' experience is preferred as this is the full cycle of taking a class from 1st Year to 3rd Year. A background survey will be forwarded via email to a list of English teachers nationally. The researcher will engage in 'purposive sampling' (Cohen et al 2007, p. 114) to shortlist and identify participants for the interviews and focus group. While Guba and Lincoln (1985) suggest that all sampling can be described as purposeful it is being utilised in this study as a way to elevate debate and a rigorous expression of differing opinions in the focus group. Purposive sampling is preferred as it is strategic in nature opposed to *convenience sampling* – "Doing what's fast and convenient" (Patton 2002, p. 228).

3.5 Data collection methods

Equal emphasis will be given to quantitative and qualitative data. There will be three main data collection methods used: a background questionnaire (n=50), 10 semi-structured interviews and a focus group consisting of 5-7 post-primary English teachers.

3.5.1 Validity and Reliability

Qualitative research is influenced by the researcher's individual attributes or perspectives more so than quantitative research. Consequently, the validity and reliability of the case study, itself a limited approach (Yin 2009), may be subject to bias. To counter this a triangulated approach will be used to improve the validity and reliability of the research (Cohen *at al.* 2007, Yin 2009). It is important that the data and field notes are collected accurately to unambiguously depict what is being described in the discussion, conclusions and recommendations.

3.5.2 Questionnaire

The attraction of the questionnaire or the 'collecting of survey information' (Creswell 2012, p.317) in a structured way (see Appendix 13, p. 86, and Appendix 14 for a sample transcript on pp. 87 - 92), to the researcher is that they are relatively easy to analyse. Questionnaires can be processed without the need for the researcher to be present (Creswell 2012). The questionnaire that will be used for this research will contain both closed and open-ended techniques. Dichotomous questions, rating scales, rank order and open-ended questions will be used to allow for a greater sophistication of answers.

As a data collection method, questionnaires also serve to establish rapport with the sample so questions will be ordered and sequenced so that each participant will feel inclined to cooperate rather than be uncooperative (Oppenheim 1992). The questionnaire will also be piloted and 'refined so that the final version contains as full a range of possible responses as can be reasonably foreseen' (Creswell 2012, p.321). Questionnaires are seen as a reliable data collection method as the respondent is anonymous.

3.5.3 Semi-structured interview

Kvale (2012) defines an interview as 'an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest' (Kvale cited in Creswell 2012, p.349). The interview (see Appendix 12, pp. 84 - 85) must be handled in a sensitive manner if participants are to offer their frank opinions. The purpose of the interview will be made clear at the start. Rapport and mutual trust are also intrinsic in conducting a positive interview that will lead to accurate data being gathered – if the questioning is too deep the participant may feel 'uneasy and adopt avoidance tactics' (Creswell 2012, p.350).

The interview questions will be informed by the emergent data generated via the questionnaire. The interview is semi-structured, meaning that if there are issues of interest that are not stated in the interview schedule then these can be accommodated through probing questions (Creswell 2012). Finally, interviews allow for the retelling of an individual's observations and circumstances of the social phenomenon under research. Therefore, it may be argued that they allow for a diversity of opinion and the magnitude of human experience to come to the fore. Their reliability is more limited than a questionnaire (Creswell 2012).

3.5.4 Focus Group

Bryman (2012) defines a focus group as an 'interview with several people on a specific topic or issue' (Bryman 2012, p.501). Focus groups are distinct from interviews in that the collective rather than the individual view emerges (Creswell 2012), which could mean that the moderator or facilitator's agenda is less apparent. Focus groups are beneficial as the questioning focuses on a 'tightly defined topic' (Bryman 2012, p.502) whereas the trajectory of an individual interview can vary widely. This allows for a wide variety of views to be aired as participants respond to other opinions or modify their own which can be 'more interesting than the sometimes-predictable question-followed-by-answer approach of normal interviews' (Bryman 2012, p.503). The focus group will have between 5-7 participants, not too large so that it could become unmanageable and not too small that participants will feel reticent and unwilling to share (Creswell 2012).

3.6 Thematic data analysis – a check on trustworthiness

The data collected from the questionnaire, semi-structured interview and focus group will be processed thematically. Nowell *et al.* (2017, p. 2) define thematic analysis as, '...a method for identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set'. Thematic analysis (TA) is advantageous as it allows the researcher 'to see and make sense of collective or shared meaning *across* a data set' (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.57). As a new entrant to qualitative research TA can provide 'an entry into a way of doing research that can otherwise seem vague, mystifying, conceptually challenging and overly complex' (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.58).

The process of *data reduction* or as Creswell (2012, p.347) defines it, ‘coding data in preparation for analysis’ will be used to reduce the large quantity of data generated during the data collection stage. Thematic analysis and data coding will increase the validity of the data analysis process by avoiding selective data use and always focusing on making claims that are ‘sustainable by the data’ (Cohen et al. 2007, p. 146).

Thematic analysis is also useful as it allows summaries of large data sets to be made as well as allowing different perspectives to emerge from the research participants. Thematic analysis makes clear the differences and similarities and ‘unexpected insights’ (Nowell et al. 2017, p. 2) that may arise during research. Thematic analysis is also inherently flexible in its nature – it allows for rich and detailed description, yet it is ‘...theoretically and methodologically sound’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 5).

When the steps in which thematic analysis is carried out are made clear it lends trustworthiness to a research a project. Nowell *et al.* (2017) posit a six-phase process to establish trustworthiness in a research project (See Table 1, page x).

Phase 1	Familiarizing yourself with your data
Phase 2	Generating initial codes
Phase 3	Searching for themes
Phase 4	Reviewing themes
Phase 5	Defining and naming themes
Phase 6	Producing the report

Table 1: Establishing trustworthiness during each phase of Thematic Analysis.

Such phased rigour, when applied to textual data, ensures that the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are enshrined in the research design. Credibility was achieved by choosing appropriate research methods, triangulation and by a thorough review of the literature. Transferability was secured by describing the context of the research so that generalisability could be made by others. Dependability was ensured by having an independent audit of findings and transcripts created in the data collection and data analysis stages (Cohen *et al.* 2011). Confirmability was secured by consistency of approach on the researcher's part, by highlighting both positive and negative findings and by making clear that the researchers' interpretations are founded in the data (Nowell et al. 2017).

3.7 Ethical considerations

As with any research project, ethical considerations are to the fore. Since the advent of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) this is even more so. There is now an increased awareness around the twin issues of consent (see Appendix 9, p. x) and data storage amongst the population at large. Hammersley and Traianou (2012) present the view that consent should be ‘fully informed and free’ (Hammersley and Traianou 2012, p. 7). Ensuring fully informed and free consent is commonly achieved via a consent form. Creswell (2012) states that practicing ethics is much more than following the rules, guidelines or checklists set down by the institute’s ethics committee. Rather, ethical considerations should be a ‘primary consideration rather than an afterthought’ (Creswell 2012, p. 23, Hesse-Bieber & Leavy; 2006 cited in Creswell 2012)

Research data is defined as ‘all recorded, descriptive, numerical or visual material collected as part of a research project/degree’ (LYIT 2019, p. 92). Data for the research project will be in the form of responses to a background questionnaire, as well as audio-visual recordings and transcriptions of interviews and a focus group.

Participants on the research project are all teachers and therefore over the age of eighteen. The researcher does not hold a position of authority over the participants and is seen as a peer. Nevertheless, using the principle of voluntary informed consent I have prepared a consent (see Appendix 10, pp. 81 - 82) form for all participants informing them of their rights. The principle of voluntary informed consent informs participants of what will be required of them during the research and of their right to withdraw from the project at any stage up to when the data analysis is initiated (British Educational Research Association 2018). An information letter (Appendix 8, p. x) has also been prepared to give participants a sense of the nature of the project and what it aims to achieve as well as how the project will be disseminated.

When reporting the results of research, it is imperative to be ‘scrupulous in avoiding distortion of evidence’ (BERA 2000, p. 4). Findings must be reported accurately, and weak assertions avoided. ‘Fictionalising’ (BERA 2018, p. 21), will be used to avoid undue identification of a participant and to ensure that the principle of anonymity is adhered to. For example, when using a direct quote from a participant I will say that the quote came from ‘Participant 1’ and so on.

No incentives will be offered to the participants to take part in the survey. All participants have the right to non-traceability, non-maleficence and the right to withdraw (Appendices 7, 8 and 9, p. 75 - 80). Participants also have the right to privacy. Precautions have been taken to allow privacy to be maintained when using video conferencing software (Appendix 11, p. 83). The risk of harm to participants is low. Such is the low level of risk that this research project is deemed worthy of study (Potter 2006).

The research will be endogenous in nature – with participants coming from within my own organisation (Trowler 2011). As a result, there is a requirement to be aware of my potential status as an *insider* who may find it hard to exercise neutrality when reporting and interpreting the data. Conversely, endogenous research offers numerous advantages such as being able to give a detailed account of the lived realities (Geertz 1973) and may therefore have more long-term implications for policy and professional practice (Trowler 2011).

3.8 Researcher positionality

As I am an English teacher, I will be conscious of my own opinions surrounding new assessment practices in junior cycle English. Any interjection of my own opinion will have to be steadfastly avoided to remain impartiality.

Some of the participants will be known to me as colleagues. I will have to present myself in a new role as researcher and moderator where they feel comfortable enough to be honest and open under the principle of anonymity and informed consent.

In my position as a part-time Associate with *Junior Cycle for Teachers* (JCT), the support service for teachers, I must also make my professional obligations known. When I work for JCT, I represent the views of the organisation and my own views around reform and assessment changes are not readily apparent in my interactions with teachers in workshops or schools.

Milner (2007) reports of the seen, unseen and unforeseen dangers that can trip up a researcher when they are not aware of theirs and others ‘cultural systems of coming to know, knowing and experiencing the world’ (Milner 2007, p.1). Being aware is simply not enough, I must use the data to justify claims made and not allow my own biography to cloud the research.

Jootun *et al.* (2008) place emphasis on the concept of reflexivity in qualitative research. Reflexivity concerns the researcher regularly reflecting on their role within the research and on 'his or her values, preconceptions, behaviour or presence and those of the participants, which can affect the interpretation of responses' (Jootun et al. 2008, p.1)

3. 9 Conclusion

A detailed exposition has been put forward of the steps taken to narrow the research philosophy, research approach, methodological choices, data collection methods and the system under which data will be analysed. Clarity was offered on the ethical considerations considered and implemented. Additional guidelines have been put in place in response to the emergence of COVID-19 regulations to ensure privacy and informed consent. Attention has been drawn to my own role as an English teacher and a part-time Associate with JCT within the research.

4. Research findings and data analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter consists of a discussion of the results of the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and the focus group. In total, 146 participants responded to the questionnaire, while there were eight semi-structured interviews and four focus group participants. Data analysis was carried out thematically using the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to identify common categories and themes. The three categories that are aligned with the research questions that emerged following codifying of the data are the following:

1. Assessment, validity and reliability
2. CPD and assessment literacy
3. Teachers as motivators, diplomats and advocates

Table 2, below, gives further clarification on how the themes and categories are aligned to the research questions:

Category:	Research Question(s):	Themes:
<p>Category One:</p> <p>Assessment, validity and reliability</p>	<p>Research Question One:</p> <p>How and when do teachers know that the appropriate Features of Quality (<i>FoQ</i>) has been awarded?</p>	<p>Themes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Varying interpretations of assessment, validity and reliability 2. The role of collegiality and school culture in effective moderation 3. The SLAR experience

		4. Ipsative assessment risk
<p>Category Two:</p> <p>CPD and assessment literacy</p>	<p>Research Questions Two and Three:</p> <p>How competent are teachers at assessing their own students' work? How have teachers been supported/trained in assessment literacy for SLARs to proceed in a manner that ensures effective moderation?</p> <p>What supports have been offered to assist teachers in assessing their students' work? Have these supports been helpful? What other helps/CPD do teachers need?</p>	<p>Themes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strengths and weaknesses of CPD to date 2. Views on future CPD and assessment literacy
<p>Category Three:</p> <p>Teachers as motivators, diplomats and advocates</p>	<p>Research Questions Four and Five:</p> <p>What role does the teacher-student relationship play in the impartiality of a descriptor awarded from the Features of Quality (FoQ)?</p> <p>What role does parental expectation/involvement play in the assessment process? To what extent do teachers feel pressured to provide a descriptor that will not cause worry to parents?</p>	<p>Themes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exercising professional judgment 2. Motivating students for non-numerical assessment 3. Merits of reforms

Table 2: Research categories and themes aligned with research questions one to five.

4.2 Category One - Assessment, validity and reliability

This category was identified once the following themes were reviewed and defined:

5. Varying interpretations of assessment, validity and reliability
6. The role of collegiality and school culture in effective moderation
7. The SLAR experience
8. Ipsative assessment risk

This category was established by participants' ability to define the terms; assessment, validity and reliability, to discuss their experience of approaching differences of opinion in SLARs and how impartiality was maintained throughout the CBA process. According to Stiggins (2010), teachers spend an estimated one third of their professional time involved in activities related to assessment. Accordingly, it will be worthwhile to ascertain whether these activities are conducive to effective teaching and learning. Analysis of participants responses to the questionnaire in tandem with analysis of transcripts from the semi-structured interviews and the focus group yielded insights into the practices and knowledge of teachers as it applied to research question one:

How and when do teachers know that the appropriate Feature of Quality (FoQ) has been awarded?

4.2.1 Category One - Theme One - Varying interpretations of assessment, validity and reliability

Analysis of teacher's responses to interview question number one, 'What does the term assessment mean to you?', yielded varying interpretations and pointed towards the term 'assessment' being a social construct or phenomenon. Many participants' answers acknowledged the dual assessment approach currently in place in the junior cycle with the majority of participants aware of the formative and summative dichotomy in assessment. The *Framework* (2015) had its core the aim of moving away from the 'reductive exigencies of the exam system' (Granville, cited in Dolan 2014, p.25) and it would seem that this has been a positive impact on participants' perspectives of assessment:

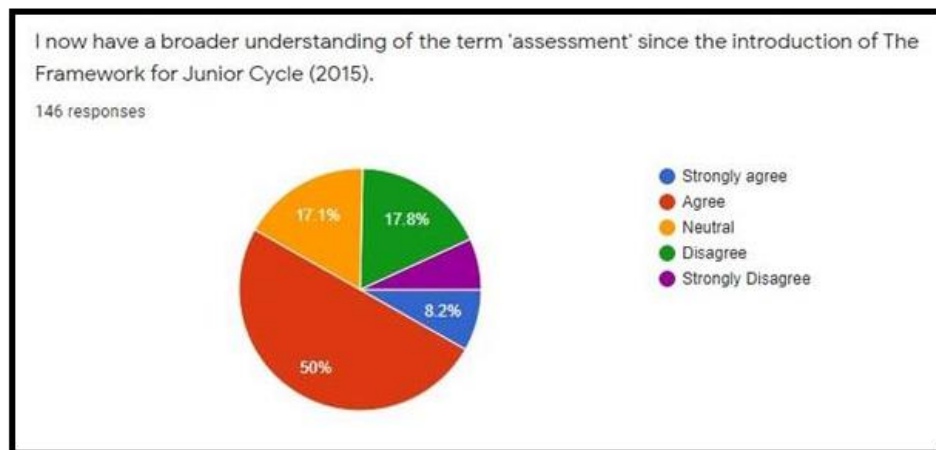
'There's assessment of learning and assessment for learning. Assessment would have been viewed as summative but the new junior cert has brought in the idea of continuous assessment and that they learn from the assessment.' (Participant 1 - Interview).

'To me it's about choosing moments to see if students have comprehended the material...more formative assessment now...less summative assessment...we're being much more creative in how we assess our students...more assessment modes...' (Participant 8 - Interview)

'The modes of assessment have changed...now in the classroom assessment is constantly happening' (Participant 7 - Interview)

Participants' broad perception of assessment is also represented in the questionnaire. Traditional definitions of assessment have been replaced with a more flexible view of the term to include more formative assessment while not negating the need for summative assessment. Seventy-three, exactly 50%, of the participants responses showed that their perception of assessment was broader since the advent of *The Framework (2015)*:

Graph 1: Responses showing a broader perception of assessment – 8.2% (N=11) strongly agreed



Participants were unfamiliar with the concepts of validity and reliability. One out of the eight participants pointed out that they had encountered the terms in educational research before. For the most part, participants' responses to interview question number two, 'What do

the terms validity and reliability mean to you?’ indicated a lack of clear knowledge on this topic:

‘To me they mean consistency and external assessment. It’s not something you typically associate with your own judgement.’ (Participant 1 - Interview)

There were times when participants portrayed a misunderstanding of the terms validity and reliability. However, this was made clear and their attempt at any definition was limited and indicated a potential area of future CPD for teachers:

‘Vaguely heard of validity and reliability...validity would be proving does it work well...reliability is when it’s a good assessment...do they understand the information...’ (Participant 7 - Interview)

Perhaps, the most accurate definition came from participant 8 in the semi-structured interview. They offered a conscientious take on the terms as they apply to assessment:

‘Validity and reliability are about...if the students had a different teacher would they be assessed and awarded in the same way...’ (Participant 8 - Interview)

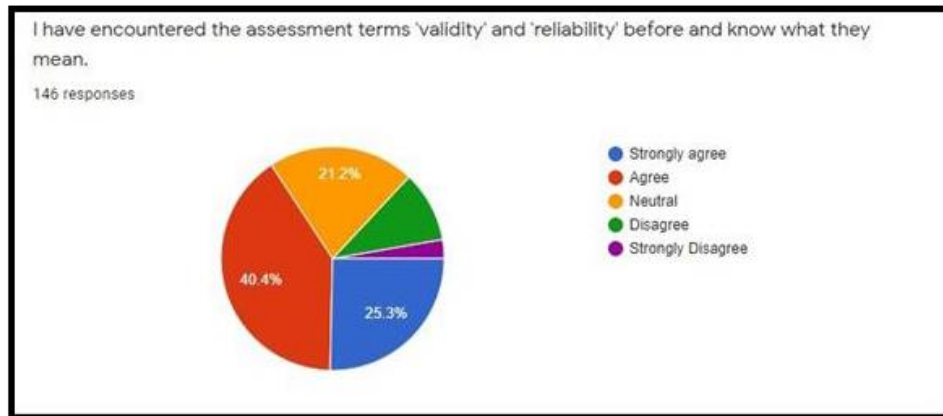
There was more consensus in the focus group around the issue of validity and reliability. Once participants were asked to elaborate on the concepts in a group setting a tangible consensus emerged:

‘Reliability comes in with the SLAR...to see if everybody is in agreement.’ (Participant 1 - Focus group)

‘The SLAR helps that (reliability)...the more you discuss it...the clearer it becomes...’ (Participant 2 - Focus group)

While interview participants struggled to accurately define the assessment terms ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ the terms have been encountered before. However, the analysis of the responses of the focus group suggest consensus and understanding of these terms. The majority, over 65%, of respondents said they had encountered the terms before, while 13% admitted to not having heard the terms before:

Graph 2: Respondents indicate their level of exposure to the assessment terms ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ – over 65% have encountered the terms before



When participants were asked question 2 (b): ‘Would a different teacher reach the same conclusion with the same student?’, which was designed to check reliability, the answers varied and showed that there are issues for the reliability of the CBAs. Analysis of the responses raises concerns about how reliable the moderation of student work is:

‘Bias towards students (may mean a different descriptor is awarded), different methods of teaching’ might lead to a different judgement - (Participant 2 - Interview)

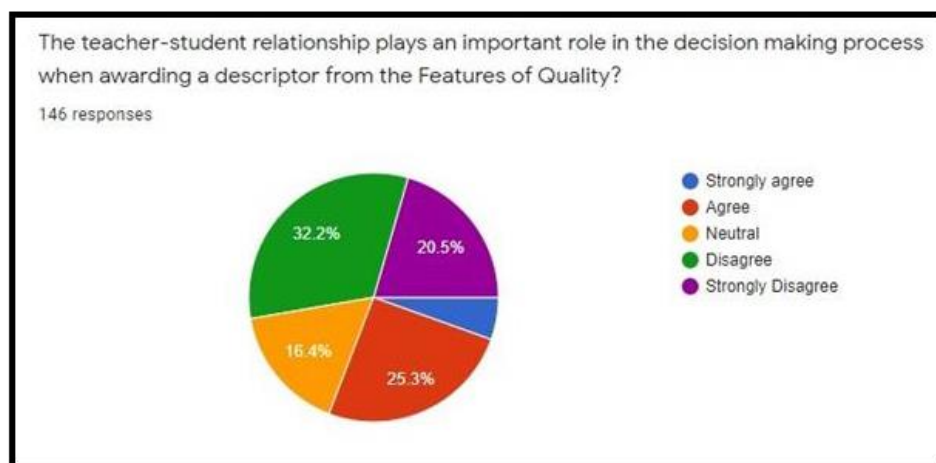
‘You may not (get the same descriptor as another teacher)...it depends on your relationship with the student...you may not know what they’re capable of...you may make allowances for them...you may say, ‘I know what they were trying to say there’ - (Participant 4 - Interview)

‘Possibly not...different teachers have different standards...different expectations...some teachers consider the students personal background...for example their parents separating...’ - (Participant 5 - Interview)

'It's to do with who teaches the student...it's not supposed to be our own personal opinion...it's very hard to be professional...' - (Participant 6 - Interview)

These responses differ somewhat to the results of the questionnaire. There was consensus amongst interview participants that the awarding of descriptors is a subjective process and one which could depend on the relationship between the teacher and the student. When the teacher-student relationship was called into question in the questionnaire over 57% of participants said that this would have no bearing on their judgement. There is a disparity, graph 3, between how teachers feel they engage in moderation of student work and the actual reality of attempting to remain impartial:

Graph 3: The role of the teacher-student relationship when awarding descriptors



From the analysis of the interview transcripts, the focus group transcripts and the questionnaire responses we can see that teachers have a broad view of assessment with many commenting on the dual assessment approach currently in play at junior cycle. Participants' views on validity and reliability were less accurate in the interviews than in the focus group. The focus group showed that participants felt that fairness was achieved in the awarding of descriptors by discussing it in the SLAR. This will be explored further in the next theme.

4.2.2 Category One - Theme Two - The role of collegiality and school culture in moderation

The second theme to emerge from the data analysis was the importance of good working relationships amongst colleagues in departments during SLARs to ensure effective moderation and to achieve reliability. Teacher's professionalism in assessing their students was

commented upon regularly and reassured participants that they had awarded the correct descriptor to a piece of work. When asked to describe a typical SLAR meeting in the focus group one participant gave the following reply:

'SLARs are a department discussion on student standards and what we feel students should get...it's a collective agreement on what descriptor we're going to assign to our students...'
(Participant 1 - Focus group)

When asked how differences of opinions are discussed in a SLAR an interview participant offered the following:

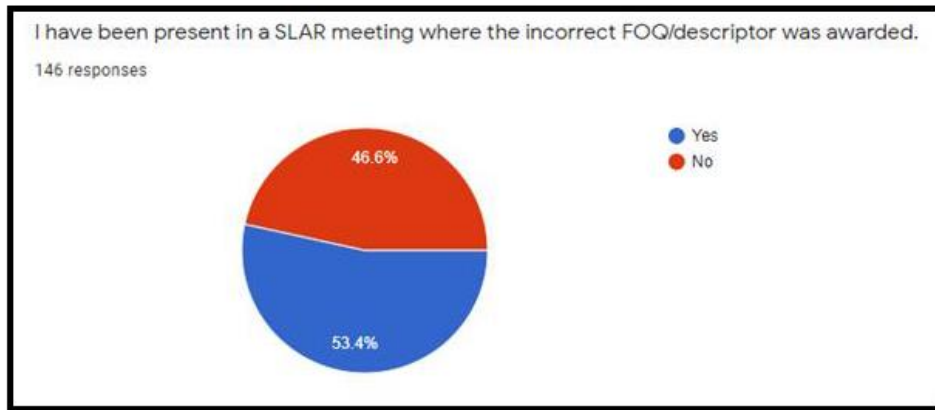
'We're agreeable as a department...we work well together as a team...as we discussed it...we realised we may have been wrong...sitting down with your colleagues helped...' - (Participant 6 - Interview)

Teachers openness to a frank discussion about the awarding of descriptors was seen as prerequisite for effective moderation:

'You have to be okay with being vulnerable (in a SLAR) ...teachers typically aren't...' - (Participant 8 - Interview)

SLARs are seen as spaces where differences and ambiguities are discussed openly and frankly if conditions allow. Questionnaire responses suggest that an open discussion is required as 53% of respondents reported having been present when they thought the incorrect descriptor had been applied:

Graph 4: Nearly 54% of respondents in the questionnaire have been present when they felt the incorrect descriptor was awarded



To ensure professionalism and collegiality is maintained when discussing differences of opinion participants in the focus group agreed on the importance of setting out the norms from the beginning of and often before the SLAR:

‘You need to set out the parameters and expectations from the start...’ - (Participant 1 - Focus group)

‘Agreeing the parameters...emphasising respectful conversations...’ - (Participant 2 - Focus group)

‘At the end...agree on the report/notes...so that everyone has input into what was discussed...’ - (Participant 3 - Focus group)

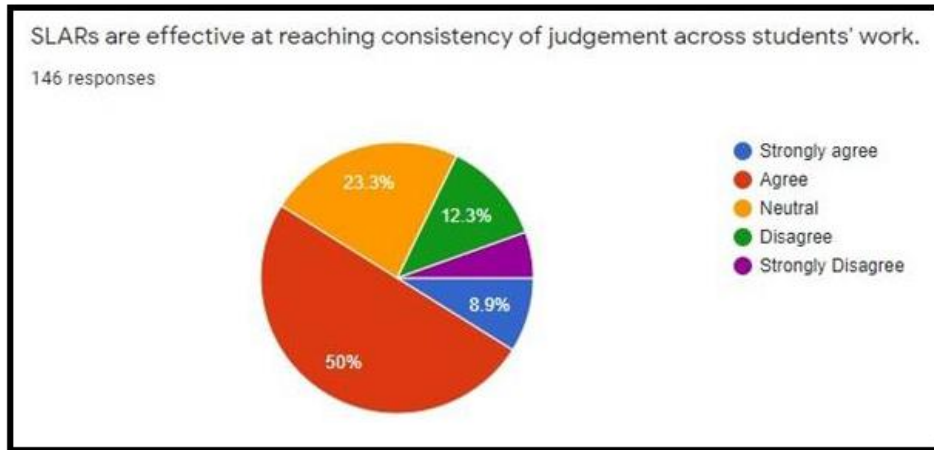
These activities are seen as best practice and show that collegiality and professionalism are very much enshrined in a lot of teacher’s practice and are a cornerstone of exchanges that take place in SLAR meetings.

4.2.3 Category One - Theme Three - The SLAR experience

Despite the high levels of professionalism and collegiality reported when approaching and participating in the SLARs there were criticisms offered of the SLAR experience when differences of opinion or personality came into play. Nearly 60% of the respondents of the

questionnaire recorded that SLARs are effective at reaching consistency of judgement across student work as can be seen in graph 5:

Graph 5: 50% of participants indicated that SLARs are effective in the moderation of student work



Nevertheless, there are moments when a disagreement may occur or where a conversation about the awarding of the perceived incorrect descriptor takes place. When this occurs, participants offered their views on how to approach the situation:

'You have to be very careful with personalities. It's more a case of asking questions and using the features of quality. It's more asking questions than saying that something is incorrect.' - (Participant 1 - Interview)

'Use the features of quality to guide it (a discussion about different descriptors)' - (Participant 2 - Interview)

'It happens a lot...we put them (teachers) on the spot...why did you award this descriptor...listen to the video...these are the reasons why I would give this descriptor' - (Participant 3 - Interview)

'You have to be very careful in the way you approach it as you don't want to offend your colleagues...try and refer to the features of quality and give examples' - (Participant 4 - Interview)

'I was the facilitator...you have to approach it in a gentle way...that's the award that the teacher has given...they've spent time coming to that decision...I would ask them questions and compare it to other pieces of work...when we broke it down and went back to features of quality it was massively helpful...' - (Participant 5 - Interview)

One participant commented on the potential of SLARs to emphasise and heighten personality clashes within departments when teachers have not entered into the SLAR process with an open mind or who do not have the necessary skills to engage in professional conversations:

'It's very fractious...it does affect relationships in departments...there are some people who will never get used to that process...I've also been in a situation where what was agreed in a SLAR wasn't followed through in reporting...if the teacher has ultimate autonomy what's the point in having a SLAR...' (Participant 8 - Interview)

A similar outlook emerged in the focus group with unity amongst the participants in their views on teacher's mindset while participating in a SLAR. If teachers are generally agreeable and open to taking on the views of others, then the moderation is likely to proceed in a reliable and valid way:

'Being open to persuasion about a descriptor is about personality...it depends if the colleague thinks it should be going up or down...some people aren't open to feedback...' - (Participant 4 - Focus group)

The autonomy of the teacher to stand over their judgement was commented upon multiple times by other participants and was seen as a reason not to push a teacher to change their mind once a discussion was had:

'I'm lucky that my department is a two teacher one... I would voice my opinion as politely as I could...but to be honest it's the own teacher's professional judgement at the end of the day...' (Participant 8 - Interview)

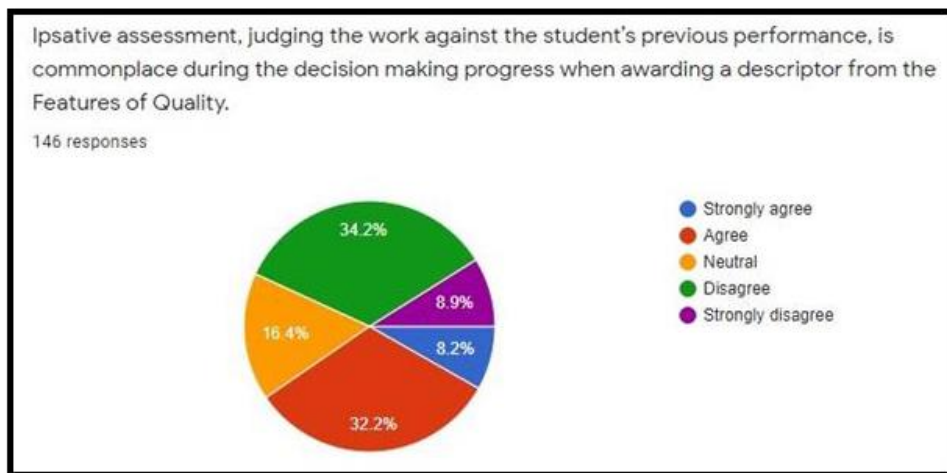
This would suggest that colleagues do not push their views too explicitly as the student's teacher has the final say on a descriptor in the end. This may lead to a stifling of

debate and a sense of resignation from the outset when those present at the SLAR are aware that a teacher may become has final autonomy on the descriptor awarded.

4.2.4 Category One - Theme Four - Ipsative assessment risks

From conducting the literature review and by focussing on the NCCA *Report of the review of the early enactment of Junior Cycle English* (NCCA 2018) the activity of ipsative assessment became clear. The authors of the report identified teachers' tendency to judge the work of students against the previous performance. The NCCA detailed that this was a '...recurring feature...' (NCCA 2018, p.42) amongst teachers surveyed. A similar pattern emerged across the data collection process. Over 40% of questionnaire respondents stated that they had considered the students' previous performance rather than their most recent piece of work:

Graph 6: Ipsative assessment is commonplace during the moderation process



Participants in the interviews and the focus group pointed out that it was hard to avoid ipsative assessment as there was no anonymity in the CBA process as there usually is in externally marked exams:

'It's human nature. A huge amount of teaching is relationships.' (Participant 1 - Interview)

'It comes down to the teacher-student relationship...you see how far they've come...it's hard to set them apart (two different performances)' - (Participant 2 - Interview)

'It's meant to be a snapshot in time...but it ends up that you do take into account what they've done beforehand...' (Participant 3 - Focus group)

The data analysis suggests that this may be a result of the industrial relations compromise. The inclination to assess ipsatively has crept into teachers practice as the teaching unions did not favour their members engaging in assessment which would see their members assign numerical marks. It may be proposed that teachers, parents and students are comfortable with teachers assigning comments and descriptors as these are not treated the same way as summative exam results.

4.3 Research Question One - Justification

The qualitative and quantitative data suggest that teachers' perceptions of the term 'assessment', 'validity' and 'reliability' vary. While participants offered broadly similar definitions of 'assessment', their views on 'reliability' and 'validity' were less clear and may have an impact on the effectiveness of moderation of student work thus justifying this research question.

When asked how they knew that they had awarded the correct *FoQ* participants pointed to the numerous factors that this could depend on. Central among these factors is the running of SLARs, inter-departmental collegiality and professionalism. Teachers can only assess effectively when they have been shown how and made aware of potential risks such as ipsative assessment. Almost half of teachers surveyed admitted to having no knowledge of the ill-advised tendency to consider previous performance when accounting for moderation of student work. It can be argued that the CBAs are not being moderated correctly on all occasions and that teachers have not been made explicitly aware of checking their bias.

4.4 Category Two - CPD and assessment literacy

This category was identified once the following themes were reviewed and defined:

1. Strengths and weaknesses of CPD to date
2. Views on future CPD and assessment literacy

The twin areas of CPD and assessment literacy are viewed as crucial to the success of school-based assessment. The literature (Stiggins 2010, Looney *et al.* 2018, Lysaght and O’Leary 2017) suggests that both in-service and pre-service teachers require constant, on-going training to build teachers assessment competencies and to make teachers adroit in navigating the moderation process so that validity and reliability are to the fore.

Analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data sources: the questionnaire, semi-structured interview and the focus group helped give valuable insights into research questions two and three:

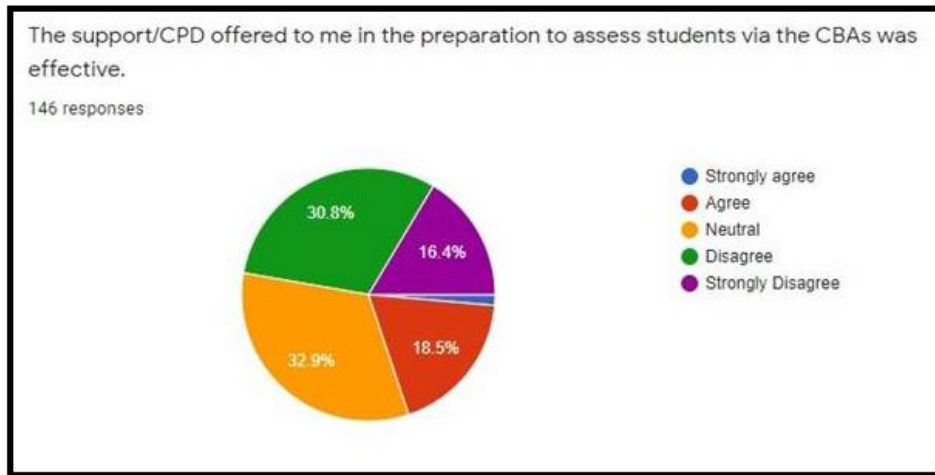
How competent are teachers at assessing their own students' work? How have teachers been supported/trained in assessment literacy for SLARs to proceed in a manner that ensures effective moderation?

What supports have been offered to assist teachers in assessing their students' work? Have these supports been helpful? What other helps/CPD do teachers need?

4.4.1 Category Two - Theme One - Strengths and weaknesses of CPD to date

The results of the questionnaire show that nearly 50% of participants feel that they have not been prepared well enough to assess students via the CBAs:

Graph 7: Teacher’s views on the CPD they received in advance of the reforms



Graph 7, above, clearly shows how teachers felt under-supported as they began to navigate the crosscurrents of a contested curriculum which had arisen out of the industrial relations landscape of the time. Roughly 20% of participants feel that the preparation they received was effective. When participants' opinions on CPD were elaborated on in the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion a picture of inconsistency emerges. While the need for teachers to build knowledge of key assessment competencies has been discussed in the literature review, it is clear that the CPD offered to teachers has been haphazard and may not have been as constructive as it could have been:

'CPD is like a tick the box exercise...leave with more questions than answers...the more teachers probe and ask questions the more the trainers look like they don't have the answers' - (Participant 2 - Interview)

'I don't know if CPD can make teachers more clinical' - (Participant 3 - Interview)

'I think if you had a facilitator coming into individual schools...working with our English department...give us the guidelines for an effective SLAR' - (Participant 4 - Focus group)

'More samples of different types of work (would make CPD better) ...the work that was shown to us was a very narrow field...a lot of the samples they showed us didn't relate to what students were doing...' - (Participant 5 - Interview)

'The JCT CPD was wholly unacceptable...I still don't think people do it (SLARs) correctly...' - (Participant 8 - Interview)

Despite this, CPD was on occasion, also seen as positive and constructive. Participants reported that the modelling of effective SLAR scenarios was seen as beneficial and worthwhile:

'CPD was good...we did a mock SLAR...' - (Participant 5 - Interview)

'It was explored in depth, they role played the whole thing and showed us examples of work...we were debating it and sharing opinions on different things...it opened my eyes on what was expected...' - (Participant 2 - Focus group)

A core element of CPD delivered to teachers was the discussion and utilisation of the national exemplars for both CBA 1 and CBA 2. The exemplars are intended to act as a guide and to assist teachers in SLARs at arriving at decisions. Participants remarked, when asked question ten, 'How useful are the national exemplars at setting standards?', that the exemplars had benefits although were not at all time useful and that they could be problematic on occasion:

'It's good to have a point of reference...the exemplars are good to have a point of reference...I don't check in on them very often' - (Participant 2 - Interview)

'They are okay...some of the pieces of work are fantastic...I don't know if they are very fair...exceptional for us could be something different for another school...they're nearly too perfect...' - (Participant 6 - Interview)

'Not at all useful (the exemplars) ...they are horrendously unhelpful...the drive behind them is good...the intention is certainly there...they are there for consultation...yet there are so few of

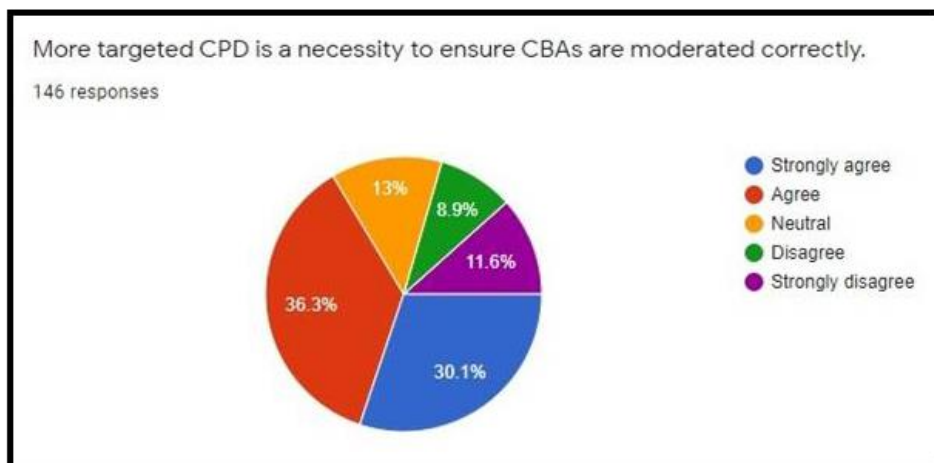
them that no standard can really be developed across it...’ - (Participant 8 - Interview)

Therefore, it can be argued that the exemplars are not viewed as helpful when developing a standard as there are so few of them available. Conversely, some participants did comment upon their usefulness and used them to show to students what the different standards are.

4.4.2 Category Two - Theme Two - Views on future CPD and assessment literacy

Participants views on the CPD they have engaged in so far and the future direction CPD should take formed the focus of this area of research. A large majority, 66%, of participants displayed a clear indication for further support and CPD as graph 8 shows:

Graph 8: Over 66% of participants favoured further CPD to moderate student work effectively



This awareness amongst teachers of the value of CPD is reflective of many of the readings found in the literature review. DeLuca and Johnson (2017) and McLellan (2004) forward the argument that teachers adept in assessment skills are a requirement as formative assessment becomes more commonplace. Perhaps, having viewed the CPD offered to date (Graph 7) as inadequate this clear appetite for further CPD should be seized upon.

Suggestions about what form this further CPD could take centred mostly on the SLAR process and the vocabulary needed to engage in professional conversations. Participants answers to interview question number 6, ‘What further supports/CPD are needed to assist in

the effective judgement of students' CBA work?', yielded the following insights:

'I think maybe they need to focus on the features of quality and break them down even more...they need to be more student friendly...' - (Participant 3 - Interview)

'Maybe a refresher day on the key skills, the vocabulary and how SLARs operate...it's been six years we've been into this...to go back to basics...' - (Participant 5 - Interview)

'JCT could use the CPD as a feedback session...ask teachers what learning outcomes are not being met...ask do we need to change any outcomes...' - (Participant 6 - Interview)

'More samples of work are needed...being down to earth and making it relative to their age...making it realistic for a 14-year-old student...the examples we've been given...I don't know if I could even achieve that standard' - (Participant 7 - Interview)

When asked interview question number 8, 'Assessment literacy/competencies are a necessity when assessing students' work. What skills do you feel you need to develop to ensure effective moderation now and into the future?', participants sometimes struggled to readily identify skills they needed to develop which would suggest that they had not thought about assessment in these terms before. When offered examples of assessment literacy skills they suggested the following:

'Technical skills are a prerequisite for carrying out moderation of the CBAs...basic digital skills.' - (Participant 2 - Interview)

'Being able to use technology to give feedback in real time, being able to have shared access to work online...at the moment it's impossible to have some element of digital literacy...they could do with embedding that more into CPD...' - (Participant 5 - Interview)

'The language of assessment...that you are familiar with the language around it...there's a new vocabulary around it...there's a specific vocabulary around it now...' - (Participant 6 - Interview)

In many ways, as one participant pointed out, it may be too late for further CPD and supports at this stage to change practices which may now have become embedded in the culture and identity of schools and its teachers:

'It's too late (for more CPD) ...it's been rolled out...it should have been led from the start...we were thrown in the line of fire immediately...some people are ingrained in bad practice around SLARs...' - (Participant 8 - Interview)

This comment about '*bad practice around SLARs*' was explored further in the focus group when participants were asked to describe how a typical SLAR proceeded. One participant noted that they found SLARs in their school were rushed and not afforded the correct level of time and detail required to ensure validity and reliability:

'Different schools are doing the SLARs very differently...some are rushing them during a 20-minute lunch...you're not really taking it in properly...it should be implemented properly and checked that it's being implemented properly...' - (Participant 3 - Focus group)

Part of the reason for this is the so called 'initiative overload' (O'Brien 2018) which has beset many schools recently. Junior cycle reform and the associated system of SLARs may be viewed as another task for teachers with an already busy workload to complete without ever engaging at a critical level. Teachers' lacklustre adoption of the SLAR process in some schools may be viewed as a reaction to a curriculum which many may view as being foisted upon them with little consultation. Such '*...historical and ongoing resistance with the junior cycle reform agenda...*' (MacPhail 2018, p. 13) may yet prove the undoing of the SLARs and CBA system as all subjects see the reforms bedding down.

4.5 Research Questions Two and Three - Justification

The qualitative and quantitative data corroborates existing literature which suggest the importance of ongoing CPD and development of teacher's assessment literacies. Teachers had not previously considered assessment as a literacy that they needed to develop and nurture. Thinking of assessment in these terms is something that caused teachers to pause. When asked what further support they needed almost all of the responses favoured mock SLARs, a wider range of exemplars and further clarification on the features of quality. Targeted CPD was favoured by over 66% of teachers. When consulted on their view's teachers were forthcoming in their feedback. Such a willingness to offer constructive feedback justifies the exploration of research questions two and three and could improve future iterations of CPD for teachers across the entire spectrum of junior cycle subjects.

4.6 Category Three - Teachers as motivators, diplomats and advocates

This category was identified once the following themes were reviewed and defined:

1. Exercising professional judgment
2. Motivating students for non-numerical assessment
3. Merits of reforms

Analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data from the three data sources; the questionnaire, the semi-structured interview and the focus group helped shed light on research questions four and five:

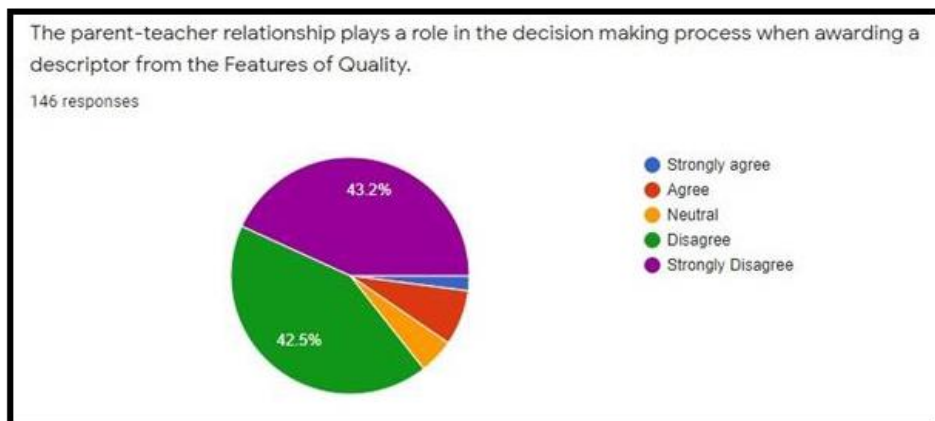
What role does the teacher-student relationship play in the impartiality of a descriptor awarded from the FoQ?

What role does parental expectation/involvement play in the assessment process? To what extent do teachers feel pressured to provide a descriptor that will not cause worry to parents?

4.6.1 Category Three - Theme One - Exercising professional judgement

An overwhelming number of questionnaire respondents, 85%, stated that parental expectation played no significant role in their awarding of a descriptor to a student's piece of work. This finding demonstrates teacher's explicit commitment to fairness, transparency and the inherent professionalism underpinning teachers' vocational identity. Many anecdotal concerns abound that teachers may come under undue pressure to award a descriptor based on their relationship with parents. Graph 9 clearly refutes this hypothesis:

Graph 9: 85% of teachers surveyed said that parental expectation played no role in their decision-making process



Participants adherence to teaching students the success criteria, providing timely feedback and exercising professional judgement ensures that any parental pressure is alleviated of:

'Try and award what you see in front of you...awarding them for what you see on the day...sort of like doing the job of the SEC, because they won't know the students..try to remain impartial' -

(Participant 4 - Interview)

'I didn't let it cloud my judgement...I gave them feedback...' - *(Participant 7 - Interview)*

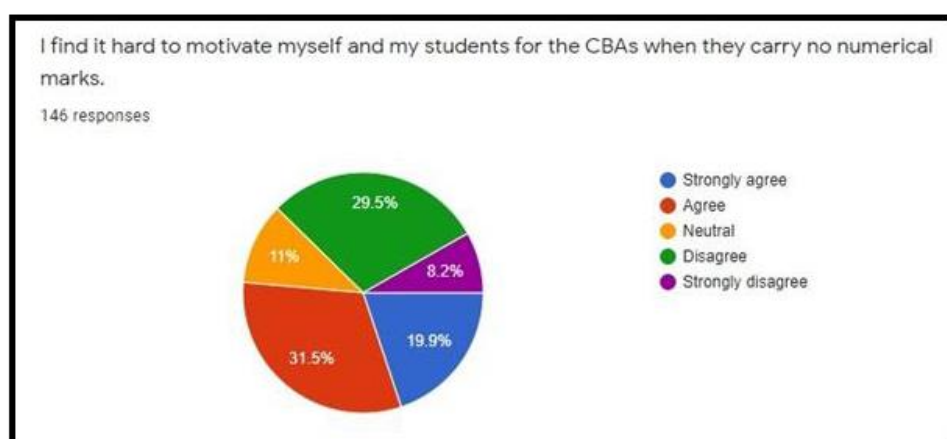
'I give them success criteria...if there's success criteria I can judge it against this...I put these in place early so that the students are used to them...' - (Participant 8 - Interview)

It could be proposed that teachers feel comfortable occupying the space of assessor and teacher when they know they have prepared their students well by giving feedback and success criteria so students are best prepared to succeed. Conversely, over 25% of participants (Graph 3) in the questionnaire did indicate that the student-teacher relationship had an impact on the awarding of descriptors. This indicates that it is difficult to cast aside personal knowledge of students as teachers have seen students' progress throughout the years that they have taught them.

4.6.2 Category Three - Theme Two - Motivating students for non-numerical assessment

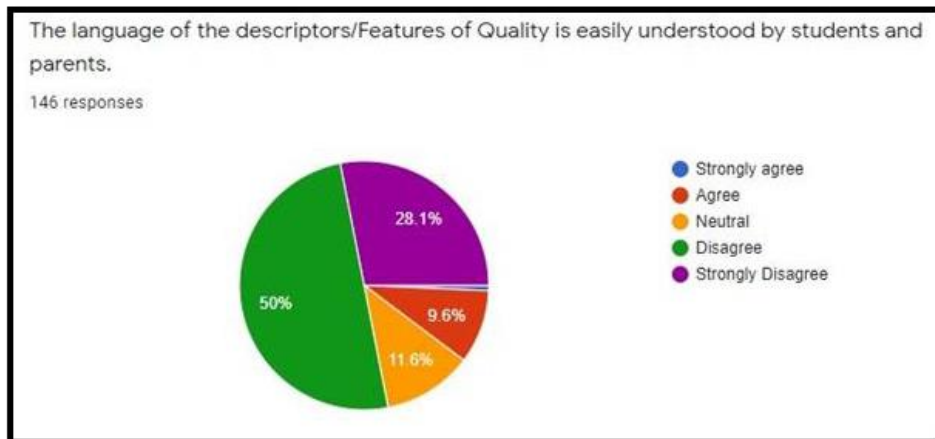
Data was collected on whether teachers found it difficult to motivate themselves and students for the CBAs. Tellingly, over 51% of participants stated that they did find it hard to motivate both students and themselves. The reason for this may be that the CBAs carry no numerical marks yet take up a significant amount of teaching time. Graph 10 details participants views on the matter:

Graph 10: Over 51% of participants reported having difficulty motivating themselves and their students for the CBAs



Low levels of motivation could be exacerbated by the often-ambiguous language of the descriptors and the features of quality with almost 80% of participants agreeing with the statement in Graph 11:

Graph 11: Over 78% of participants found the descriptors/Features of Quality are not easily understood by students and parents



Interview participants also made the link between motivation and the language of the descriptors with a number of those interviewed casting aspersions on the language currently in use:

'I would imagine that the majority of the parents also would be wondering what they mean and I don't know if our students would necessarily be in the place to explain to them what it means.' - (Participant 1 - Interview)

'The descriptors language can be quite negative for students and parents...the words 'Yet To Meet'..it's very negative on their self-esteem' - (Participant 2 - Interview)

'I don't think the parents understand the descriptors...it might go over their head...descriptors are too broad...they're too airy fairy...' - (Participant 4 - Interview)

When asked how they attempted to motivate students for the CBAs participants responses to interview question 4, 'How do you motivate students to put effort into the CBAs when they carry no numerical marks?', resulted in sharing of a number of interesting techniques and observations:

‘Once you say it’s part of their Junior Cycle...I would have always put an emphasis on telling them that this is a skill and especially so for CBA 1. This is a skill that you’ll need for life at some stage you might need to give a speech...’ - (Participant 1 - Interview)

‘There is freedom to choose what CBA 1 is on...it’s something they have chosen because they are interested in it...’ - (Participant 2 - Interview)

‘We told them that there were marks going towards them! I couldn’t believe it myself that there were no marks going towards this.’ - (Participant 5 - Interview)

‘I found that trying to create a bit of competition helped...nobody wanted to do a bad CBA...’ - (Participant 7 - Interview)

From analysis of the data, it could be proposed that motivating students is not a new problem and is one that has persisted for as long as there has been assessment. Motivating students when there are no numerical marks being awarded may prove especially difficult. From the data analysed it seems teachers have become creative in how they generate enthusiasm and interest in the new system of CBAs.

4.6.3 Category Three - Theme Three - Merits of reforms

As with any reform effort there may be misgivings about how it may have been implemented, the level of detail or the resources assigned to it. Some of the concerns about junior cycle reform have been discussed under different themes hitherto. While these are genuine concerns, they do not take away from the perceived merits of the reforms that participants have also commented on in the data collection process. Chief amongst these observations was the praise for the importance and visibility of oral literacy skills that has now been enshrined via CBA 1:

'Every couple of weeks they have to get up and speak in front of the class...' - (Participant 3 - Interview)

'CBA 1 can help their self-esteem...when they realise, they can do it...stand up in front of their peers...it's great for their development...they sometimes enjoy it...' - (Participant 6 - Interview)

'Oral presentation caters for the reluctant students...they can access the curriculum...it's open and allows students to play to their strengths...' (Participant 4 - Focus group)

Participants in the focus group agreed that the move away from summative assessment and towards drafting encouraged students to view writing as a process:

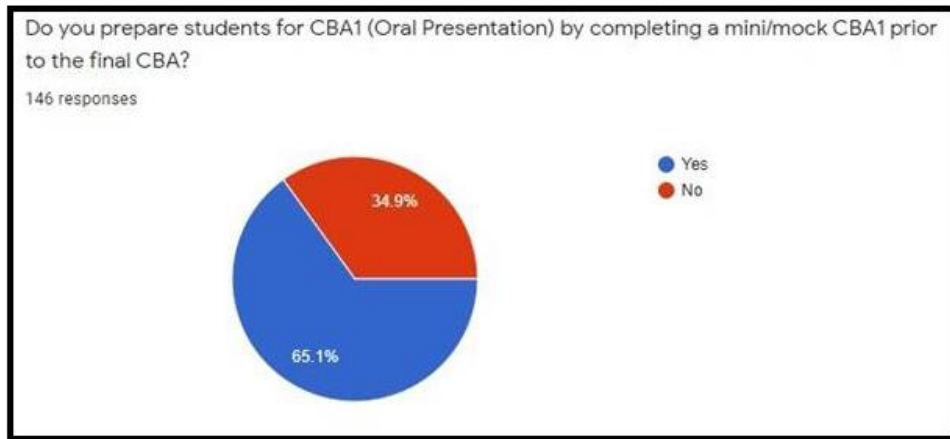
'Teachers more aware of assessment and trying to assess more regularly...it's brought assessment to the forefront...' - (Participant 1 - Focus group)

'Students are now more open to feedback and drafting...it's a work in progress...' - (Participant 2 - Focus group)

'Definitely taken the emphasis away from the summative...' - (Participant 3 - Focus group)

Teaching methodologies may also have changed to reflect the emphasis placed on oral literacy skills as graph 12 suggests:

Graph 12: Over 65% of participants reported preparing students for CBA 1 by using mini or mock presentations



It may be proposed that such changes to the way teachers teach were at the centre of the reform agenda with teachers changing their approach to reflect more student-centred pedagogies now commonplace compared to the didactic teaching of the old junior cycle course.

4.7 Research Questions Four and Five - Justification

Research questions four and five sought to clarify the role that teachers' relationships to their students and parents/guardians played in the awarding of descriptors. Data suggests that parental pressure or expectation played no significant role (Graph 9) in the moderation process while over a quarter of participants (Graph 3) stated that the teacher-student link did account for bias or difficulty in remaining impartial.

Category three found that teachers occupy different spaces as motivators when they attempt to enthuse their students, diplomats as they remain impartial and explain their decisions to students and parents and finally, as advocates for their students who are being exposed to different teaching methodologies which places students at the centre of the learning process. These three roles present unique challenges and justifies their exploration as new insights have been gained into the working practices of teachers across the country. A sizable portion of teachers, 25.3%, feel their relationship to their students may impact on their impartiality when awarding a descriptor. This concern could be allayed by further oversight of the SLAR process by school management and leaders.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

Data analysis from three data collection sources resulted in three central categories emerging from the thematic analysis carried out. This section of the paper will now focus on the conclusions and recommendations that can be drawn from the data analysis arising from the three categories which emerged. Conclusions will be drawn from each of the categories:

1. Assessment, validity and reliability
2. CPD and assessment literacy
3. Teachers as motivators, diplomats and advocates

5.1.1 Assessment, validity and reliability

Research found that teachers' perceptions of assessment have broadened in line with the aspirations of and introduction of *The Framework* (2015). A move away from the entirely summative nature of assessment that characterised the old junior cycle English course was noted. Teachers felt comfortable accounting for the new assessment approaches they now employ in preparing their students for the new curriculum. The increased use of both formative and summative assessment (Black & Wiliam 2003) was noted by participants. This shows that CPD can be constructive when related to the curriculum and when explored in depth.

Participants often reported having never heard of the terms validity and reliability, with a few saying they only encountered them in college or courses outside of school. While teacher's inability to readily define the terms validity and reliability may cause alarm, reassurance can be taken from the overall sense of fairness that teachers strive for in the awarding of descriptors from the Features of Quality. The SLAR process was viewed as hugely important to ensuring validity and reliability even if teachers may not know that they are explicitly engaging in activities to this effect.

5.1.2 CPD and assessment literacy

Participants' views on the effectiveness of CPD offered to teachers was mixed. Participants felt that CPD was inadequate on occasion while others commented that CPD worked well when SLARs were roleplayed. The effect of effective teacher CPD on student achievement is well documented (Stiggins 2010, Xu and Brown 2016, McLellan 2004, Mertler 2004). There is a clear demand from teachers for more CPD (Graph 8) with over 66% favouring further targeted supports. Teachers may have felt catapulted into the new curriculum with very little tangible support on the ground. Teachers felt that they were caught in the cross-currents of competing ideologies around who should assess students and how many marks this assessment should account for. This ultimately led to industrial action which may have thwarted the timing of CPD and engagement by teachers.

Assessment literacy is a term the semi-structured interview participants had not encountered or thought about in terms of a skill before. It is worthwhile to define the term before we proceed further. Assessment literacy relates to the:

'...the level of knowledge of assessment concepts required by individuals to interact with assessment in a meaningful way, depending on their situation" Berry & O'Sullivan (2016 Conference Slide 5)'.

Participants commented on the language and vocabulary of the descriptors as proving difficult at times for teachers to understand. This suggests a superficial grasp of the term 'assessment literacy' and may point towards a need for explicit clarification of key assessment concepts such as validity, reliability, usefulness, practicality, washback, authenticity, and transparency. Only when teachers become aware of the key assessment literacy concepts can they begin to connect the dots between learning outcomes and the dual assessment approach in use at junior cycle (Rogier 2014). It could be proposed that this knowledge gap about assessment literacy may help explain teachers' misconceptions and misgivings around the CBA process. Assessment literate teachers will be more likely to understand, '...the design of assessments and decisions surrounding their usage' (Rogier 2014, p.1).

5.1.3 Teachers as motivators, diplomats and advocates

The data suggests non-numerical assessment is generally seen as a factor strongly related to low motivation levels. This is assuaged by teachers' innovative approaches to stirring up motivation in their students by espousing the advantages bestowed by participating in the CBAs such as improved oral and written literacy skills. Teachers reported that when they ceded autonomy of the CBA topic to students the motivational levels of students increased. This is reflective of much of the research (Reeve *et al.* 1999, Haerens *et al.* 2015) which states that autonomy-supportive teachers are characterised by a distinctive motivational style while more controlling practices are likely to limit motivation.

Teachers now occupy the unenviable position of assessing their own students, albeit, without assigning numerical marks in a summative exam. This raises the question of whether prior knowledge of students' work and effort before a final assessment, as well as teacher-parent interactions, unwittingly has an outcome on the descriptor a teacher may award. A quarter of participants think the teacher-student relationship has some bearing on the descriptor awarded (Graph 3). This is not a negligible cohort of participants and should be given due consideration. Teachers' interactions with parents may be political in some educational jurisdictions (Blase 1987). This study found the opposite to be the case with a resounding 85% of participants stating that their relationship to parents had no role in their awarding of descriptors to students.

Participants valued the new focus on skills that the new curriculum allows to be explored in detail. This has allowed teachers to become advocates for their students and to engineer learning moments that best suit the context within their individual school and classroom to maximise the learning that takes place. The data suggests that teachers are enthusiastic about these new skills being taught as they see they are transferable to other subjects and to life after school. Teachers care about issues impacting their students' education (Roberts and Siegle 2012) and as such are vocal about reform efforts which may have been developed without the desired consultation teachers would have liked.

5.3 Summary

The overarching sense gained from teachers' experiences of the reforms is that they were introduced without adequate preparation, consultation and without appropriate time given to set up robustly regulated systems of moderation. While teachers embraced the new skills based approach of *The Framework* (2015) and the increased opportunities for different modes of assessment concern arose for the impact of the reforms when it came to impartiality, time invested in non-numerical assessment, ipsative assessment, motivation and communicating students achievement through the oft misunderstood (NCCA 2018) descriptors and Features of Quality.

It could be suggested that there is a sense that the reforms happened, ‘...to teachers rather than *with* teachers’ (Flom 2010) thus alienating teachers and diminishing the goodwill of a key stakeholder in the successful implementation of the reforms.

5.4 Conclusion

There are several important implications for educational stakeholders involved with the implementation of the reform effort. These include the Department of Education, the NCCA, JCT, initial teacher education providers and school management bodies as well as individual teachers who wish to become more aware of their practice and to make connections with the new assessment modes, SLARs, learning outcomes and assessment literacy. The CBA system and associated SLAR method of moderation with its requirement for assessment competent teachers could be improved further with consideration of the recommendations below.

5.5 Recommendations

- a. Explicitly teach teachers key assessment literacy concepts such as validity and reliability. This could be carried out via staff meetings or shared learning days.
- b. Provision of third level courses on assessment delivered by the schools of education around the country - these could be completed part-time or entirely online and could result in a Higher Diploma qualification. Teachers could be taught technical as well as theoretical knowledge about the key assessment literacy concepts.

- c. Refresher CPD with a focus on SLARs incorporating a mock SLAR equipping teachers with the confidence to approach difference of opinion.
- d. More robust oversight of SLARs by school management to ensure a commitment to professional standards and collegiality. These were key indicators of a successful SLAR. School management has a role to play in giving rise to these conditions.
- e. Equip teachers with the pedagogical skills that best suit autonomous learners. This in turn would motivate students to view the CBAs with more enthusiasm. Instructional Leadership skills currently being delivered to a selected cohort of teachers should be rolled out to all teachers to realise this.
- f. Provide a feedback window every 2-3 years for teachers to have an input into how the reforms are proceeding and whether any changes need to be made arising out of their experiences with students and parents.
- g. Create a Post of Responsibility within schools with a special focus on assessment leadership. The post holder would have responsibility for oversight of SLARs, assessment CPD and sharing of good practice around the CBAs and SLARs.
- h. Creation of a *Charter of Expectations and Responsibilities* for the SLARs clearly setting out the parameters of the conversations that are to take place between teaching colleagues during SLARs.
- i. The NCCA should develop more national exemplars with a particular focus on the most common descriptors such as ‘In Line with Expectations’ and ‘Above Expectations’ (Appendix 1) to aid in the development of a clearly articulated and readily identifiable standard.
- j. The language of the descriptors is viewed as not easily understood by teachers and parents. Work should commence to improve the language and make it more student friendly.
- k. As all subjects are now engaged in the reform efforts initiated by *The Framework* (2015) the findings of this study could feed into future CPD for subjects across the junior cycle spectrum.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – The Features of Quality

Junior Cycle English Assessment Guidelines: First Edition

Features of Quality for Oral Communication
Exceptional The student's communication is remarkable for its fluency and its control of material used. The communication is imaginatively shaped to a very clear purpose. The student's engagement with the audience/listener is compelling and sustained.
Above expectations The student's communication is clear and convincing, and material has been very well chosen. Communication is fully shaped to its intended purpose. Engagement with the audience/listener is highly effective.
In line with expectations Communication is clear and convincing for the most part, showing knowledge of the subject of the communication. Communication is shaped to a purpose. Engagement with the audience/listener is reasonably well sustained.
Yet to meet expectations Communication is unconvincing although some knowledge of the subject of the communication is shown. The purpose of the communication is often unclear. Engagement with the audience/listener is haphazard or poorly sustained.

Students will complete Oral Communication towards the end of year two and expectations of the standard they achieve will be at a level appropriate to their age and experience at that stage of junior cycle.






[Source:

https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&source=images&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiB2L24rJrmAhVMRrXUIHZ-nCDkQjRx6BAGBEAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.jct.ie%2Fenglish%2Fclassroom_based_assessments&psig=AOvVaw2vFV1nJJHhGU6e-tyoU4za&ust=1575492331100058]

Appendix 2 – Exemplars of students work

Examples

These samples move from In line with expectations (A - E) to Above expectations (F - K) to Exceptional (L)

	Assessing oral communication [TCA] Video of teacher using features of quality and note-taking template to assess the oral communication CBA.	+
	Example A: Hunger Games [TCA] Having read The Hunger Games and watched the film adaptation, these two students decided to create a presentation on the novel and film.	+
	Example B: DMD [TCA] This student decided to speak about living with Muscular Dystrophy and his love of the film Inside I'm Dancing, whose protagonist also has this condition.	+
	Example C: Celebrities [TCA] Having studied Benjamin Zephaniah's performance poetry, these two students wrote a short verse and created a presentation on celebrities.	+
	Example D: War Horse [TCA] This student enjoyed studying War Horse and decided to explore the theme of death in the play.	+

[Source: [https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/Junior-Cycle-Subjects/English-\(1\)/Examples-of-Student-Work/Collection-of-Texts-examples](https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/Junior-Cycle-Subjects/English-(1)/Examples-of-Student-Work/Collection-of-Texts-examples)]

Appendix 3 – The Principles of Junior Cycle Education

The Principles of Junior Cycle Education	
Learning to Learn	High quality curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning support students in developing greater independence in learning and in meeting the challenges of life beyond school, of further education and working life.
Choice and Flexibility	The school's junior cycle programme is broad enough to offer a wide range of learning experiences to all, and flexible enough to offer choice to meet the needs of students.
Quality	All students experience a high quality education characterised by high expectations of learners and the pursuit of excellence.
Creativity and innovation	Curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning provide opportunities for students to be creative and innovative.
Engagement and participation	The experience of curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning encourages participation, generates engagement and enthusiasm, and connects with life outside school.
Continuity and development	Curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning enables students to build on their learning to date, recognises their progress in learning and supports their future learning.
Inclusive Education	The educational experience is inclusive of all students and contributes to equality of opportunity, participation and outcomes for all.
Wellbeing	The student experience contributes directly to their physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing of school community and society.

[Source: <https://www.jct.ie/perch/resources/english/learningoutcomesscreencast1handouts-2.pdf>]

Appendix 4 – The Key Skills of Junior Cycle Education



www.juniorcycle.ie

[Source: <https://www.jct.ie/perch/resources/english/learningoutcomesscreencast1handouts-2.pdf>]

Appendix 5 – The Statements of Learning for English

The student	
1	communicates effectively using a variety of means in a range of contexts in L1*
2	listens, speaks, reads and writes in L2* and one other language at a level of proficiency that is appropriate to her or his ability
3	creates, appreciates and critically interprets a wide range of texts
4	creates and presents artistic works and appreciates the process and skills involved
5	has an awareness of personal values and an understanding of the process of moral decision making
6	appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which she/he lives
7	values what it means to be an active citizen, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts
8	values local, national and international heritage, understands the importance of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change
9	understands the origins and impacts of social, economic, and environmental aspects of the world around her/him
10	has the awareness, knowledge, skills, values and motivation to live sustainably
11	takes action to safeguard and promote her/his wellbeing and that of others
12	is a confident and competent participant in physical activity and is motivated to be physically active
13	understands the importance of food and diet in making healthy lifestyle choices
14	makes informed financial decisions and develops good consumer skills
15	recognises the potential uses of mathematical knowledge, skills and understanding in all areas of learning
16	describes, illustrates, interprets, predicts and explains patterns and relationships
17	devises and evaluates strategies for investigating and solving problems using mathematical knowledge, reasoning and skills
18	observes and evaluates empirical events and processes and draws valid deductions and conclusions
19	values the role and contribution of science and technology to society, and their personal, social and global importance
20	uses appropriate technologies in meeting a design challenge
21	applies practical skills as she/he develop models and products using a variety of materials and technologies
22	takes initiative, is innovative and develops entrepreneurial skills
23	brings an idea from conception to realisation
24	uses technology and digital media tools to learn, communicate, work and think collaboratively and creatively in a responsible and ethical manner

[Source: <https://www.jct.ie/perch/resources/english/learningoutcomesscreencast1handouts-2.pdf>]

Appendix 6 – The revised grading system for the new Junior Cycle

Junior Certificate			Junior Cycle	
Level	Percentage	Grade Descriptor	Percentage	Grade Descriptor
Higher, Ordinary, Foundation/ Ard, Gnath, Bonn	≥ 85 to 100	A	≥ 90 to 100	Distinction
	≥ 70 and < 85	B	≥ 75 and < 90	Higher Merit
	≥ 55 and < 70	C	≥ 55 and < 75	Merit
	≥ 40 and < 55	D	≥ 40 and < 55	Achieved
	≥ 25 and < 40	E	≥ 20 and < 40	Partially Achieved
	≥ 10 and < 25	F	≥ 0 and < 20	Not Graded (NG)
	≥ 0 and < 10	NG		

[Source: <https://www.examinations.ie/?l=en&mc=ca&sc=ma>]

Appendix 7 - Sample Research Participant Consent Form

Title of Project: Junior Cycle English teachers' perspectives on recent assessment reform: Issues for validity and reliability

Name of Chief Investigator: David Mc Hale

Name of Investigators: David Mc Hale

I, ----- _____, agree to take part in the above study and consent to my data being used for the purpose of this research study as outlined in the information sheet.

1. I confirm that I have been given and have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have asked and received answers to any questions raised.
2. I understand (*Outline requirements of project participation e.g. taking part in focus group, interview, questionnaires etc. and how data will be recorded e.g. by audio*) e.g. that I will participate in a 1 hour focus group which will be audio recorded.
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without my rights being affected in any way.
4. I understand that the researchers will hold all information and data collected securely and in confidence and that all efforts will be made to ensure that I cannot be identified as a participant in the study (except as might be required by law) and I give permission for the researchers to hold relevant personal data on me.
5. If I withdraw from the study, there will be no negative consequences. Withdrawal date is on or before Friday July 3rd 2020.
6. I am aware that should I at any time I feel uncomfortable with being recorded, I can request that the recording equipment be turned off.
7. I am aware that I am permitted to view all research and transcripts that have taken place concerning my involvement. I can request a copy of the report from the researcher by emailing XXXXXX
8. All information will be confidential and used only for the purposes of the research study.
9. I understand that ID codes will be used to protect my anonymity and confidentiality and names of people and places will be changed.
10. I agree that quotations may be used for the research.

I agree to take part in the above study and consent to my data being used for the purpose of this research study as outlined in the information sheet.

Signature of participant: _____ **Date:** _____

Investigator's signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix 8 - Information letter on the nature of the research project

David McHale - Masters Research Student,
School of Business,
Letterkenny Institute of Technology,
Port Road,
Letterkenny,
Donegal.

Indicative title of project: *Junior Cycle English teachers' perspectives on recent assessment reform: Issues for validity and reliability*

Dear sir/madam,

My name is David McHale, and I am a student of the MALT programme at the School of Business, LYIT. I am researching recent Junior Cycle assessment reform for my Masters dissertation, and therefore I am asking you to take part in the above research project. The project will examine teachers' attitudes towards assessing their students work for CBA 1 and CBA 2 through the use of SLARs (Student Learning and Assessment Review) and the Features of Quality.

However, it is important that you understand what this study entails before you decide whether or not to participate. Please read the information sheet included with this letter and feel free to ask me any questions in relation to the project.

I am asking you to participate in an interview on the following themes: CBAs, SLARs, awarding of descriptors, validity and reliability.

1. You can contact me by email at XXXXXXX or by phone at XXX XXX
11. XXXX. My supervisors contact details are: Dr. Manuel Catena, XXXXXXX.

Thank you for taking time to consider participating.

If you are satisfied with the information provided, and willing to participate, please tick the boxes on

the consent form attached, sign it, and return it to me in the SAE provided.

Yours Faithfully,

David McHale

A description of the study and why it is being conducted

The project will be carried out in a maximum of 20 secondary schools. The key themes I will explore are: CBAs, SLARs, awarding of descriptors, validity and reliability. The research is being conducted to explore the implementation of CBAs and the awarding of descriptors. The primary focus of the research will be assessment.

Why have you been chosen?

You have been chosen as you are an English teacher with experience in teaching the CBAs, participating in SLARs, moderating and awarding descriptors.

What will you be required to do?

Firstly, your participation is entirely voluntary. In fact, even if you consent now, but change your mind, you can withdraw from the study at any time without any explanation until the data are analysed and about to be written up. I am asking you to participate in an interview on the following themes: CBAs, SLARs, awarding of descriptors, validity and reliability. I will visit [insert school name] to meet with you, if that suits, or alternatively we can arrange the interview by phone or Skype. With your consent, I will record the interview. The interview will be approximately 12-15 minutes long and will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner. Remember, you have the right to cease participation at any time and without the need to provide a reason.

Benefits of the study

English teachers have been assessing their own students work for 5 years now and I think it will be worthwhile to survey their views on the process as attitudes towards assessment have changed greatly in the intervening years. Attitudes towards assessment have moved towards the Key Skills of Junior Cycle, collaboration and formative assessment.

Confidentiality

All data generated in hardcopy will be held securely in a locked cabinet and no names or identities will be used. Softcopy data will be stored on a password protected computer which is used exclusively by the researcher, and all individual documents will be password protected and encrypted. The data will be kept securely for 5 years after the completion of the project by my supervisor at XXXXX when softcopy will be deleted. Any hardcopy will be shredded.

In relation to the interview, it will be anonymised and transcribed, and an interview transcript will be

sent to you. This is to make sure that you are comfortable with its content before the researcher proceeds to use it for the purpose of the overall project. You can request deletions or amendments to the transcripts. You can change your mind about any submission you have made before Friday 3rd July 2020.

However, since there are very few English teachers as a percentage of the total population, I must point out that this is a very small-scale study. Though anonymity will be used, the small numbers involved can limit the level of confidentiality that can be assured.

Use of data and dissemination of results

The content of the interview will be used for my Masters dissertation; all references to it will be on an anonymous basis. This will be done by assigning each participant a number i.e. Participant 1.

I may also write conference papers or seek publication of my research in academic or professional education journals.

This project has been submitted to the LYIT, School of Business, Ethics Committee, and has been approved in order to request interviews from a number of personnel in the secondary English teaching profession in Ireland.

Appendix 10 - Consent form for semi-structured interview

Title of project: Junior Cycle English teachers' perspectives on recent assessment reform: Issues for validity and reliability

Name of researcher: David McHale

If you agree with the statements below, please tick the boxes.

- I have read the attached information letter which explains the research project named above. Yes

- I understand that the letter is asking me to participate in an interview. Yes

- I understand that all the information gathered will be kept strictly confidential and that my name and the name of my organisation will not be included in any reports. Yes

- I understand that my interview will be recorded electronically and transcription of this will be kept securely in an encrypted file on the researcher's computer. Yes

- I understand that participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time until the data are analysed and about to be written up. Yes

- I understand that this research will be published in form of a doctoral dissertation and also possibly in conference papers and journal articles. Yes

Also, please tick one of the following boxes to indicate whether or not you agree to taking part:

I AGREE to taking part in the above research

I DO NOT AGREE to taking part in the above research

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____

You can contact me by email at XXXXXX or by phone at XXX XXX

My supervisors contact details are: Dr. Manuel Catena, XXXXXX

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Thank you for taking time to consider participating.

Appendix 11 - Amendments to consent form due to COVID-19 restrictions

As a result of COVID-19 restrictions some changes will be made to the collection of data via the interview and focus group as it is now not possible to meet face-to-face to conduct research as planned originally.

The primary change to the interview and the focus group is that these will now both be carried out via Google Meet - a video-conferencing tool.

A tutorial on Google Meet can be found [here](#). Further explanation and queries on Google Meet can be answered before the interview/focus group takes place by contacting the researcher, David McHale, by email; XXXXXX. Data collection will not commence until participants are comfortable using Google Meet. Participants will have full access to the transcriptions and have the right to change, amend or remove sections or sentences. Participants who wish to withdraw from the research will have until Friday 3rd July 2020 to withdraw from the research to allow data analysis after July 3rd.

To ensure maximum privacy during these video calls it may be useful to note the following:

- Video can be turned off and audio only used.
- Your background/backdrop environment may be changed if you wish to retain privacy of your home/working environment. A tutorial on how to change the background can be found [here](#).
- A headset is recommended to ensure others cannot hear the entirety of the exchanges taking place on Google Meet and to aid audio quality.
- As interviews will be carried out online via video chat there may be privacy issues from conducting these video calls at home. Please attempt to take the video call in a separate room away from others in the household and be mindful to avoid interruptions.
- With the participants consent the interview/focus group will be recorded for research and transcription purposes only.
- This data will be stored on a password protected laptop for a period of 3 years to ensure external examiners can access it. Nobody other than the researcher or external examiner will have access to the data.
- The participant has the right to terminate participation in the interview/focus group at any stage and for any reason.

I have read and understand the additional COVID-19 guidelines as listed above:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____

Appendix 12 - Interview schedule for interviews/focus groups

Interviewer: David McHale

I. Opening

A. (Establish Rapport) [shake hands] My name is David McHale and as part of my MALT course I have initiated research in CBAs, descriptors and SLARS. I thought it would be a good idea to interview you, so that I can better understand some of your responses that you gave in your initial survey.

B. (Purpose) I would like to ask you some questions about your experience with CBAs, descriptors and SLARS so that I can use this information in my thesis.

C. (Motivation) I hope to use this information to help paint a picture of the reality on the ground of what teachers are experiencing as they deliver the CBAs and moderate their own students work.

D. (Time Line) The interview should take about 10 minutes. Are you available to respond to some questions at this time?

II Body

General teaching background

- A. Could you start by informing me how long you have been teaching for? Over that time what level have you taught Junior Cycle English to?
- B. Have you ever marked State Exams? When/when/for how long?
- C. Have you ever been seconded to work for Junior Cycle for Teachers, NCCA or PDST? When/when/for how long?

Attitude towards the CBAs

- A. How much time would you spend on CBA 1 and CBA 2 in class? Do you feel this time is well spent?
- B. How do you use the CBAs as opportunities to revise or as a means of giving students full control over the topics they choose to write about and present?
- C. How do you facilitate group work/active learning during the CBAs or do you have students work individually?

Awarding of descriptors

- A. Do you discuss the language of the descriptors with students before you undertake a CBA? If yes, what is the reception of this language in class? If no, why not?
- B. Do you show students examples from each category of descriptors, i.e. do you model what they should be achieving by the end of the process?
- C. When awarding a descriptor do you think back to a previous piece of writing/presentation or do you take their work presented as a stand-alone piece in and of itself?
- D. In your opinion, do the CBAs encourage students to embrace the philosophy behind the Key Skills of the Junior Cycle?

Participation in SLARs

- A. Do you feel SLARS are worthwhile/appropriate use of teacher time? Y/N? Why?
- B. Have you ever encountered a piece of work that was clearly awarded the incorrect descriptor? Y/N? How was this addressed within the confines of the SLAR?
- C. Are the full range of descriptors presented at SLARs i.e. a piece of work from each of the 4 categories?
- D. Does your vice-principal allow your SLAR to take place during school time i.e. between 9-4?
- E. Does the chairperson for the SLAR alternate?
- F. Have you ever collaborated with other teachers/schools to organise a SLAR?
- G. Are SLARs a positive or negative development within the landscape of the secondary school?

III Closing

A. (Summarise) From what you have indicated in this interview, you think that _____ . You have been teaching for _____ years and really feel that _____ . You think that CBAs _____ and that SLARS _____ . If having a difficult conversation with a colleague about a descriptor awarded, you would _____ .

B (Maintain Rapport) I appreciate the time you took for this interview. Is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know so that I can successfully represent your views in my thesis?

C. (Action to be taken) I should have all the information I need. Would it be alright to call you at home if I have any more questions? Thanks again.

Appendix 13 - Indicative questionnaire

1. How sure are you that you have awarded the correct descriptor for a CBA?
 2. What, to you, do the terms 'valid' and 'reliable' mean?
 3. According to the NCCA SLARs 'enable teachers to collaboratively reach consistency in their judgments of student work'. How effective are SLARs are reaching 'consistency'?
 4. Does the language of the Features of Quality effectively portray student achievement?
 5. Are there any FOQ that you find problematic? If Yes - why?
 6. Do you feel that the CBAs measure what they were designed to measure?
 7. When awarding a descriptor do you make this decision based on improvements in previous performance or do you make the decision based on work presented most recently?
 8. If students were to complete their oral communication task 1 year from the date of original completion do you think you would award the same descriptor?
 9. Is the language of the descriptors understood by the students and parents?
 10. Have you ever witnessed a moment in a SLAR where you felt a teacher awarded the incorrect descriptor?
 - a. Did you challenge this decision?
 - b. If Yes – what was the outcome? Remain the same or changed?
11. Do you prepare students for the CBAs with a mini CBA?

Appendix 14 – Semi-structured interview transcript example

List of figures and tables

Figure 1 - A conceptual framework of teacher assessment literacy in practice

Figure 2 – The Research Onion (Saunders et al. 2009)

Table 1 - Establishing trustworthiness during each phase of Thematic Analysis

Table 2 - Research categories and themes aligned with research questions one to five

List of graphs

Graph 1 - Responses showing a broader perception of assessment – 8.2% (N=11) strongly agreed

Graph 2 - Respondents indicate their level of exposure to the assessment terms ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ – over 65% have encountered the terms before

Graph 3 - The role of the teacher-student relationship when awarding descriptors

Graph 4 - Nearly 54% of respondents in the questionnaire have been present when they felt the incorrect descriptor was awarded

Graph 5 - 50% of participants indicated that SLARs are effective in the moderation of student work

Graph 6 - Ipsative assessment is commonplace during the moderation process

Graph 7 - Teacher’s views on the CPD they received in advance of the reforms

Graph 8 - Over 66% of participants favoured further CPD in order to moderate student work effectively

Graph 9 - 85% of teachers surveyed said that parental expectation played no role in their decision-making process

Graph 10 - Over 51% of participants reported having difficulty motivating themselves and their students for the CBAs

Graph 11 - Over 78% of participants found the descriptors/Features of Quality are not easily understood by students and parents

Graph 12 - Over 65% of participants reported preparing students for CBA 1 by using mini or mock presentations