Bearding the Lion: Reforming Assessment in Junior Cycle

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Introduction

Nothing encapsulates the drama, tension and acrimony of junior cycle reform more than the debate about proposed changes in assessment. Even before the change was formally introduced in Minister Quinn’s Framework for Junior Cycle (DES 2012), long-standing positions were evident that did not bode well for a smooth implementation. That there was need to reform the curriculum and assessment was not in serious dispute. Concern about the form and function of assessment at junior cycle emerged in almost every review of curriculum since its introduction in 1989 and there was widespread criticism of the negative influence of assessment methods on curriculum, teaching and learning (CEB 1984a; OECD 1991; Government of Ireland 1992; NCCA 1999; Smyth et al. 2007). The changes proposed by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in 2012 sought to rebalance that examinations system and give
teachers the opportunity to take more control over how their students are assessed, through introduction of some elements of school-based assessment (SBA) for certification purposes. Analysis of why teachers preferred to continue with external, centralised forms of assessment reveals assumptions and challenges underlying trends in many countries for greater teacher involvement in high-stakes assessment and for the need to ensure that policy takes adequate regard of local situational contexts and cultures, both educationally and socially.

Debate about assessment in Ireland is not new. Ireland has a long history of public education stretching back to 1831 in the case of primary schooling. Public secondary education came later, as did evaluation and certification, initially accompanied by a payment-by-results incentive system for primary and secondary teachers that did little to foster child-centred educational experiences for learners. Soon after establishment of the independent Irish state in 1922, the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate exams were introduced, without the payment-by-results. The Primary Certificate Examination was introduced in 1929, followed by the Group Certificate in 1947, at the end of two years vocational education. These and later iterations of the exams were to form the template for certification at second level right up to the present day. Over the decades, there were several changes in curriculum, but relatively little change in assessment. A study of the Leaving Certificate by Madaus and Macnamara (1970) queried the suitability of the exam on a number of grounds, including the reliability of results and over-emphasis on student memorisation of knowledge. One study of the Intermediate Certificate (Heywood et al. 1980) found similar issues and proposed the inclusion of more varied forms of assessment, including SBA. The recommendations were largely ignored but the report, authored by academics in the School of Education, Trinity College, reflected many of the proposals made decades later by the DES in 2012 and 2015. Despite consistent reservations amongst the research community about the suitability of existing assessment arrangements at secondary level, the system remained relatively unchanged until the emergency temporary arrangements for assessment put in place for junior and senior cycle in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Murchan 2020a).
Successful curriculum change needs to be systemic, accompanied by changes in teaching, learning, resources and assessment. Education systems are shaped by how society prioritises aims, purposes and methods at given points in time. Much of the current assessment architecture was developed to align with behaviourist views of learning and teaching prevalent in the mid-twentieth century. Newer sociocultural interpretations of learning and teaching require corresponding adjustments to assessment, without which there remains a disjoint between what and how students learn and how they are assessed (Shepard 2000), a concern likely to apply equally to curriculum reforms in Ireland. Modern interpretations of assessment place it as an integral part of teaching and learning (Lysaght et al. 2019). There was relative agreement on this in relation to junior cycle, where the concept of “classroom assessment” proved far less contentious than assessment as part of certification processes, the latter traditionally developed, administered and scored by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) rather than by teachers. As the debate about assessment of junior cycle achievement evolved, a key issue became the role of the SEC in externally grading students’ work, or looked at another way, the role of teachers in assessment for certification. This suggests the need to take a sociocultural perspective that considers issues from the perspectives of different stakeholders, including teachers. Black and Wiliam (2005) highlight the influences of political, societal and cultural factors on assessment practice across different jurisdictions, influences that resonate with the junior cycle reform process in Ireland.

The story of junior cycle reform in Ireland provides interesting illustration of the conceptualisation, implementation and outcomes of assessment reform at the system level. This reform was well conceptualised, planned and research-led and seemed, at the outset, to enjoy widespread support. It was an ambitious agenda developed by people keen to see it succeed and included a commitment to large-scale professional development for teachers. And yet it became mired in controversy in relation to proposed changes in assessment, resulting in delay and significant change to the original plans. The initiative provides an interesting glimpse of scaled-up educational reform in practice, illustrating the complexity of reform and the ways in which policy proceeds through layers of scrutiny and amendments before emerging as embedded practice in schools and classrooms.
Assessment in Lower Secondary Education Internationally

When originally developed as the Intermediate Certificate Examination in 1924, the assessment at the end of lower secondary education was administered to the relatively small proportion of the cohort remaining in school at that age. For most examinees, it was a terminal exam marking the end of their formal education as they moved on to employment. A century later, enrolment patterns have changed dramatically, with almost the entire cohort completing junior cycle, consistent with an average enrolment of 95% in lower secondary education across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2019). Furthermore, over 90% of students in Ireland remain in school beyond junior cycle to complete the Leaving Certificate Examination (DES 2015b).

Some, but not all, education systems assess student performance towards or at the end of lower secondary education. Around the age of 16, students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, for example, take the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). This qualification offers students a range of subjects and recent reforms in England mean that much of the assessment is in the form of terminal exams scored by the awarding bodies on a scale from nine (the highest score) to one (the lowest). In France, students finishing lower secondary education may elect to be awarded the Diplome National du Brevet (DNB) at age 15. This qualification is based on performance in a number of subjects with grades coming from a combination of continuous assessment throughout Year 9 and some terminal examinations. However, as in Ireland, given the proportion of students proceeding beyond lower secondary education, “the Brevet may be regarded as approaching obsolescence” (Cros 2009, p. 16). Salokangas et al. (Chap. 11, this volume) highlight practices in Finland and Sweden where assessment of student achievement in lower secondary education is conducted either entirely by teachers themselves or through teacher grading of state-developed national curriculum tests. Students in Singapore receive GCSE qualifications in the form of the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of
Education Ordinary Level (GCE O-Level), an exam that largely mirrors the GCSE offered by Cambridge Assessment in the UK, with some greater local control by the Singapore Ministry of Education (SEAB 2020). Overall, internationally, there is varied practice in relation to the certification of student achievement at lower secondary level. Some systems such as Ireland and parts of Britain are quite centralised, either through national or approved awarding bodies, favouring externally marked examinations. Other systems leave such assessment and certification in lower secondary education to teachers and schools.

Rationale for Reform in Ireland

National Debate

As noted previously, discussion about reform of curriculum and assessment at lower secondary level long preceded the eventual proposals from the DES in 2012. One report on the Intermediate Certificate Examination (Department of Education 1974) highlighted possibilities for reducing the reliance on essay-type questions through more widespread use of objective items. Later that decade, a series of reports from the Public Examinations Evaluation Project (PEEP) recommended introduction of SBA by teachers as part of student certification (Heywood et al. 1980), but the reports, presented to the Minister, came to nothing in the prevailing educational policymaking of the time. Consultative reports from the fledgling Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB 1984b, 1986) highlighted possible radical changes to assessment, but these did not survive the morphing of the CEB into the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 1987. Surprisingly, little consideration was given to assessment in developing the Junior Certificate Curriculum, first introduced in 1989. However, once the curriculum was introduced into schools greater attention was paid to assessment.

Original conceptualising around the junior certificate envisaged some element of SBA but this was dropped by the time the first cohort of students was examined in 1992. The new curriculum was already in its first
year of implementation before serious debate began in relation to how it would be assessed and the need to think beyond traditional written terminal examinations. Provision for optional orals in some language subjects and optional projects in subjects such as geography received negligible uptake by schools and written and externally scored exams dominated. As the new curriculum bedded in, a number of reports explored issues of assessment. Table 9.1 provides an overview of reports that focused on perceived challenges with curriculum and assessment at junior cycle level. Data in the table suggest that the new programme had hardly started when policymakers began to query the effects of restricted assessment techniques on programme implementation. Only one cohort had been examined when the NCCA (1993, p. 34) called for SBA in the form of “greater diversification of assessment modes [at] school level” supported by continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers and appropriate moderation systems. Similar views emerged also in a government white paper (DES 1995) that highlighted a number of concerns and recommendations including:

• a mismatch between junior cycle objectives and assessment approaches (essentially a test validity concern)
• adverse impact of the examination on teaching methods and student learning
• need to introduce some SBA, along with the far more remote goal that “internal assessment” might also form part of the Leaving Certificate.

Further review and consultations proceeded over a period of two decades, including some research by the Economic Social and Research Institute (ESRI) commissioned by the NCCA.

In an analysis of policy development throughout this period, Murchan (2018) identified two overall conclusions drawn by policymakers from this debate:

• existing approaches to assessment had an adverse impact on teaching, learning and the curriculum itself
• some level of SBA as part of assessment would attenuate that impact.
| Date | Agency and report | Selected issues identified | Relevant recommendations |
|------|-------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1992 | Government of Ireland. *Green Paper* | Nature of the JC exam compromises many approaches and methodologies associated with the revised subject syllabi. | Certify via a mix of external exam and SBA |
| 1993 | NCCA. *A programme for reform* | Restricted range of assessment approaches has an adverse effect on teaching methods and classroom organisation. JC is not an exit exam for students so schools should have flexibility in assessment. | More SBA with associated CPD and moderation |
| 1994 | National Education Convention (1994). *Report* | Exam inhibits realisation of aims and objectives of JC curriculum, promoting subject-based rather than cross-curricular learning. Rewards rote learning and distorts students’ curricular experience. Teachers have concerns about SBA. | Role for a mixture of SBA and external exam |
| 1995 | DES. *White Paper* | Assessment methods should promote learning of a diverse range of objectives and encourage teaching approaches consistent with those objectives. | New assessment methods and increased role for SBA. Retain stakeholder confidence. |
Table 9.1 (continued)

| Date | Agency and report | Selected issues identified | Relevant recommendations |
|------|-------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1999 | NCCA. *Junior Cycle Review* | Mismatch (1) between JC aims and assessments and (2) between students’ experience in primary and JC. Terminal exams encourage rote learning by students; process of students’ learning not captured by exams. Adverse impact of exams on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Relevance of JC as a high-stakes qualification has ceased. Tension between teachers’ role as professionals and excessive focus on exam preparation but teachers have reservations about SBA. | Introduce some SBA as part of JC |
| 1999 | DES (1999). *Issues for Discussion* | JC is not a terminal qualification for most students. Recognises challenges in altering state examinations, perceived as “national icons”. Exams can induce student stress. | Introduce combination of external exams and SBA |
| 2004 | NCCA (2004). *Update on JC review* | Terminal exams not serving a broad-based curriculum. Exams narrow teaching, with an over-emphasis on product. | Increased role for AfL. Smaller core JC course with additional optional subjects. |

(continued)
| Date     | Agency and report                                      | Selected issues identified                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Relevant recommendations                                                                                                                                 |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2004–2007| ESRI. Three reports from longitudinal study Smyth et al. (2004) Smyth et al. (2006) Smyth et al. (2007) | Student interest in and liking for school and teachers decreases during JC. Evidence of ability-based streaming by some schools, especially for boys. Teaching narrowed to focus on exams; dominance of traditional teaching methods. In-class tests the most frequently form of assessment 3rd year focus on preparing for terminal exam. Students like subjects offering opportunity to use active learning methods. Some students increase engagement with school over time but some disengage. Boys and students from working-class backgrounds particularly at risk. | Assessment system is part of but not the entire problem. Schools can promote more student engagement through a number of structural and pedagogical reforms. |
| 2010     | NCCA (2010). *Innovation and identity*                | Need to focus on the student experience of the JC as a programme separate from primary and senior cycle curricula.                                                                                                                                                                     | Offers five scenarios for reforming the JC.                                                                                                                                               |
Table 9.1 (continued)

| Date  | Agency and report | Selected issues identified | Relevant recommendations |
|-------|-------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 2011  | NCCA. *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle.* | Further focus on student experience. Schools should have more flexibility to design their own JC programme for students. Need to change the assessment system to bring about real change. Assessment of JC should support learning in JC rather than prepare students for state exams at the senior cycle level | Introduce Short Courses. Offer most subjects at one level only. Provide national certificate based on externally set and marked exams (60% weighting) and SBA (40%). |
| 2012  | DES. *A Framework for Junior Cycle.* | Accepts overall analysis of NCCA 2011. Assessment as the key lever of change. Sees DES mainly in advisory role to monitor school and national patterns of results. | School certificate, rather than national. Certify via exams set and marked by school (60%) and SBA (40%), moderated within school. |

What was missed, however, was the latent misgivings teachers had about the second part of that argument, reservations that would prove pivotal in a titanic struggle between the DES and teachers subsequent to publication of the reform proposals in 2012.

The next section of the chapter explores a wider range of international influences that, it is argued, helped shape the initial debate around curriculum reform and the focus on SBA. Lessons and influences from abroad about educational curricula, assessment and certification are heavily referenced in the two final publications listed in Table 9.1: the NCCA advisory paper of 2011 and the DES policy of 2012.
International Influences

Several educational factors trending internationally informed the national debate about curriculum and assessment at junior cycle. The revised junior cycle includes eight key skills, drawing on twenty-first-century competency models developed by the OECD (2001) and the European Union (2006) and on practices in a number of other countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand (Halbert 2011). Despite much policy enthusiasm, widespread illustration of cross-curricular competencies in practice is difficult to find (Voogt and Roblin 2012) and the assessment of such learning “remains the single biggest barrier to international efforts to integrate 21st century competences into school curricula” (Lysaght et al., 2019, p. 20). Assessing cross-curricular competencies using terminal, external exams poses particular conceptual, technical and logistical challenges.

Another international influence was the relatively poor performance by Irish student on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009, especially in Reading and Mathematics. This issue entered the policy and public debate just as the junior cycle review was reaching a crucial stage. Of the Irish sample in 2009, almost six in ten students were in 3rd Year (Perkins et al. 2010), placing considerable spotlight on junior cycle. These results generated significant impact, prompting introduction of a national literacy and numeracy strategy (DES 2011) and informed decision-making in relation to junior cycle reform at the highest levels within the DES (Murchan 2018). Part of the solution, according to the policymakers, lay in greater use of SBA in schools, in keeping with practice in a number of education systems that performed well in PISA. Systems such as Finland (ranked 3rd in Reading achievement in 2009 amongst all countries participating), Hong Kong (4th), New Zealand (7th) and Queensland (Australia 9th) were significantly above Ireland’s ranking of 21 (OECD 2010) and were highlighted as systems where SBA played a positive role.
Balancing the Formative and Summative Purposes of Assessment

Assessment serves a range of purposes in education (Murchan and Shiel 2017; Newton 2007), exerting a powerful influence on teaching, learning and achievement (Black and Wiliam 2009; Hattie 2009). Teachers can use the results of assessments in class to gauge how students are learning and adjust teaching accordingly; students can self-check their understanding of concepts and address any misconceptions identified, thus engaging in self-regulation of their own learning; policymakers can use the results of national and international assessments to estimate achievements levels for the population and subgroups of students and frame appropriate policy response. Different stakeholders involved in education have different purposes for assessment, some of which are termed formative, others summative.

Formative Assessment

This chapter uses the terms formative assessment and assessment for learning interchangeably, setting aside nuanced differences outlined in Wiliam (2011). Similarly, the term summative assessment is used for assessment of learning. Formative assessment is primarily focused at the individual student level and has as its primary function the improvement of student learning. Thus, the strategies that teachers typically use in class to check on students’ understanding of a topic and help them in their work constitute formative assessment. So too do the increasing number of digital assessments that accompany learning materials, with a view to helping students achieve mastery of concepts. Such approaches aim to “identify gaps between student understanding and intended learning outcomes and to adapt teaching and learning so as to close any gaps” (Looney 2018, p. 129). Research indicates that formative assessment benefits student learning, motivation, behaviour and ownership by students of their own learning with evidence of particular gains for low-achieving students (Black and Wiliam 1998; Wiliam 2011; Faragher 2014). Additionally, assessment-rich classrooms foster more positive, dynamic and
collaborative teacher-student interactions, lower levels of disruption in class and greater levels of teacher autonomy in relation to their own professional practice.

**Summative Assessment**

Teachers, students and parents are also familiar with summative assessment, for example, the term and end-of-year tests frequently administered in schools, along with state examinations at the end of junior and senior cycle. Though summative assessment is frequently interpreted as based on exams, tests or other “performance” undertaken by students, it also includes teacher judgments of students’ work based on indicators of quality relating to a wide range of student engagement and learning (e.g. homework, portfolio, project, group/class participation, etc.). Summative assessments have as their primary function the identification of students’ present level of understanding, skill, performance and competence in relation to intended learning outcomes. Results of such assessments are frequently communicated in the form of marks, grades or descriptors, which when clearly understood by the relevant audience, provide succinct description of students’ achievement, frequently in relation to the achievement of other students or groups of students. Benefits attributed to summative assessment include offering a fair and efficient method for grading students and providing motivation to students to engage with learning (Brown and Hattie 2012; Morris 2011). In a review of 670 studies, Phelps (2012) found positive effects in relation to student motivation, active engagement with information, capacity to remember information, teaching strategies and alignment of teaching with curriculum specifications. He concluded that

one hundred years’ evidence suggests that testing increases achievement … [and that] … studies finding positive effects on achievement exist in robust number, greatly outnumber those finding negative effects, and date back a hundred years. (pp. 39–40)

In a similar vein, the OECD (2013) highlights four potentials of summative assessment:
• Signal high standards and expected performance
• Motivate students to increase effort and achievement
• Provide information about performance to students, parents and others
• Certify learning and award qualifications

**Tensions Between Formative and Summative Purposes of Assessment**

High-stakes exams have a strong impact on what is taught and learned in school, exerting “strong pressure on students, their parents, teachers, and schools but also [having] serious consequences for users of results and for governments or examination agencies that implement them” (Kellaghan and Greaney 2020, p. 1). Outcomes from school-leaving exams with gatekeeping functions to college and employment are critical to students’ life chances and to the reputation of schools in which they are enrolled (Isaacs 2018). Therefore, despite the evidence that formative assessment promotes learning and the existence of policy initiatives to embed formative assessment in educational systems (OECD 2013) there is frequent tension between the formative and summative purposes of assessment in school (Harlen 2005; Looney 2011) with teachers frequently under pressure to ensure that students do well on high-stakes exams. Ratnam-Lim and Tan (2015) highlight the pervasive influence of high-stakes examinations in Singapore and the challenges faced by policymakers and teachers trying to introduce greater levels of formative assessment in classrooms. Similarly, policymakers in Hong Kong, another system with a high-stakes assessment culture, have struggled to promote formative assessment practices in schools (Berry 2011). There are frequent complaints from teachers and students that the pressure of terminal exams and other summative assessments dominate curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. This reflects concerns expressed about students’ experience of junior cycle where pressure of the exam gradually led to a “reduction in more engaging student-centred” teaching and learning in favour of more didactic methods based on teaching-to-the-test (Smyth and Banks 2012, p. 300). This was exactly the type of challenge underpinning Irish policymakers’
view that “unless the examination changes, nothing else will” (NCCA 2011, p. 5).

**Balancing External and Internal Assessment**

Another dichotomy in educational assessment, relevant to the story of junior cycle, focuses on who undertakes the assessment or, specifically, who grades the work of students? Whereas teachers are central to the process of formative assessment, this is not necessarily the case for summative forms, especially high-stakes exams used to certify student achievement at the end of second-level education. Questions of interest include:

- Who develops the assessment task?
- Who marks the student work?
- Who provides quality assurance for the grading?

In many education systems including most of Europe, Africa, South Asia and China, a central authority (e.g. ministry, national examinations agency or licenced provider) develops the assessment task to ensure standardisation across all candidates (Kellaghan and Greaney 2020). In other systems, such as Finland tasks and marking criteria are developed locally by teachers or schools, who evaluate students’ work. Thus, in high-stakes assessment environments, marking of student work can be undertaken by the central agency exclusively (as in Ireland and France), by students’ own teachers (Finland and some German states) or a combination of both (Queensland). Practice in relation to quality assurance varies, with some systems adopting a centralised state system of moderation while others depend on teachers within or across schools to undertake this work.

Concern about the extent to which external exams can adequately capture the diversity of learning outcomes has prompted systems to introduce elements of SBA so that student certification is based on a combination of external and internal (teacher-supplied) marks. Kellaghan and Greaney (2020) highlight several advantages and challenges associated with SBAs (see Fig. 9.1).
The weighting of the SBA component varies across systems and across subjects within systems, with figures of 20–40% typical in England, with 20% more typical in Irish state exams. In Queensland, where for years certification was based on SBA exclusively, there has been re-weighting of the system to include a measure of external assessment, a pattern evident in the reduction of “controlled assessment” in the GCSE in England since 2015 (Ofqual 2013). Despite the challenges associated with SBA, Kellaghan and Greaney (2020) propose a number of steps that can be taken to ensure its effectiveness and acceptability to stakeholders as part of high-stakes certification of students. Approaches include clear specification of assessment tasks and scoring criteria; provision of support materials and CPD to teachers; careful communication with students and parents; and moderation and/or statistical adjustment of teacher marks.

| Advantages                                      | Challenges                                      |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| • Increased scope of learning that can be assessed | • Unreliability of teacher grades |
| • Positive impact on learning                   | • Teaching-to-the-assessment (SBA) by some teachers |
| • Professional autonomy for teachers           | • Pressure on teachers to award high grades      |
| • Represents a form of CPD                      | • Teacher workload                              |

**Fig. 9.1** Advantages and challenges associated with SBA. (Adapted from Kellaghan and Greaney 2020)

The pre-reform junior certificate typically involved students studying 11 or 12 subjects which were offered at two or three tiers or levels, higher, ordinary or foundation. For the most part, students were “formally assessed largely on the basis of written exams at the end of third year” at the conclusion of three years lower secondary education (Smyth et al. 2007, p. 2). Student work was assessed externally and anonymously by teachers.
hired by the SEC and teachers did not assess the work of their own students. There were some elements of externally assessed orals, coursework and projects in some subjects, as outlined in Fig. 9.2. Whereas projects and coursework were part of subjects, such as Religious Education (20% weighting) and Science (35%), concerns were expressed about the extent to which these reflected genuine engagement by students with learning outcomes as opposed to memorisation of procedures to include in project notebooks and reports.

Given the perceived dominance of summative assessment, policymakers sought to make dedicated space for formative assessment in the revised programme. Initially termed classroom assessment (DES 2012, p. 20), further revision introduced the nomenclature of an ongoing assessment (DES 2015a, p. 36), with a focus on providing feedback to students, planning next steps in teaching and learning and improving teaching and learning. The proposals for formative assessment were generally welcomed, along-side calls for appropriate CPD for teachers. What generated more interest and controversy were proposals intended to provide evidence for

| Subject                          | Coursework/Oral Components |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Ancient Greek                   | Art, Craft, Design¹         |
| Classical Studies               | English                     |
| Geography                       | German²                     |
| Irish²                          | Italian²                    |
| Material Technology (Wood)¹     | Mathematics                 |
| Religious Education¹            | Science¹                    |
| Technology¹                     | Typewriting                 |
| Business Studies                | Environmental & Social Studies |
| French²                         | History                     |
| Home Economics¹                 | Jewish Studies              |
| French²                         | Latin                       |
| German²                         | Music                       |
| Irish²                          |                              |
| Japanese                        | Technical Graphics          |
| Italian²                        |                              |
| Material Technology (Wood)¹     |                              |
| Religious Education¹            |                              |
| Technology¹                     |                              |

Fig. 9.2 Pre-reform junior cycle subjects and associated mandatory¹ and/or optional² coursework/oral components
certifying student achievement at junior cycle and reporting to parents. The 2012 proposals placed responsibility on schools themselves to assess and certify students, after a brief transition period where the SEC would be involved. Key aspects relating to assessment are included in Fig. 9.3.

Overall, the DES policy of 2012 differed in small but ultimately important ways from the proposals one year earlier from the NCCA (2011). The key points of difference were around (1) the exam component (externally set and marked under the NCCA proposals) and (2) moderation of the SBA (externally by SEC in the NCCA proposal). Over subsequent months and years, these changes became key to negotiation and acceptance of the reforms, especially by representatives of teachers, who argued that the changes were “educationally unsound” (TUI 2014) and that teachers “cannot be advocate and judge” for students and thus should not be responsible for assessing their own students (ASTI 2013, p. 24). Several arguments were advanced by teachers, the most enduring of which centred on the need to retain public and parental confidence in the integrity of marks from junior cycle assessment and maintain existing relationships between teachers, students and parents. Overall, representatives of teachers queried the extent to which public trust in the impartiality of teachers could be maintained in a school-based assessment system used for junior cycle certification. Just as viewpoints differed across

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**Fig. 9.3** Key assessment elements in *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES 2012)

- Introduction of standardised tests for Year 2 students in reading, mathematics and science
- Use of Classroom Based Assessment (CBA) (40%) to certify student achievement, internally moderated within school.
- Remainder of assessment via exams (60%), set and marked by school
- Monitoring role for DES, to advise schools based on national patterns.
- *Junior Cycle School Award* (Certificate) issued to students by the School
- Phased implementation period 2014 – 2020.
stakeholders such as policymakers, parents, students and teachers, different views emerged amongst teachers themselves, with the larger union, the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI), engaging in the most sustained opposition to assessment proposals whereas the Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI) found greater merit in the revised proposals and engaged with the reforms at an early stage.

Given teachers’ opposition, the DES revised the proposals and Fig. 9.4 presents a summary of the main adjustments in relation to assessment. Key to the proposals was introduction of a form of SBA termed Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) in each subject. CBAs were intended to assess aspects of students’ learning that were difficult to demonstrate using exams. Tasks for the CBAs would be developed by the NCCA, completed in class by students over a defined time period according to a national timetable and assessed by teachers using prescribed criteria. Results would be communicated directly to students and parents but

- Students complete 2 CBAs per subject, one each in Years 2 and 3.
- Students complete one in-class written Assessment Task (AT) in most subjects in Year 3. Similar to controlled assessment. Worth 10% of SEC grade (exam = 90%).
- Terminal exams retained, set and graded by SEC. Exams offered generally at one level, of 2 hours duration.
- Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings involving relevant staff in school to discuss CBA standards and marks.
- Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (Certificate) issued to students by the School. This contains results of exams and ATs graded and certified by SEC, along with results of CBAs and other information provided by school.
- Phased implementation period 2014 – 2022.

Fig. 9.4  Key assessment elements in Framework for Junior Cycle 2015. (DES 2015a)
would not form part of state certification. Such certification would come in the form of (1) a modified version of the traditional terminal exams, set and scored by the SEC and (2) one written Assessment Task in most subjects (controlled assessment) to be taken in class by students in 3rd year but, crucially, scored by the SEC. In effect, a two-tier system was created, whereby a different scoring scale was developed for the CBA and the SEC dimensions of assessment. Described as a “dual-currency solution” (Murchan 2015), this ensures that a composite “score” for a student cannot be compiled from the school-based and SEC results.

The changes, based on an agreement in principle between the unions and the DES (TUI et al. 2015), assuaged some but not all teacher concerns, particularly amongst members of the larger teacher union the ASTI, and the dispute about the assessment proposals continued and widened to include some separate concerns of teachers around pay and conditions. This resulted in some closures of schools due to industrial action in 2016. Further negotiations and concessions, including the granting of 22 hours non-teaching time to teachers annually to enable them, in part, to engage with the SLAR process, eventually resulted in agreement just before students were to sit the first (English) exam under the revised junior cycle in June 2017.

Negotiations about the nature of the reforms extended from publication of the initial policy in 2012 to the 2016–2017 school year, passing through many obstacles along the way. A phased implementation was planned, involving sequential introduction of subjects to incoming first year students beginning with English in September 2014 to 2019–2020. It was also planned to offer CPD to teachers and school leaders in advance of and during implementation (see Chap. 12 in this volume for details). With the final set of subjects introduced in September 2019, the first cohort of students to complete the full junior cycle, including assessment elements, will graduate in June 2022. As new subjects are examined for the first time, issues emerge. For example, based on sample papers provided by the SEC during 2019 teachers questioned the suitability of the Irish exam paper planned for administration to students in June 2020, an external exam that was cancelled, in any event, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers also expressed reservations about junior
cycle assessment that they believed focuses more on literature than the previous version where 40% of marks were awarded for an oral examination (Ó Caollai 2019).

**Summary**

The debate, disagreements and compromises associated with junior cycle reform provide useful insights into the practical realities of introducing fundamental change in curricula and assessment at scale in any school system. Agreement seemed easier to reach in some areas than others. Proposed change that had proceeded in what seemed to be a reasonably confident manner ran into difficulty as it got closer to implementation. All parties to the process agreed that change was necessary and that the quality of education for students is of the highest priority. The importance of assessment was widely acknowledged yet agreeing the specific nature of change was and continues to be difficult to achieve in practice.

This chapter addressed the most contested aspect of junior cycle reform, analysing a dispute around assessment that threatened to derail the entire reform initiative. Topics in the chapter focused on a number of themes that relate assessment reform in Ireland to global trends in assessment. Assessment practices at lower secondary level in several education systems were reviewed, highlighting a diversity of practice. The case for reform of junior cycle assessment was analysed in relation to national and international influences. These included concerns articulated and sustained over a two-decade period that highlighted the adverse impact of the extant assessment system in terms of narrowing of teaching, learning and the curriculum itself. International influences were also reviewed, including the impact of Ireland’s version of PISA shock in relation to the 2009 survey results in reading and mathematics and a perception that some education systems regarded as “high performing” incorporated elements of school-based assessment. The chapter also focused on the tensions that exist between formative and summative assessment and how this played out in the Irish context where disagreement about how student achievement would be certified side-lined serious discussion about the potential for assessment to facilitate students’ learning. Contrasting views also emerged amongst different stakeholders on the
appropriateness of school-based assessment for state certification purposes, an argument that teachers won. The story of reforming assessment at junior cycle has implications for reform at senior cycle, where the stakes are genuinely high for students, teachers and the system as a whole. Teachers are demanding that a full evaluation of the effectiveness of change at junior cycle be undertaken prior to any changes at senior cycle. Whereas it is difficult to predict the shape of eventual proposals at senior cycle, the lessons from the junior cycle and from the implementation of calculated grades to replace the 2020 Leaving Certificate exam due to COVID-19 (Murchan 2020b) suggest that they may be less ambitious. What this will mean for students as they negotiate their way towards the end of second-level schooling and on to higher education and/or employment remains to be seen.

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