# A case study of teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools

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# Abstract

## A case study of teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools

Throughout the education system, assessment is a multi-faceted concept used in various forms and for various purposes such as accountability and improvement (OECD, 2012). Post-Primary education in Ireland has experienced significant changes to the curriculum and with that assessment reform. This is evident in lower secondary, where we are now in steady state at junior cycle since the introduction of the Framework in 2015, and in the upper secondary, where senior cycle reform is underway with a number of new specifications fully published within the system. Central to this change is the development of a learning outcome approach to teaching, learning, and assessment, which places the learner at the centre of the assessment process facilitated by the teacher. Learner voice and the rights of the learners are at the centre of teachers' practice. These recent changes have provided a shift in the paradigm in relation to teaching, learning, and assessment across education, as the approach to assessment places greater emphasis on the learner at the centre of this process.

The development of assessment knowledge and competency, known as teacher's assessment literacy, is a challenge for teachers particularly in the area of how to use assessment, and this challenge is central to their beliefs and cultures. This doctoral study examines a case study of teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools. The study is conducted through the lens of a case study analysis with semi-structured interviews in a post-primary school. The aim of the research is to identify the role teachers' beliefs and cultures play in developing assessment literacy. Data was gathered across a number of semi-structured interviews and an engagement with the teaching and learning group of the school across a six-month period.

This study was conducted during the school academic year 2021-2022. It will assist in contributing to the research in Ireland relating to teachers' beliefs and culture relating to assessment. This research captures the importance of engaging with schools directly, to provide valid and meaningful evidence relating to teachers practice over a period of time. In this instance, it is related to teachers' assessment literacy and the role played by beliefs and cultures in developing this practice. By engaging with the school on a one-to-one basis, the researcher was able to address the challenges and concerns that the teachers were facing in the here and now, relating to curriculum change with

a specific focus on the development of their assessment literacy.

Additionally, the study examines the role played by continuing professional development (CPD), the continuum of education, teachers' assessment literacy and the role that the participants experience in teaching has on their own learning as teachers. The study concludes by outlining the implications for the system and future research in the area of assessment literacy relating to teachers' beliefs and culture.

# Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank the case study school and the thirteen participants within the school. Without their cooperation and involvement this dissertation would not have been possible.

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To my wife, Catherine, and our daughters Caoilfhionn and Síofra, I am deeply grateful for your patience, sacrifice and support. Without you, I would not have got through these four years. I am eternally grateful. Thank you.

# Dedication

To Catherine, Caoilfhionn and Síofra.
The three ladies in my life.
Thank you.

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# List of Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **AAL** | Assessment as Learning |
| **AFL** | Assessment for Learning |
| **AOL** | Assessment of Learning |
| **ASTI** | Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland |
| **BERA** | British Educational Research Association |
| **CAO** | Central Applications Office |
| **CAQDAS** | Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software |
| **CBA** | Classroom-Based Assessment |
| **CPD** | Continuous Professional Development |
| **CSL** | Centre for School Leadership |
| **DCYA** | Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth's |
| **DE** | Department of Education |
| **DES** | Department of Education and Skills |
| **DEIS** | Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools |
| **ESRI** | The Economic and Social Research Institute |
| **ETBI** | Education and Training Board Ireland |
| **HEI** | Higher Education Institutions |
| **ICT** | Information Communication Technology |
| **ITE** | Initial Teacher Education |
| **JC** | Junior Cycle |
| **JCSP** | Junior Cycle Schools Programme |
| **JCT** | Junior Cycle for Teachers |
| **LAOS** | Looking At Our Schools |
| **LMETB** | Louth Meath Education Training Board |
| **LC** | Leaving Certificate |
| **LCA** | Leaving Certificate Applied |
| **LCE** | Leaving Certificate Established |
| **LCVP** | Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme |
| **NFQ** | National Framework of Qualifications |
| **NCCA** | National Council for Curriculum and Assessment |
| **OECD** | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| **PDST** | Professional Development Service for Teachers |

| | |
|---|---|
| **QAA** | Quality Assurance Agency |
| **SEC** | State Examinations Commission |
| **SSE** | School Self-Evaluation |
| **TAI** | Teacher Assessment Identity |
| **TALIP** | Teacher Assessment Literacy in Practice |
| **TALIS** | Teaching and Learning International Survey |
| **TL21** | Teaching and Learning In the 21st Century |
| **TUI** | Teachers Union of Ireland |
| **TY** | Transition Year |
| **UNESCO** | United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation |

# Chapter 1
# Introduction

My research has been formed from my own experience of teaching in post-primary schools, working for a support service and over the past eight years as a Department of Education Inspector in observing practice in post-primary schools and working with various Continuing Professional Development (CPD) bodies, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and other agencies dealing with the education sector and schools as they focused on changes to curricula which resulted in developing their assessment practices.

Over this period, I have observed many challenges faced by teachers and schools relating to changes in assessment practices in post primary schools nationally regardless of their ethos or patronage. This experience has helped to develop my positional stance and approach to this research proposal and is acknowledged and affirmed by various authors (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002; Bassey, 1995). They state that people *"drive research and the issues for research, do not simply operate in isolation, but rather the need to research particular issues grows from the context in which the researcher operates"* (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002, p.11). This resonates with me. My research has built on the salient issues researched to date and probed deeper into the themes that emerged related to the challenges that Irish teachers are facing, in relation to the changes to assessment practices in post primary schools.

Through my work as a Department of Education (DE) Inspector, my findings from many models of evaluations have showed up major deficits in the approach taken in relation to formative assessment practices. Therefore, what happens in the system that a school can believe that they are at the forefront of assessment practice, but their strategies are at a basic level, one that is no more advanced than Initial Teacher Education (ITE) student teachers. From here, I started to develop my understanding of change within the education sector around the introduction of new practice and what is causing a lack of full implementation. I have concluded that a lack of willingness to change practice around assessment is focused on misconceptions of assessment practice and numerous studies have focused on the fact that teachers and the schooling system sometimes have as Brown (2011) stats as "*multiple and conflicting conceptions of assessment*" (p.29). A major question that I hope to address is, what role teacher beliefs and school culture plays in developing assessment

literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools.

Fives and Buehl (2012, p. 62) categorise the ideas around teacher belief literature and the categories used, including the various beliefs held by teachers and how these beliefs shape their practice in an Irish context.

They are:

- Belief about self

- Context/Environment

- Knowledge/Content

- Teaching practices

- Approaches to Teaching.

These categories assisted my research greatly and provided it with a structure. The publications related to teachers' beliefs and culture in post-primary schools indicate that much research has been conducted internationally, but there are a limited number of publications related to the Irish educational context, particularly at post primary level. A gap exists in the literature relating to the Irish context and what background factors predispose a teacher, school, or community to addressing assessment literature relevant to teachers' beliefs and cultures. The task of selecting the various themes for the review was not aided by the fact that a great deal of information was available about teachers' beliefs and cultures in an Irish context, but much of the information had to be unwoven to ascertain what aspects of assessment practices that were challenging for Irish teachers and what factors were to be addressed.

The primary questions for this research study were exploratory.

- What do teachers do in the classroom concerning assessment practices?

- Do teachers' beliefs and culture inform their practices related to their assessment literacy?

- How is the successful provision of assessment practices unpacked in the case study school?

The term unpacked in relation to the third research question, references the post-primary schooling system in Ireland and the language used by the Department of Education to describe the learning

outcome backed approach across the various strands within a specification. It is a descriptor used to describe how teachers engage with an outcome-based specification and delve deeper into understanding the intentions as set out by the specification.

The Junior Cycle (JC) Framework when introduced in 2015 presented a changing landscape to lower school secondary education in Ireland, and it is stated that '*the most significant change in the new Junior Cycle is in the area of assessment*' (DE, 2015a). The changes to practice highlighted in the framework for the first time presented "*a dual approach to assessment*" throughout the three-year cycle (DES, 2015a, p.7). This is a similar approach that is being enacted in relation to senior cycle redevelopment, where many new subjects and specifications have placed greater weight on second components and the importance of assessment over the two years of study.

Barnes research on assessment is clearly constructed in the identification and analysis of teachers' own assessments and what their own beliefs relate to, and that these beliefs are considered to be conceptions (Barnes et al., 2015). Barnes (2015) clearly assists in identifying the idea of a teachers' "*conception*" in providing a framework for *"describing teachers overall perception and awareness of assessment"* (Barnes, p.285). From my engagement with this study, the relevant literature clearly reinforces the reality that teachers' conceptions of assessment can align themselves to any point on a continuum of assessment, ranging from pedagogical-related perspectives to high-stakes accountability-related perspectives (Barnes et al., 2015). To study this continuum in detail, it is important to investigate teachers' beliefs. This study focuses on how teachers' beliefs and school cultures play a role relating to changes in assessment practices. The methodology of this study is qualitative, based on a case study analysis through semi-structured interviews. My biographical and professional background as a business teacher would incline towards the positivist paradigm where order and control can be orchestrated to a greater degree than the interpretative paradigm. However, I was guided by the research questions for the study, which best fitted the interpretative paradigm. This distinctive appreciation for order may present a problem within the study, but it is important to be cognisant of the problem so it can be appropriately addressed and suitably circumnavigated during the research study.

This preference for order and control would also incline my views towards a quantitative approach for data gathering with its origin in the positivist paradigm. Quantitative research is regarded as objective, in that the researcher is removed from the research, and the data are

analysed using impartial statistics (Blaxter *et al.*, 1996). However, the counter argument suggests that it is impossible to convert the complexity of human perceptions and responses into numeric form.

By conducting an early analysis of the literature review, I developed a potential research framework (see Figure 1.1) that provided me with a useful starting point for the analysis.
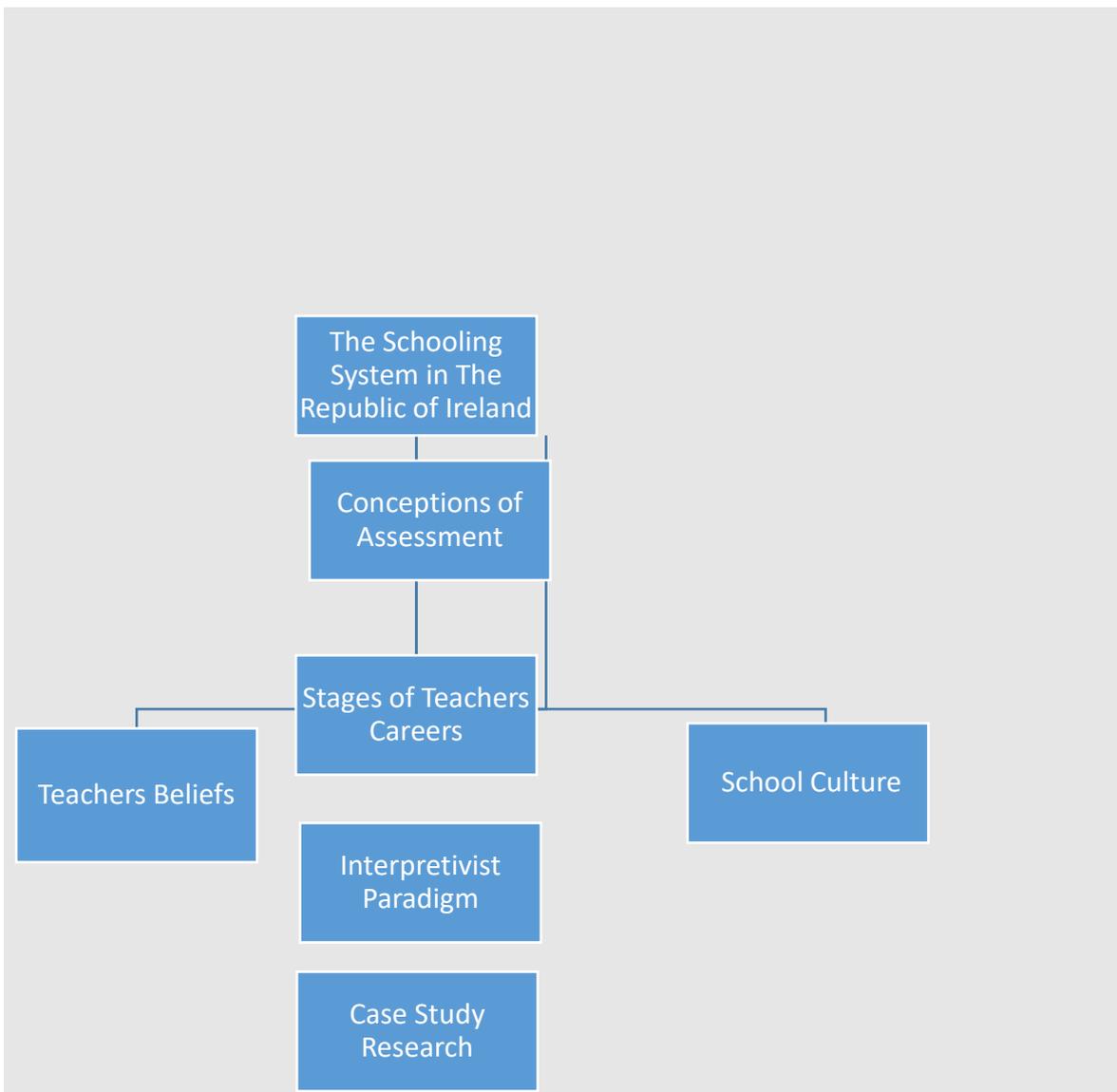


*Figure 1.1. The conceptual frame used in this study*

As this is a case study in a single school, I have included some key quotations throughout chapters four and five to keep teacher voice very close to my findings and discussions.

## 1.1 Conceptual Frame

This study is broadly based on the conceptual framework highlighted in Figure 1.1. It will undertake case study research under the interpretivist paradigm. Its focus on the interpretive approaches, particularly on the social theory and how one embraces a viewpoint of reality that is been socially constructed. This has been further developed with a distinct focus on teachers' beliefs and the culture of the school in which they teach. The research is mindful that teachers are at different stages in their teaching careers, and this will be reflected through the engagement with the participants in the case study school. Teachers' beliefs, culture, and school culture play a pivotal role in developing their understanding of assessment, their conceptions, misconceptions, and varied levels of assessment literacy. This will then be framed around the schooling system within the Republic of Ireland and what structures can be put in place to understand teachers' beliefs and cultures related to assessment practice/literacy to improve learner outcomes.

## 1.2 Policy and Findings

Educational policy nationally has been developed to explore the reason for education, its purpose, and how it plans to meet the needs of all learners across the education system. Ranson (1995, p.440) highlights the purpose of policy for governments to "*codify and publicise the values which are to inform future practice and thus encapsulate prescriptions for reform*". Ball (1998) also contends that "*policies are ways of representing, accounting for and legitimating political decisions*" (p.124), and as such they go to the heart of the relationship between the state and the welfare of its citizens (Hill, 1996). The formulation of a DE assessment policy must consider these factors. In addition, the Chief Inspector's Report 2016 – 2020 published in March 2022 (DE, 2022) outlined several strengths and areas for improvement in assessment across post-primary schools, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five. However, published school and setting evaluation reports provide a valuable insight into the use of assessment across Early Years, Primary and Post-primary schools.

## 1.3 Policy Context

This study aims to explore the role of teachers' beliefs and culture when they develop their own assessment literacy. To understand teachers' assessment literacy, one should grasp the national educational context and how assessment practices have evolved in Ireland. It is also important to note that during the course of the current research, there have been recent and significant changes in Senior Cycle curricula and various assessments in relation to Leaving Cert examinations. This

research centrally discusses the changes related to policy across education in Ireland and the evolution of assessment practices within the context of junior cycle education in Ireland and the newly introduced senior cycle redevelopment. The national educational policy direction has changed many times since the formation of the Irish state with the establishment of the Intermediate Certificate Examination in 1924, from the emergence of the Junior Certificate Programme in 1989. This has all marked a significant curricular and policy change in Irish education at lower and upper secondary level. Yet with all of these changes, there was minimal alterations ever made to the assessment approaches and how teachers understood their role as part of the assessment process. In October 2012, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) introduced a shift of practice in relation to their policy direction with the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle. This framework and policy shift looked at overhauling both curriculum and assessment practices at lower secondary level in Irish post primary schooling. This was reinforced by Gleeson (2022), who discussed the widespread support for curricular reforms and the many challenges that arose, particularly regarding assessment and certification proposals.

The Junior Cycle Policy Reform in Ireland, as articulated in the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 (DES, 2015a), signified a profound restructuring of learning, teaching, curriculum, and assessment within the first three years of the secondary school system. This policy overhaul marked a departure from the prior Junior Certificate examination, which relied entirely on external assessment. Historically, Irish assessment practices at both Junior and Senior Cycle were dominated by national grading systems, with minimal involvement of teachers as assessors for certification. While previous attempts at Junior Cycle reform existed, the current reform represents an unprecedented transformation encompassing both curriculum and assessment. A longitudinal research exploring the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle conducted by the University of Limerick (UL, 2022) revealed issues of identity among Junior Cycle students, perceiving lower secondary education as a purposeless period. The Junior Certificate examination was often viewed as a mere rehearsal for the Leaving Certificate Examination, reinforcing the one-time nature of the former and the limited assessment methods throughout the three-year cycle. From my experience as a teacher and department senior inspector this dominance of terminal examinations run by the state examinations commission led to a narrowed learning experience characterised by rote learning and teaching to the final examination nationally.

In 2009, the then Minister for education Batt O'Keeffe, acknowledged that change was required across the second-level education system, focusing on a shift away from rote learning to a focus on understanding and skills as we see described in the Framework as knowledge, skills, understanding, and values with the student at the centre of the learning process. Subsequent a second version of the longitudinal research exploring the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle conducted by the University of Limerick (UL, 2023), affirmed the necessity of reconfiguring the Junior Cycle curriculum and assessment to align with fundamental educational principles and international best practices.

The reform process gained momentum over six years, involving discussion documents, consultations, draft policy frameworks, and significant industrial relations unrest. The Framework for Junior Cycle was finally published in 2015. The policy framework offers students with balanced learning opportunities, incorporating a broader range of assessment methods. Notably, the most significant change lies in the area of assessment, introducing a dual approach that supports student learning throughout the three years of the Junior Cycle while measuring achievement at the end. This approach combines formative assessment, classroom-based assessment, an externally marked terminal examination by the state examination commission (SEC), and a reflective assessment task. This has presented a significant challenge for teachers, mainly down to the development of their own assessment literacy. The Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) comprehensively report students' overall achievement through various assessment components, reflecting a departure from the traditional reliance on state-certified examinations.

This practice will now be extended to the redevelopment of senior cycle. One could argue that this policy direction and ultimate success of this reform depended on teachers' active engagement, critical reflection, and deep understanding of the underlying pedagogical principles. To develop this practice nationally CPD was offered by the JCT, now known as Oíde. This practice will now be extended to the redevelopment of senior cycle. In 2022, senior cycle redevelopment was unveiled by the Minister of Education, Norma Foley, guided by a vision aimed at achieving *'equity and excellence for all'* within this educational phase. This program is underpinned by the advisory report on the review of Senior Cycle provided by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and draws upon the experiences of Leaving Certificate students, global perspectives, and the growing demand for educational reform.

Subject Development Groups have been assembled to facilitate the design and development of new Leaving Certificate subjects, specifically Drama, Film and Theatre Studies, Climate Action and Sustainable Development, as well as the revision of the existing subjects. Furthermore, these groups have reconvened in order to tackle the remaining subjects within the first tranche.

Notably, students pursuing the Leaving Certificate Applied program now enjoy enhanced access to Leaving Certificate Established qualifications in Mathematics and Modern Foreign Languages. Similarly, students enrolled in schools offering the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) are now able to access the link modules without having to meet subject-specific criteria or modern European language requirements.

Moreover, substantial engagement has taken place among various education stakeholders, including representatives of students, teachers, parents, school leadership, management bodies, and subject experts. Considerable progress has been achieved through the establishment of the Senior Cycle Redevelopment Programme Delivery Board and the Senior Cycle Redevelopment Partners' Forum. Additionally, commissioned research conducted by the NCCA and the State Examinations Commission (SEC) has addressed important aspects such as the weighting, composition, and moderation of teacher-based assessment components. Each of the new subject specifications will integrate externally assessed components, diverging from the conventional written examinations and these components will be diligently evaluated by the State Examinations Commission (SEC).

Further revisions to subjects will be introduced in an additional tranche in 2026, followed by subsequent tranches to be introduced annually thereafter. Minister Foley emphasized the importance of this development, signalling a significant progression within the Minister's ambitious agenda for Senior Cycle Reform.

One could argue that this policy direction and ultimate success of this reform depended on teachers' active engagement, critical reflection, and deep understanding of the underlying pedagogical principles. To develop this practice nationally CPD was offered by the JCT, now known as Oíde.

Teachers are centrally positioned in the assessment process, requiring a paradigm shift in their role from passive observers to active participants, which requires the development of their own assessment literacy. Hence this policy change of direction has led to the development of this research focusing on teacher's assessment literacy.

Several key themes have emerged in the context of junior cycle reform in Ireland. Policymakers viewed assessment as a crucial lever for driving teaching and learning reforms in schools. Divergent perspectives on the significance of assessment and certification at the lower secondary level were evident, particularly between policymakers and teachers. Existing practices shape stakeholders' views, and teachers' resistance to change addressed through their unions was influenced by concerns about workload and ongoing conflicts relating to the assessment practice now highlighted across the lower and newly proposed upper secondary changes.

Teachers' professional identity plays a central role in the discourse surrounding times of reform. Teachers' efforts to project and protect their professional identity, which conflicts with attempts to modify the stakes associated with external examinations was a clear obstruction to change. This research planned to identify the role played by teachers' beliefs and school culture in developing their assessment literacy across three levels. Some of the initial concerns raised were related to the impact on classroom based assessment and what the knock on effect would be related to teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships, where teachers focused on their roles as advocates in preparing their students for state examinations.

The reform of education  as discussed by Ward and Eden, occupies a "prominent position on the political agendas of various educational systems, a circumstance unsurprising given that education constitutes a central pillar of national identity and the intergenerational transmission of beliefs, ideas, and knowledge" (2009, p. 1). Adjustments to policies and practices in education occur with increasing frequency, often driven by perceived needs or deficits. These reforms may follow either a bottom-up trajectory, originating from initiatives at the school or local level, or a top-down model, guided by directives from central authorities or the state (Chapman and Mahlck, 1997) such as the Government.

A critical concern within policy reform pertains to the fidelity of implementation at the school level in how teachers perceive the change and implement it. For reforms to realise their objectives, the communicated message must be clear and accurately conveyed to those responsible for implementation, who must interpret the reform in alignment with policymakers' intentions. This frequently proves challenging due to issues such as policy ambiguity, the ambitious nature of instructional ideas, institutional and individual capacity constraints, push-back from stakeholders (Elmore, 2003; Coburn et al., 2016), teachers' pedagogical beliefs and their perceptions of what is essential for their students (Goodson, 2001; Siskin, 2003; Datnow and Hubbard, 2016). Focusing on this point, I felt that this was an area that required development at individual, whole school and national level, focusing on teacher's beliefs and cultures relating to assessment literacy.

## 1.4 Defining assessment

Assessment can be regarded as evidence of performance (Wiliam & Black, 1996) or "*activity used to assess students' level of proficiency*" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 101). Assessment is essentially about making decisions based on evidence collected. The interpretation of this evidence or result is analysed by the teacher before it is communicated to the "*intended user*" (Harlen, 2007). Assessment is commonly divided into that conducted for summative and that for formative purposes; or grouped into assessment of learning and assessment for learning (Weeden, Winter, & Broadfoot, 2002). Klenowski and Wyatt Smith (2014), define assessment as "*a process of collecting information or evidence about learning and inferring meaning from the assessment process*" (p.50). Assessment within Irish post-primary schools are central to the teaching and learning process. The primary function of assessment within these schools is to generate, gather, interpret, and record information relating to the progress and achievement made by learners. This facilitates the learners in understanding the reason for teaching an assessment a specific unit of learning or topic in providing them with a comprehensive approach to the development of the knowledge, skills, disposition, values, and attitudes required to successfully understand the taught topic. This information can assist students in building their resilience to interrogate and support their ongoing learning. The assessment process can provide evidence of the learning to the individual student or the whole class group. It relies on several methods to provide evidence of learning, celebrate progress, and develop the next stages of learning at the individual, school, and systemic levels. This is achieved by placing the learner at the centre of the learning process, by promoting learner autonomy and learning skills. The process of assessment is not singular, in that any one form outperforms the other, so it can

involve both summative and formative assessment. For the assessment to be useful, it should inform the actions taken based on the information gathered.

Across the education system, assessment is carried out at several levels, ranging from the individual learner right through to the international context. At present, the teacher plays a significant role in organising, constructing, and facilitating the range of assessment practices relevant to each level within Irish post-primary schools. It is used at each of these levels for several reasons which can have an impact on learner outcomes and experiences.

## 1.4.1 Types of Assessment

If one is to look at the principal modes of assessment evident within Irish classrooms, the two approaches would be summative and formative assessment. Both modes have a purpose and are used at various intervals throughout the teaching, learning and assessment process. The approach of summative over formative happens at different moments across the learning process with each one having a distinctive purpose. Understanding this purpose is a key component of assessment literacy that can act as a guiding framework for teacher practice in assessment (Xu & Brown, 2015; Rindone & McQuarrie, 2010).

In the Irish education system, learners engage with a range of assessment types from the ages of three to eighteen (Early Years, Primary and Post-Primary). Three broad general types of assessment are used across the various sectors: assessment of learning, assessment for learning, and assessment as learning. The purpose of these assessments is outlined in Table 1.1 below. For the purpose of developing teachers assessment literacy related to this thesis my focus on assessment will be on the assessment process that happens as part of the teaching and learning, mainly formative and summative.

*Table 1.1 Comparison of Assessment of, for and as learning (adapted from Berry, R 2008)*

**Comparing Assessment of, Assessment for, and Assessment as Learning**

|  | Assessment of Learning | Assessment for Learning | Assessment as Learning |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Description** | This approach collects evidence at the end of the learning for the purpose of making judgements on learners' achievements against goals and standards. | This approach collects information during the learning for the purpose of making decisions on what kinds of actions are needed to help improve teaching and learning. | This approach gets learners to collect information about their own learning. Learners reflect on their learning and make plans to improve it. |
| **Purposes** | To measure learning outcomes. To check progress against standards. To compare learners by their performance. To provide evidence to inform future teaching and learning. To provide certification. | To understand how learners learn by monitoring their progress during the learning process. To make on-going instructional decisions using the information collected. To help improve learner learning through providing formative feedback. | To help learners understand the standard expected of them. To develop learners' abilities to self-monitor, self-assess, self-evaluate and self-correct. To enable learners to develop their own learning plans |
| **Methods** | End of units/topic/year assessment, standardised tests, International and National assessment. | Continuous opportunities to check-in on learning. Diagnostic testing. | Opportunities for learners to self-assess, collaborate, and peer-assess. |

## 1.4.2 Summative Assessment- Assessment of Learning

Summative assessment is a way of revising or summing up the learning process. Hill defines summative assessment as a "*means to record the nature and level of students' achievement throughout their academic careers*" (2000, p.94) while Harlen puts forward the idea that summative assessment only involves the process of "*marking and providing feedback grades to students and that it is separated from teaching and is carried out at intervals when achievement has to be summarised or reported*" (1998, p.3). This is an interesting thought process and is no doubt one that is shared by some Irish post-primary teachers at present.

The NCCA (2020) defines summative assessment as a tool to "*evaluate student learning at the end of the instructional process or of a period of learning. The purpose is to summarise the students' achievements and to determine whether and to what degree the students have demonstrated understanding of that learning by comparing it against agreed success criteria or features of quality*".

In the post-primary sector, this third purpose is having the greatest impact on teachers and their students at present. However, this is the one which has the greatest levels of variables attached. Summative assessment can be used to provide a judgement relating to students' competency or understanding of a unit or topic. This accountability, as described by Ball (2013), states that this mode of assessment "*employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of control, attrition and change*" (p.57).

The first formal assessments of learning commence in second class in primary school as standardised tests on literacy and numeracy. This is built upon at four more points in the learners' lives (Two at Primary and Two at Post Primary). Figure 1.2 below indicates these formal assessments of learning points.
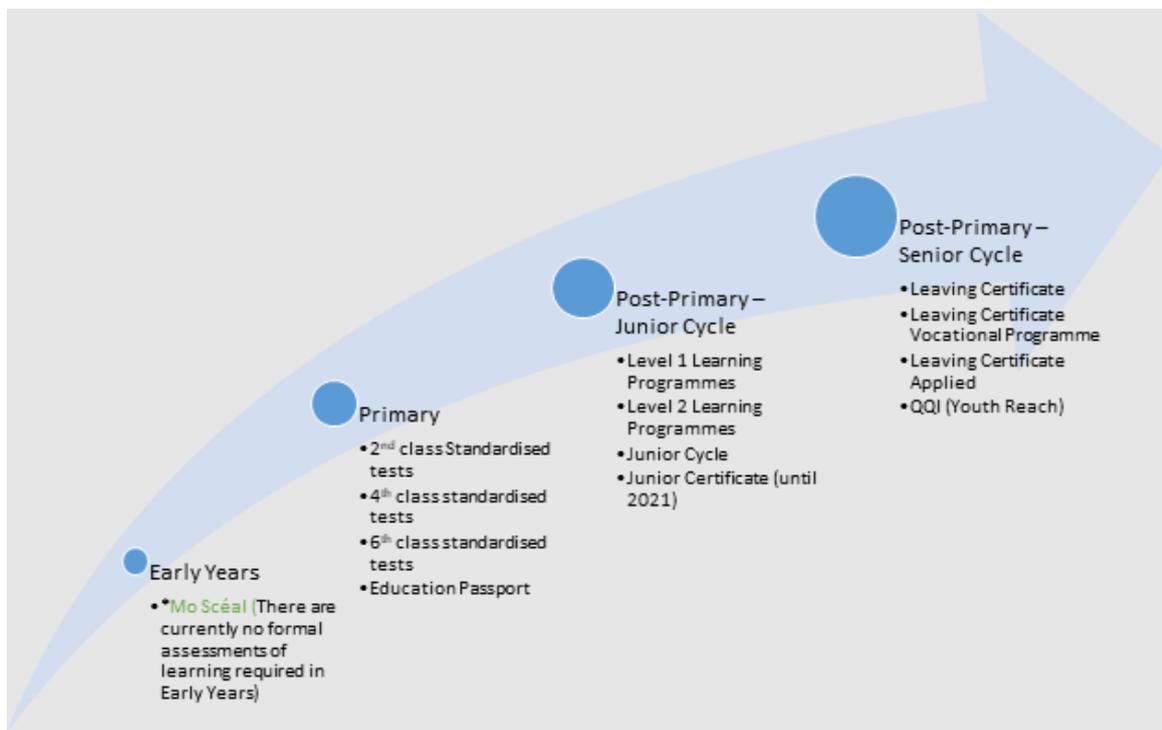


*Figure 1.2: Continuum of assessment of learning from early years to senior cycle*

### 1.4.3 Formative Assessment- Assessment for Learning

Formative assessment also known as assessment for and as learning places the students learning at the centre of the process of assessment. The NCCA define assessment as formative when either formal or informal procedures are used to

> "*Gather evidence of learning during the learning process and used to adapt teaching to meet*

*student needs. The process permits teachers and students to collect information about student progress, and to suggest adjustments to the teacher's approach to instruction and the student's approach to learning. Assessment for learning covers all the aspects of formative assessment but has a particular focus on the student having an active role in his/her learning"* (NCCA, 2015).

Information gathered from formative assessment can be used as feedback so that the teacher can adapt their teaching process to engage all learners that they teach. Formative assessment's purpose in relating to assessing learning of students to make changes to the instruction process by the teacher may engage the teacher to look at his/her practice in order to meet the needs of every student in the classroom. Put simply, formative assessment aims to supply students with feedback on their learning and to their teachers over the timespan of teaching a particular topic. Formative assessment would use several methods such as teacher observation, classroom discussion (Boston, 2002), questioning, feedback through marking, and peer- and self- assessment (Black, et al., 2002). Portfolios or collected students' work when annotated and observed over time may also be used formatively (Duschl & Gitomer, 1997).

Formative assessment is a contrast to summative assessment, it relates to the action of teaching, learning and assessment, more commonly known as assessment for learning (AfL). It is distinctly different than summative assessment (AoL) in that it transacts at a different time in relation to the learning process to that of summative assessment. Its primary focus is intrinsically connected to the learning that is happening and how the teacher and student can assess in a more developmental way relating to the learning that is happening. Clark analysed a large body of research relating to formative assessment across the United States and concluded that formative assessment is *"one of the most effective modes of assessment in enhancing student motivation and achievement"* (2012, p.241). This is clearly backed up within the Irish education sector as the junior cycle framework 2015, which states that the Junior Cycle *"will be underpinned by the further integration of formative assessment as a normal part of teaching and learning in classrooms"* (2015, p.29) and the redevelopment of senior cycle clearly place the process of formative assessment at the centre of the learning outcome based specifications now in place across the curriculum. Black and Wiliam describe formative assessment *"as encompassing all those activities undertaken by the teacher, and/or students which provide information for feedback to modify teaching and learning activities in which*

*they are engaged*" (1998, p.7). Later Black and William developed a more inclusive definition that places the students evidence and achievement been *"elicited, interpreted, and used by teacher, learners or their peers, to make decisions about the next stage in instruction that are likely to be better or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited*" (2009, p.6). This clearly places formative assessment at the centre of teaching, learning and assessment. It is one which will challenge teachers own assessment literacy and their belief linked to their own practice. This in turn can impact the schools culture relating to assessment and the process of how it transacts across the whole school. With this in mind it is important to engage in an approach to developing formative assessment practices and Wiliam (2010) has developed a process that can be used by teachers to develop their practice. This process looks at five key areas, they are;

1. Clarifying, sharing and understanding learning intentions and success criteria
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions, questions and tasks that elicit learning
3. Providing feedback to help the learner move their learning forward
4. Activating students as owners of their learning.
5. Activating students as instructional resources for their learning. (2010, p.114)

Klenowski (2009) develops this idea of AfL further by placing it as "*part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance on-going learning*" (p.264). The placing of the student at the centre of the teaching, learning and assessment process is further developed across the literature. Cizek (2010), who develop the purpose of placing the learner at the centre of the teaching process and developing a partnership between teacher and student, discusses the centrality of partnership being at the core of the AfL process. With this in mind, AFL refers to frequent, interactive assessments of learner progress and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching and learning appropriately. It is all those activities undertaken by teachers/practitioners, their learners in modifying the process of teaching and learning so that learners are clear about their learning, know where they are in their learning, where they are going with their learning and what needs to be done to get them there. It places the learner centrally within the process and includes their peers and promotes life-long learning. Some of the principles of assessment for learning can also be applied to school and national level to identify improvement areas and promote effective

and constructive cultures of evaluation throughout the education system.

It should:

- Central to the teaching, learning and assessment process
- Involve meaningful discussion with the learner
- Provide clear direction for future teaching, learning and assessment
- Be used to assist learners in developing their learning and engagement with the given subject.

Any assessment is considered an assessment for learning when the evidence of the learning that has taken place is used to make decisions and guide future learning. This type of assessment promotes reflection on the following key questions:

- What does the learner need and want to know?
- How can the learner display what they know?
- What should and could the learner do to progress their learning?
- How will the assessment and feedback guide future teaching, learning and assessment?

Through this process, learners can learn about themselves as learners and become aware of how they learn by reflecting on their work regularly and taking more responsibility for their work.

## 1.5 Characteristics of assessment

In order for assessment to be effective, it needs to have certain characteristics. These characteristics are displayed in Figure 1.3.
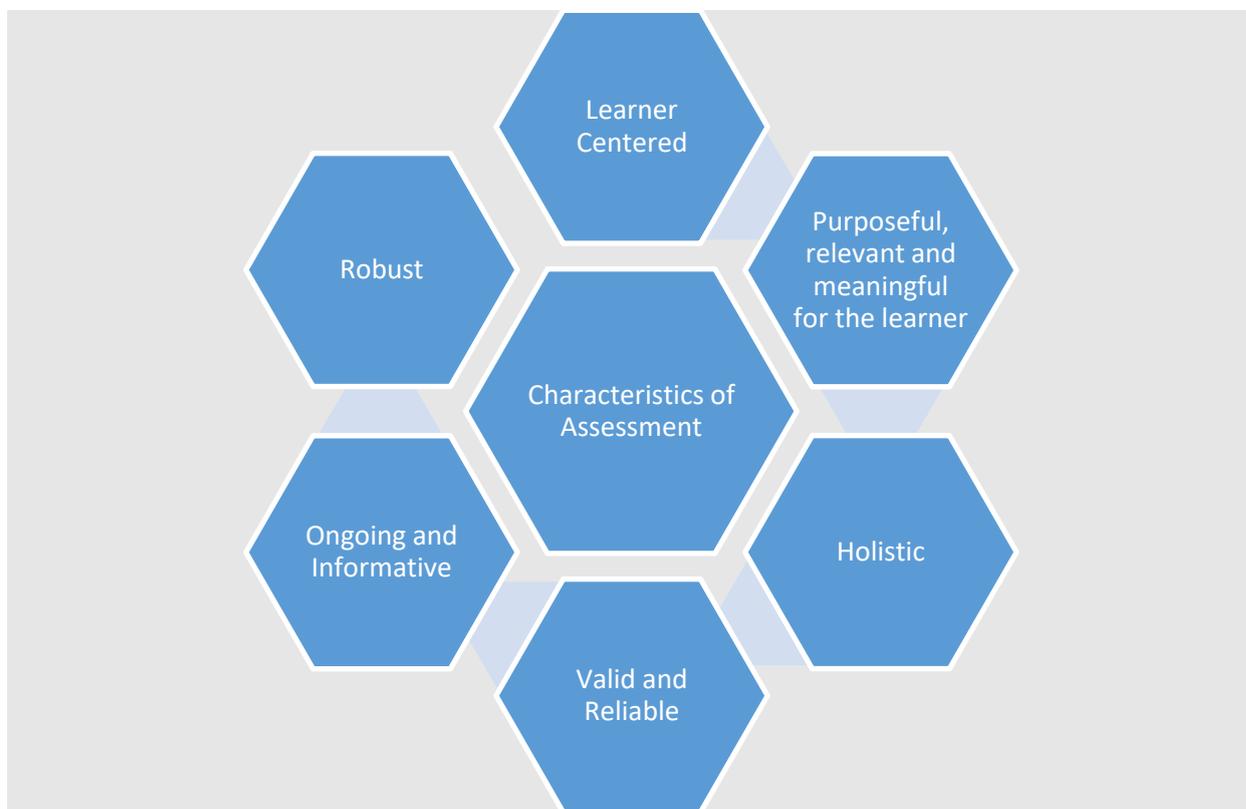


*Figure 1.3: Characteristics of Assessment (Adapted from Gallavan's Six Components of Assessment, 2009)*

Assessment is an essential component in the teaching and learning process. They should all operate in a balanced and interconnected way. The characteristics of assessment presented above is an adaptation of Nancy Gallavan's six components of assessment. Unlike Gallavan's approach I am not benchmarking the characteristics of assessment based on a performance-based approach but using it to inform teacher's assessment literacy. The six characteristics of assessment displayed in figure 1.3, which provides a frame for the overall assessment process and is explained below. They are all interconnected components and provide teachers with valuable information in improving the teaching, learning and assessment process. They also provide teachers the opportunity to unpack and engage with assessment in a meaningful was, by taking the six components into consideration.

### 1.5.1 Learner-Centred

In a learner-centred approach to assessment, learners should be active participants at the core of the learning process. The publication of new curricula based on a learning outcomes approach shifts the focus of the learning process from the teacher to the learner. Learner-centred pedagogy and assessment focus on dispositions, skills and practices that enable lifelong learning and independent problem-solving. Learners need to be clear about what they aim to learn, and which indicators and criteria are appropriate to evaluate progress and inform future learning. Learner-centred assessment provides information that supports differentiated, inclusive teaching and learning practices. Equally, assessment should be differentiated and inclusive to be truly learner centred. Engaging learners as active participants in the assessment will help them develop capabilities in analysing their learning, developing their ability to become self-directed learners, and respecting their rights as competent, agentic learners.

### 1.5.2 Purposeful, relevant, and meaningful for the learner

Assessment needs to be purposeful, relevant, and meaningful for the learner.

- Purposeful: Assessment should require the learner to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and values to ensure the assessment procedure is purposeful.

- Relevant to the curriculum: Assessment should allow learners to display their learning from the curriculum to provide information about what has been learned and to enable comparison of achieved learning with intended learning.

- Meaningful to the lives of the learners: Assessment needs to provide learners, schools and the system with information relevant to their lived lives. For example, key skills, attitudes, values, and competencies needed for living need to be integral to what is assessed. In this way, assessments can measure the learner's achievement, in their unique context. Assessment should be forward thinking and able to adapt to the changing needs of learners.

### 1.5.3 Holistic

To view assessment holistically, it is essential that teaching and learning in a school/setting is a shared process with ongoing reflection and communication embedded in practice; assessments are not just an end to the learning experience. They are moments in time that gather evidence about

the learners' viewpoints, understandings, values, attitudes, beliefs, skills, and knowledge. What learners know before, during and after the learning has taken place must be considered, and this must be extended throughout the school/setting. Assessment is an intrinsic part of learning, to determine learning outcomes and as an enabler of learning. Holistic assessment practices support learners in having an active role in learning and enable them to self-assess, self-evaluate, self-monitor and ultimately self-learn.

## 1.5.4 Valid and Reliable

For any assessment to provide an accurate account of learning and to inform future teaching, learning and assessment in a meaningful manner, it needs to provide validity and reliability. As highlighted by the OECD key concepts related to student assessment in the Synergy for better learning publication.

- Validity: This relates to the appropriateness of the inferences, uses and consequences attached to the assessment. A highly valid assessment ensures that "*the assessment covers all relevant aspects of learner performance*" (2013, p.142).

- Reliability: The assessment needs to be dependable and consistent so that every time it is used, it will give consistent results.  It refers to the extent to which the assessment consistently measures what it sets out to measure. An exceptionally reliable assessment ensures that the "assessment is accurate and not influenced by the assessor or assessment occasion" (2013, p.142).

## 1.5.5 Ongoing / Informative

Assessment should be an ongoing to be carried out alongside the teaching and learning process. In this way, the assessment provides information about learner achievement which can be used as an indicator of progress or as a means to identify the next stages of learning for a learner. Feedback should be provided to the learner on how they are progressing. The data gathered should be analysed and communicated to the learner in the form of feedback focused on the right instruction level and reducing the gap between where the learner is at and where they need to be in order to support the continuum of future learning. Ongoing assessment can be intuitive, whereby it is not planned, and information about the learning process is gathered incidentally. In this context, the assessment itself might be integrated into the learning process, and the learner may not be aware that it is happening at the time. However, in this case, the information gathered must be used as the basis for feedback, dialogue, and conversation with the learner to develop the learning further.

Alternatively, an assessment can be planned where specific learning moments are evaluated in line with success criteria. All assessments should promote ongoing discussion between the learner and the teacher to develop capacity and benefit the learner's progress. It should provide evidence that can be compared against specific learning outcomes.

### 1.5.6 Robust

Robust assessments allow learners to provide adequate evidence of their learning with several ways of expressing their knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

It should be:

- Performance-based: For assessment to be effective, it needs to allow the learner to demonstrate their learning in a manner appropriate to the content and skills being assessed.
- Evidence-based: Effective assessment relies on gathering data from this demonstration of learning to judge the quality of the learner's achievement.
- Inclusive: It should involve all relevant stakeholders so that the learner's knowledge, skills, and values are recognised, developed, and reported on appropriately.

## 1.6 Summary

Assessment in post-primary schools today is in a time of flux, with teachers' own beliefs and culture influencing their expectations of changing their own assessment practice. Within the Irish education landscape, the authority held through the state examination mode of summative assessment as a measurement tool, related to students' attainment and success is currently under review through senior cycle redevelopment. As redevelopment is currently happening it would be beneficial to look at teachers' understanding of the assessment processes and what this is envisaged to be; this is defined as assessment literacy. However, current CPD is not focused enough to make the necessary changes to assessment across the post-primary landscape and this could be addressed to inform teachers of their understanding of assessment and improve their own assessment literacy. The initial development of teachers' learning in assessment and their own beliefs and culture exist at initial teacher education level and this for some is the only opportunity that they have to develop their practice in the area of assessment.

This research study will aim to identify how teacher beliefs and school culture is developing

assessment literacy in Irish post-primary schools by engaging with a case study school over a six-month period and by developing the primary questions for this study. They are;

- What do teachers do in the classroom concerning assessment practices?

- Do teachers' beliefs and culture inform their practices related to their assessment literacy?

- How is the successful provision of assessment practices unpacked in the case study school?

The research sets out to ascertain if teacher beliefs and school culture have an effect in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools.

## 1.7 Overview of Thesis

This thesis comprises of five chapters. The current chapter, chapter one introduces the problem statement and offers an overview of teachers' beliefs and cultures related to assessment in Irish post-primary schools. It then offers a conceptual framework for the study and provides a definition for assessment explaining the various types of assessment that are in use across the educational landscape. I also discuss my position as the researcher within the study.

Chapter two is a setting of the scene, relating to junior and senior cycle reform. Then, an analysis of the research divided into some categories relevant to teacher's beliefs, school culture, curriculum, and assessment. The literature review concludes by focusing on teacher's engagement with the various assessment models and important questions are raised and a summary is provided.

Chapter three provides a deep analysis of the research design and methodology. The rationale for the study is outlined with an exploration of the various paradigms with a focus placed on the interpretative paradigm. The research strategy focusing on a case study analysis is highlighted with an emphasis placed on a semi-structured interview approach. The profile of the selected school is outlined taking into account all ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with emerging of various codes, categories, and concepts identified.

Succeeding on from the research design and methodological approach, the fourth chapter presents the findings with the emergent concepts and codes established. It concludes with a focus on developing practice before providing a summary of the case study itself.

Chapter five is a presentation of the discussions from the study with a focus on developing a framework for future development known as Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy - Framework (TSALF). Finally, conclusions are offered with limitations and potential research opportunities explored. It takes an approach of capturing the teachers' voice from the semi-structured interviews. This is pivotal to the research as teacher beliefs and culture frame the research. There a number of long quotations used to capture this.

Finally, chapter six is a conclusion chapter dealing with the Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy Framework and a focus on potential future research.

# Chapter 2
# Literature Review

Teacher beliefs are central to each teacher and every school that they teach within. Therefore, the role played by teachers' beliefs impact the school that they teach in and if we are to consider this across all post-primary schools in Ireland. This would then have an impact on teachers' practice nationally in Ireland and then these outcomes would impact the national understanding relating to teachers' assessment literacy. This can assist in shaping a school's engagement with change. I have witnessed this myself while engaging with schools and through reading literature from a number of key authors in the area (Levin, 2015; Fives & Buehl, 2012; Skott, 2009; Mansour, 2009, Pajares, 1992) who have developed the area of teachers' belief systems and have all come to the conclusion that a teacher's belief is central to the environment or school in which they teach, which impacts development and shaping of a teacher's own beliefs. Fives and Buehl (2012) believe that "*beliefs are individually held conceptions that are in constant relation to the context and teachers' experiences*" (p.476). The context concerning the school plays a role and they allude to the fact that a teacher who is "*working in a school holds personal beliefs about the school community that in turn influence and are influenced by the school environment and his or her behaviours*" (p.476).

Levin (2015) states that the "*larger social, political, and economic climate as well as the immediate school context*" (p.51) impacts teachers' own beliefs. While Brown and Harris (2009) worked on the idea of teachers' conceptions of assessment and how any changes to improve the process and accountability of schools in which teachers practice can cause teachers to question their own beliefs. The development of a theory relating to teachers' social and cultural contexts arose from the research. The theory focuses on the role played in shaping teachers' assessment literacy and their conceptions of assessment by challenging teachers to consider the impact that developing their own assessment literacy has on their beliefs and practice (Brown & Harris, 2009).

School culture plays a major role in developing and informing teachers' own beliefs as we have seen from Fives and Buehl's earlier quotation. Tschannen-Moran et al. (2015) defines school culture as "*a set of tacit assumptions and beliefs that have arisen as a group of educators has wrestled with the problems of practice over time, and that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and that is consequently passed along to new organizational members as the proper way to think, perceive and behave*" (p.302). When we examine the introduction of the JC Framework in Ireland and now the re-

development of Senior Cycle (SC), it is apparent that teachers' beliefs and school cultures were certainly challenged and are continued to be. This has certainly challenged teachers' own individual beliefs and their classroom and pedagogical practices over the past number of years. The key authors and their literature that I have engaged with as part of this study as previously discussed (Levin, 2015; Fives & Buehl, 2012; Skott, 2009; Mansour, 2009, Pajares, 1992), certainly identifies the role school culture plays in shaping teachers' own beliefs and I plan to address this throughout this dissertation. Rokeach (1968) and Green (1971), when working on teachers' belief systems in their research, discussed the power of a shared norm and how it is linked to a teacher's own belief system and the role the ideals of acceptable behaviour can play in impacting others and their practice. The impact of culture within a school can certainly influence individuals and groups of teachers relating to a school's own individual beliefs, their culture, ethos, and own assessment identity or what is described in the research as a belief relating to a "*schools' self-efficacy*" (Goddard & Alexander, 2004; Goddard & Goddard, 2001). School culture and links to individual teachers' self-efficacy beliefs were developed across the literature reviewed and are reinforced by Bandura who refers to self-efficacy as an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments (1986 and 1997). One aspect of relevance that recurs is the concept of collective efficacy. Goddard, Hoy and Woolfolk (2004) define collective efficacy as "*the perceptions of teachers in a school that the faculty as a whole can organize and execute the courses of action required to have a positive effect on students*" (p.7). This is compared with Goddard and Goddard (2001) across the various contextual variables that can exist such as enrolment numbers within a school and that the perceived collective efficacy can be the main foreteller of teachers' individual self-efficacy. The role of teachers' beliefs can certainly help to shape a school culture, as can the culture of the school prevent or assist in developing a teacher's own belief.

Across post-primary schooling in Ireland changes to practice has proved a difficult concept for many teachers across the system, resulting in difficulty for teachers and the whole school system embedding changes to practices. The idea of change is challenged by Gardner and Galanouli (2016) who declare that change can "*expose the type of perceptions harboured by teachers who may, up to that point in their careers, have passively followed routine*" (p.717). This idea is further developed by Fullan (2007) who discussed that the development of teachers' beliefs will be a major milestone in addressing and developing future reform. In my professional work as a school inspector, I have witnessed this first-hand across many post-primary schools nationally, regardless of their ethos or

patronage. Therefore, I want to focus on the role of teachers' beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in an Irish post-primary school in this study. This is clearly evident in recent times with the introduction of the Junior Cycle Framework in 2015, which has challenged teachers own beliefs and the culture of the schools that they teach in, especially in the area of formative assessment practices. I will now look at junior and senior cycle reform to set the context of where teachers and schools are currently at in these moments of time in relation to change which may challenge their individual beliefs and the culture of the school that they teach in.

## 2.1 Junior Cycle Reform

Prior to 1989, students studied what was known as the intermediate certificate. From then on it was replaced by the Junior Certificate. The aims set out at the time was to deliver "*a single unified programme for students aged between twelve and fifteen years broadly*" (DES, 1995, p.46) while looking to "*extend and deepen the quality of students*" educational experience by preparing students to engage in the "*further study at senior cycle*" (p.46). However, the developments at the time did not take into consideration the assessment process, and this remained the same as it had been before with most subjects having terminal examinations run by the state. In recent times, there has been a major change relating to curriculum reform across the post-primary curriculum in Ireland. The original introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle in 2012, which was implemented in 2015 (DES, 2015a), represented a change to teaching, learning, and assessment across post-primary schooling at lower secondary level.

The introduction of the JC Framework in 2015 presented a changing landscape to lower school secondary education in Ireland, "*the most significant change in the new Junior Cycle is in the area of assessment*' (DES 2015a). The changes to practice highlighted in the framework for the first time "*present a dual approach to assessment*" throughout the three-year cycle (DES, 2015a, p.7). However post-primary education at senior cycle have had some second assessment components for many years now across subjects such as home economics, history, modern foreign languages and technology. These forms of second components took may shapes from oral, aural and submission of practical work.

The Framework presents a new landscape for teachers and a conceptual shift away from the mode of the final assessment. Prior to the introduction of the framework in 2015, this change in the mode

of assessment from one of final summative assessment that was conducted by a national grading system controlled by the state examinations commission (SEC) to a component-based mode known as the classroom based assessment (CBA) and a final assessment run by the SEC.. There was also a change that all specifications were now outcome based specifications focusing on six key skills of Managing Myself, Staying Well, Communicating, Being Creative, Working with Others, and Managing Information and Thinking. Working with digital technology also formed part of each of the skills. As a result, the teacher was not directly involved in the assessment process where as now, the teacher plays an active role in the assessment mode with the introduction of the CBA. This is a major change for Irish teachers which itself has enabled many discussions nationally in schools when teachers engage in the subject learning assessment review process (SLAR). In SLAR processes, teachers make judgements on their students' submitted work and provide a grade descriptor to the student work. The judgements are then finalised by the subject department teachers and used in the schools reporting to the relevant stakeholders.

The SLAR process facilitates teachers in preparing for and discussing the assessment of students' work with colleagues. This professional engagement and dialogue links assessment to planning for teaching and learning. According to the Department of Education's circular 0017/2020 teacher's engaging in and with the SLAR meetings should:

- Share and discuss their assessment of students' learning and achievement in each Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) and build a common understanding on the quality of students' learning, so that they can share and align their judgements regarding the standards achieved in line with national standards;
- Engage in reflection on their professional practice and how teaching and learning in the school may be improved. Because of the importance of these two complementary functions – building a common understanding of standards and teachers' professional development, a portion of the professional time provided within the teacher's contract is devoted to SLAR meetings.

This process has started to bring teachers together in a formal capacity for the first time to discuss assessment within an Irish context. It has facilitated professional conversations around individual and whole school practice, focusing on teacher's assessment literacy and identity. This is a major

shift in Irish post-primary education and will pave the road ahead for further developments in teacher's assessment literacy and school culture relating to assessment.

## 2.2 Senior Cycle Reform

In Ireland, at present, across senior cycle, students can follow:

- The Leaving Certificate Established
- Transition Year,
- Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and
- Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)

The leaving certificate was first introduced in 1924 and remained unchanged until 1969. Since then, several changes have occurred at the individual subject level. At present, the senior cycle review is looking to future proof the programme as much as possible, and due to that, the senior cycle curriculum in Ireland is under review.

There are several stages to the review
- Scoping,
- School review followed by national seminars, and
- Consultation phase.

The first phase was conducted during the 2016-17 academic year, identifying key themes for exploration, and establishing the review process (NCCA, 2016). The second phase was conducted over two cycles in 2018 and 2019. It was a school-based review of 41 schools nationally collaborating with various stakeholders' perspectives relating to the senior cycle. The first cycle focused on the purpose of education in the senior cycle, and the second on various pathways, the programmes offered, and the flexibility of the programmes.

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) analysed the outcomes and presented the data at national seminars for discussion. They also produced several publications that highlighted outcomes from various stages, which will continue to happen over the coming years. The third phase identified emerging themes from the review and was published in the "*Senior Cycle Review Consultation*

*document*". This publication formed the basis of the public consultation between July and November 2019. The next point of the review was the advisory report that was issued by the Minister for Education. It comprised of the priority areas, longer-term goals, a proposed timeline and advice on the pace and scale for developments at SC. One of the significant changes to date is a multi-component approach to assessment with a minimum of forty percent achievement before the term examination accessed at the school level over the course of the cycle. Minister Norma Foley on March 29th 2023 stated that; *"These will include a significant emphasis on additional assessment components outside of the traditional final written exams. Changing the final assessment procedure to significantly reduce reliance on final examinations and introduce teacher-based assessment components"*

From the implementation of the JC Framework (2015) and the introduction of a CBA, right through to the changes, now happening in SC re-development where a greater emphasis on assessment at the post-primary education in Ireland, where a dual approach to assessment will now happen. Sullivan (2015) points out that in Ireland "*the dual approach to assessment provides a valuable opportunity to embed classroom-based assessment and formative assessment for learning (AfL) while recognising the role of external assessment*" (p.2). This has been a new dawn in Ireland across post-primary schools, particularly focusing on assessment practice. This shift in practice has proved difficult for many schools, senior management, teachers, parents, and students, and has challenged teachers' own beliefs, cultures, and assessment literacy. This has certainly challenged teacher's beliefs relating to assessment literacy and school culture relating to assessment practices as is evident from my engagement with schools in my capacity as a post-primary inspector with the department of education.

## 2.3 Teachers' Beliefs

Fives and Buehl (2012) study variations in teachers' beliefs and have "*overwhelmingly recognised*" (p. 477) that teachers have various beliefs that co-exist across many systems. Rokeach's (1968) and Green's (1971) publications identify that teachers can embrace many conflicting beliefs relating to assessment which can result in many challenges that need to be resolved. Belief systems are said to have a multi-layered structure in that they are either primarily psychological, or peripheral based on the beliefs that endorse them.

The literature raises many points to consider but presents a distinct lack of agreement; however, a trend to describe acceptance has emerged using the word "*conception/misconception*" in an attempt to understand teachers' beliefs relating to their assessment practice in post-primary education. When Clark and Peterson (1986) and Shulman (1986) examined teachers' beliefs, they described it as a shift in the paradigm concerning the understanding and practice made by teachers. There have been many publications on the key papers in this discipline (Kagan, 1992; Thompson, 1992; Pintrich, 1990; Nespor, 1987). Fives and Buehl (2012) examined an immense body of research focusing on over 600 articles across many disciplines to clearly consolidate the various beliefs and to define teachers' beliefs across various paradigms. Belief research is complex, as it spans various disciplines and theoretical paradigms. According to Darmody (2016), "*the elusive nature of beliefs as a psychological construct has led to a domain of research characterised by a significant amount of terminological and conceptual variance*" (p.213). To discuss this variance in teachers' beliefs focusing on assessment practices, it is pivotal to understand and explain a teachers' position within a school and that in a national context. Considering teachers' beliefs, it is important to characterise them, and I plan to do this by closely examining these beliefs and how they are defined, composed, and organised.

Literature recognises that teachers' beliefs reinforce the actions carried out as part of the teaching, learning, and assessment processes. Various authors have examined teachers' beliefs and have discussed that these beliefs are multi-directional with various complexities to consider across teachers' career (Basturkmen, 2012; Richardson, 1996; Thompson, 1992). The complexity of such roles, and teachers' actions do not always directly result from their pedagogical understanding and beliefs, they can be much greater than this.

Engaging with this initial introduction to beliefs, I have developed a deep complexity and understanding of beliefs and how they frame a teacher's thought process. Teacher's conception of change and self-belief is pivotal in developing the hypothesis set out in this research focusing on teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools.

Teachers' beliefs according to Kagan are a "*particularly provocative form of personal knowledge*" (1992, p.65) and Richardson positions these beliefs in describing them as "*a proposition that is accepted as true by the individual holding the belief*" (1996, p.104). Thompson suggests

simplifying the process where one looks at the conceptions rather than trying to define the beliefs as "*more general mental structure encompassing beliefs, meanings, concepts, propositions, rules, mental images and the like*' (1992, p.141).

Key literature engaged with on conducting this research points toward the complexity relating to teachers' beliefs; however, a central message relating to the role played by the teacher within educational research is clearly evident across the literature and requires further development.

### 2.3.1 Role and Organisations of Teachers' Beliefs

Fives and Buehl (2012), describe teachers own beliefs as being the practical focus that guides their intentions and actions. Fullan develops this point further in looking at how teachers' beliefs change as any reform is enacted (Fullan, 2007).

Teachers' similarities between their own beliefs and the planned implementation of reform are an essential factor in the decision process of acceptance, modification, or rejection of change. Marshall and Drummond (2006) discuss the fact that a number of teachers engage with the process and accept that the nature of what they call one's *"spirit"* (p.137) relating to assessment change, while others followed change to the end extent or the "*letter of the law*" (p.137). If one is to consider the Irish context and the two governing bodies, in this case the DE and the NCCA as the body who develops and implements such change nationally, teachers beliefs in this context have been catered for through the development of continuing professional development offered by the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) now both amalgamated and known as Oide.

Buehl and Black (2015) discuss teachers' beliefs as pre-identified "*precursors to behaviour*" and "*predictors of practice*" (p.68). Up to this point, I have discussed the various literature that I have engaged with looking at teachers' beliefs across various domains. From here I will identify a framework by Fives and Buehl (2012) which provides a rationale for the journey of change that takes place across a teacher's career. It discusses changes at various levels, from;
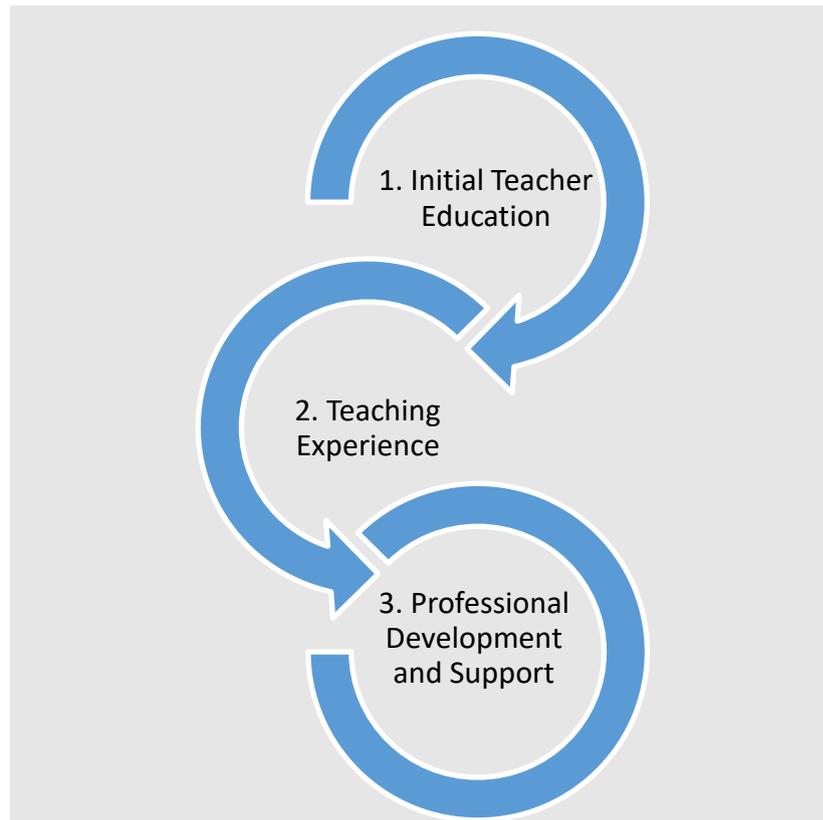
*Figure 2.1. Stages of Teacher Development*

In developing my conceptual framework, I distinguished how teachers evolve, change, or alter their practices throughout their careers. My focus is to examine whether their beliefs change in relation to their conceptions of assessment or change within a system or school that they teach with respect to the different stages of a teacher's career as highlighted in figure 2.1.

From engagement with the literature, I developed factors that impact teachers' assessment literacy. I discuss the literature taking into account the impact that these factors have on teachers.

They are:

- Teachers' individual beliefs and the whole school culture  in which they teach
- Post- Primary Teacher Education Unions (ASTI and TUI)
- Whole School Culture
- Students and other school-based stakeholders
- The Department of Education including the NCCA and SEC
- Teacher Professional Development

From engagement with the literature, I came up with the factors listed above that might impact teachers' literacy. The factors listed are mainly down to the point that I have come across them impacting teachers practice through my work as a department of education inspector and through my own experience to date, relating to some key components for implementing change to assessment literacy and practice in post-primary schools. The teacher is central to the process, and the factors that play a role in impacting their own beliefs, culture, and the school culture that they teach in can be influenced by the various components discussed.

I felt that these factors can cause teachers at various times to question their own beliefs, the school culture, and the rationale to engage with changes in this case to the assessment component of the frameworks introduced in post-primary schools. It is important to recognise that many stakeholders such as the NCCA, SEC and Oide all fall in under the remit of the Department of Education and certainly impact teachers' beliefs. For example, change to specifications and the introduction of new frameworks such as the Junior Cycle Framework were under the remit of the NCCA. The assessment process then fell within the SEC remit with teachers responsible for a percentage of this. This change was fundamental in impacting and developing teachers' beliefs and cultures. The education unions played a major role in Ireland in shaping this change. This is quite unique to an Irish context, where unions sit on sub-groups relating to changes to specifications and frameworks. In turn, the culture of a school that a teacher teaches in also plays a role in shaping their beliefs and I plan to discuss this throughout the thesis. It will be clear in chapter four and five where teacher voice was captured in relation to the impact that this has all had at school based level.

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Fives and Buehl's (2012) framework on teachers' beliefs, state that beliefs contain multiple components, including beliefs about oneself, one's teaching environment, subject method knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and approaches, including the students that teachers engage daily. Fives and Buehl (2012) conducted a deep analysis of previous publications by Rokeach (1968) and Green (1971). Both Rokeach and Green previously identified elements of these systems four and five decades previously. Rokeach (1968) argued that such beliefs are unique to the individual and central to the teacher or person.

According to Rokeach (1968) and Green's (1971) theory, belief systems have a complex multidimensional layer, and it is vital to be aware of these complexities when developing one's own conceptual framework of belief systems. Teachers' own beliefs can have an impact on a whole school's or national systems belief, which can in turn cause resistance to change and provide issues and consequences for others' beliefs. To this end, Green (1971) states that beliefs can occur in "*isolation*" within an individual, which can cause conflicting beliefs that can impact the individual and the system in which they teach.

## 2.4 School Culture

The OECD (2016) define, culture as "*dynamic, fluid and changing, which implies that people's identities, which are constructed in their interactions or affiliations with different cultural constructs or understandings, are also changeable and changing*" (p.241).

If I accept that teachers are the main ingredients of school culture, as shown in Figure 2.3. They are those teachers who can choose to engage or not to engage with changes in the curriculum. Some can be so heavily invested in the school's culture, that they can present as a barrier to change including influencing other colleagues' own beliefs. According to Stoll and Fink (1996), "*culture is created by its participants, it inevitably changes as participants change, although it can be a stabilising force, particularly for longer standing members*" (p.108).

Change by its very nature is difficult in institutions, and schools are no different. The idea of changing how we do things can be simply related to the fear of something new, unchartered waters. Cultural issues that exist in schools are at the centre of this fear. Deal and Kennedy (1983) state that culture

is the way teachers do things. This is the approach taken by some teachers in relation to changes in practice within a school.

The literature focuses on the themes of power and culture of schools in relation to identity, such as the identification of individuals in the schooling system as well as in society who hold power, and how these groups are resistant to change within both structures. School culture is seen as a major aspect shaping teachers' beliefs within a school environment. Changing the mind-set of teachers and school culture is a challenge for many post-primary schools in Ireland and this is capture by the NCCA where they state that change "*is part of the rhythm and life of the classroom and school*" (NCCA, 2008) while Fullan (1991) argues that "*the starting point for improvement is not system change, not change in others around us but change in ourselves*". This is remarkably interesting in that it reinforces the impact that a single teachers own beliefs can have on their practice and on the culture of the school where they teach. As a teacher one needs to look at their own individual belief systems and see what they can improve before anything else. From here, cultural change can potentially be developed iteratively within the individual, school, and whole system. Due to evolving economic, political, and social structures in Ireland, teachers should be aware of how to implement change within themselves, their classrooms, and the schools that they teach in.

One can look at the starting point for change and realise that it can simply be down to trusting oneself and not been afraid of the unknown, while focusing on the rationale behind why change is happening and required which can present as a concern for many teachers. The Education Act, Section 23, states that "a foundation of trust is pivotal to creating an environment conducive to learning" (1998). Champy, asks some key questions in this area, "Who do we want? Who do we need to work with? How can we generate a better environment for this change? How do we obtain the kinds of performances that we need from people? And what is the purpose of this change? (Government of Ireland, 1995). These are pivotal questions that may assist in developing teacher's beliefs and practice.

There is a key quotation from Devine et al. (2004) that resonates with this study. The authors suggest that schools that possess a "*traditional and hierarchical culture are slow to accept difference*" (p. 251). This opens a myriad of areas for a teacher to explore. Fullan states, "*We are more likely to learn something from people who disagree with us*" (2001). I would agree with the statement by Devine

that tradition with a focus on the school's culture can be slow to accept the need for change and therefore the need for change can be trumped by the school's individual culture rather than the identity of the individual teacher who wants to change but is afraid to step out of line. Fullan makes a vital argument relating to this that without a teacher challenging their own individual beliefs and in turn challenging the status quo of the school's culture then nothing may ever change.

In order for a change in culture to take place within a school, Rossman (1988) points out that one must look at "Transformative" change. Mezirow developed this idea of transformative learning as a "*deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions*' (2008, p.104), not unlike what Irish teachers have witnessed with this change that has occurred and continues to occur in the programmes they teach and the way that they now assess their students. Transformation is mostly triggered through a personal or social crisis that poses a "*disorienting dilemma*" and is described by Meziro as *"shaking individuals to their core"* (1990, p.7). This is an extreme description, but many teachers felt that curricula change certainly got them to think deeply about their practice and the reason for such change.

According to Peeling (2015), transformative change must have "*the reach to shift existing systems (and their component structures, institutions, and actor positions onto alternative development pathways, even before the limits of existing adaptation choices are met*' (p.114). We have seen this through CPD provided to teachers since the introduction of the JC Framework. When introducing assessment changes in post-primary schools, I feel that transformative change is best suited for two reasons. First, the introduction of a new program will endeavour to make cultural change a norm. This transformative change is required as it "*touches the cultural core of the school*" (Rossman, 1988, p. 151) and takes the entire group or school on a journey together. This change calls for good and clear leadership skills, and Fullan further develops this theory by discussing the needs for the self to be on board, to be a leader in order to "*shape culture is highly significant*" (1991). A change in mind-set within a school is essential. This is highlighted by Fullan (2001) "*the starting point for improvement is not system change, not change in others around us, but change in ourselves*" (2001, p.27), which clearly identifies the focus on the teacher and their individual beliefs.

Keltchermans (2009) outlines the importance of self-awareness and reflection. He emphasises how a teacher's motive can change after a number of years in the profession. According to Burnham

(2009), "*An organisation is nothing more than the collaborative capacity of its people to create value*" (p.49). In the quest to create this value, a teacher must develop this culture of change, and that this change will not occur without some core principals such as trust, empathy, and dynamic leadership. Challenging the status quo and developing a new culture within a school are major challenges. It is highlighted in "*Leading and Supporting change in Schools" (2019)* a publication by the NCCA stating that "*change is highly sensitive to and reflective of the real environment within which schools are working, it is needed if curriculum change is to advance in the coming years*" (p.7).

The second interim report, capturing insights from the first phase of data collection in the case study schools and the teacher survey relating to the junior cycle that was conducted by the University of Limerick found that those interviewed felt that the formal assessment modes of the Junior Certificate were criticised as having little benefit for students' learning and development. This perspective was expressed stating that a senior management member of a school stating that

> "*When reflecting on the preceding Junior Certificate programme, commented: I don't believe we've benefited from having heavy assessment periods in school. I do not think we have benefited from having children sitting in tiered seating, not engaged with each other for lengthy hours in a day*" (2022, p.26).

Cultural change in schools is often difficult for many reasons, mainly because it is difficult to define culture. Having reviewed the "*Leading and Supporting Change in Schools Discussion Paper*" published by the NCCA (2019), it is clear to see that the role of the individual school and its teachers needs to be carefully managed, and a new culture based on trust and empathy will be needed for this change to flourish and add value to the student, teachers, school, and education sector.

The NCCA advise that schools and teachers should focus on the idea of developing and changing their practice and be "*directly involved in curriculum development through the generation of transition units, development of flexible learning profiles, or education programmes in the context of educational disadvantage and beyond*" (NCCA, 2008). The introduction of changes in assessment practices will provide the school community and system with a network to support the students who at present are not catered for and back up what the NCCA is stating "*that schools, notwithstanding the difficulties being faced, will as always contribute directly to the potential of the next generation*

*of learners to face and master the challenges of the future*" (2008). To face these issues, a school must continue to evolve and provide teachers with opportunities to upskill and develop as practitioners.

## 2.5 Curriculum and Assessment

Historically in Ireland, according to Gleeson (2009), the mutual understanding of curriculum is "*an anthology of subjects and their associated content*" (p.93). This is the pervasive view for teachers, with each subject having its disciplinary knowledge, which is listed in the content of each subject syllabus or specification. Such a view has become "*axiomatic with the term itself*" (Print, 1993, p.5). The nature of the content of each subject is devised by the statutory body charged with developing the syllabi for each subject, which is the NCCA. The NCCA define curriculum as "the *subjects that children study in school. It sets out what your child is taught and how learning in each subject is assessed. Ireland's primary and post-primary schools is determined by the Minister for Education who is advised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment*" (NCCA, 2022). The NCCA consults with relevant stakeholders when designing a new syllabus, which is referred to as the subject or programme specifications, through a subject development group. However, the composition of a subject development group formed by the NCCA can often be politically informed, and teachers are the dominant stakeholder members in the groups (Gleeson, 2009). Therefore, the decision-making and vision for new and revised subject curricula can often be biased towards teacher perceptions of content delivery.

The curriculum and its design is a wider concept than selecting appropriate subject content. Curriculum denotes the content of a particular subject or area of study which opens the concept of curriculum as a much wider concept than mere content focused. The curriculums focus is not concerned with individual subjects or anthologies of subjects, "*any definition of curriculum, if it is to be practically effective and productive, must offer much more than a statement about content knowledge*" (Kelly, 2009, p.9). This wider concept of the entire curriculum must be afforded prior consideration and a major task that currently faces "*teachers and curriculum planners is to work out a basis on which some total scheme can be built*" (2009, p.9). Looking at teachers' beliefs and cultures concerning the changes to assessment practices, the basis of why we assess within the Irish curriculum needs to be examined especially considering the confusion on its meaning and understanding. The broad understanding of assessment and its relevance to all subject areas means

that assessment has the potential to have a wider resonance on the curriculum than mere knowledge of what it is. Therefore, a broader curriculum perspective is required for teachers to understand assessment practices to come together with the existing curriculum.

## 2.6 Assessment

The word "assess" comes from the Latin verb "assidere" meaning "*to sit beside*." Black and William define assessment as "*all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by the students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged*" (1998, p.2). Assessment has long been understood as a process of collecting information or evidence about learning and inferring meaning from it as stated by Klenowski and Wyatt Smith (2014). Essential to any model of curriculum is the need for assessment.

Broadfoot (1996) placed assessment as a central feature of all our lives. We evaluate every aspect of our existence, whether consciously or subconsciously. Therefore, it is logical that we evaluate or assess learning and our educational system's effectiveness (1996, p.4). However, she cautioned, "*one of the most highly charged evaluative settings is that of education*" (1996, p.4). The writer contended that "*teachers need…to evaluate their teaching to judge the value of teaching strategies and to discover to what extent the class as a whole has mastered a particular unit of work".* So, assessment of a teacher's practice is equally important to assess a student's performance, though typically, when we talk about assessment issues, we tend to concentrate on student assessment. Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning and it is a process of generating, gathering, interpreting, using, and recording information about a learner's progress and achievement. This provides a holistic approach to the development of knowledge, skills dispositions, values, and attitudes of all learners. The various modes of assessment that are used in Irish post-primary schools are assessment of learning, which is a summative form of assessment and assessment for learning which is known as formative assessment. For any form of assessment to be useful, it should inform the actions taken based on the information gathered.

Post-primary education across Ireland uses assessment for many purposes. It is used as a tool to guide improvements in teaching and learning, this is known as the engagement in formative assessment. At national level across the junior and senior cycle examinations when students engage with state examinations it is used to grade students learning resulting in a grade descriptor. Some

would argue that the publishing of grade league tables in national newspapers would be an accountability measurement of state assessment to make schools accountable or to be measured against each other. Within schools assessment is also used as a diagnostic tool to provide an outcome of where a student may be in order for the school to provide additional support to meet the needs of the student.

## 2.7 Teachers' Engagement with Assessment Literacy

Assessment principles related to teachers' understanding across the education landscape is discussed and described across the literature as "*teacher's assessment literacy*". For example, Stiggins (1991) defines assessment literacy as an understanding of what is involved when a teacher assesses relating to the "*high and low-quality assessment" (*p.535) and understanding displayed by the teacher in relation to their own capacity to embed and apply the "*knowledge to various measures of student achievement*" (p.535). Mertler (2003) explains assessment literacy as the possession of knowledge about the basic principles of assessment and evaluation practice, which are the terminology of assessment concepts such as the test, the measurement, assessment and evaluation, the development and use of assessment methodologies and techniques in the classroom. Dayal and Lingam (2015) describe assessment literacy as a "*means of improving learner' abilities, tests' qualities, and test scores' interpretations*" (p.45). Put simply, assessment literacy is the capacity of teachers to critically design, enact and evaluate assessment strategies to make a decision around summative and formative assessment practices. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that teachers construct classroom assessments aligned to their specifications with criteria to measure and improve students learning, as it transacts.

The emergence of increased pre-service and in-service programs has offered teacher education programs deeper insights into the idea of developing assessment literacy practices. However, teachers are left with a vacuum from initial teacher education and CPD relating to how they assess learners within their classrooms. Mertler (2003), refers to teacher's ability to navigate this obstacle by acquiring assessment skills while on the job. This is something that needs to be addressed throughout the various stages of a teacher's career and through the CPD that they engage with, as newly qualified teachers need time to develop these skills.

I have closely analysed and engaged with The Teacher Assessment Literacy in Practice (TALiP) by

Looney which is based on a conceptual framework developed by Xu and Brown (2016) related to assessment literacy. Xu and Brown take the principles of teacher assessment literacy and form a new principle describing it as an *"iterative and dynamic system"* (p.149) and visually present it as a pyramid with several interrelated components positioning the teachers' conceptions of assessment at the centre of the process. While Looney et al (2017) developed a framework that closely aligned to Xu and Brown, it is more focused on the individual teachers' identity, which she identifies as Teacher Assessment Identity (TAI). Looney's expanded framework reconceptualises TAI with five interlinking dimensions.

They are

- I know;

- I feel;

- I believe;

- I am confident; and

- My role (see Figure 2.2)

Within the five dimensions, assessment identity is continuously "framed and reframed over a career and mediated by the context in which teachers work and live" (Looney, 2018, p.446). While scholars often depict assessment literacy as a hierarchical model with a common base and goal for growth (Xu & Brown, 2016), state that assessment *"identity development is neither simple nor linear: rather it is responsive to events and circumstances"* (Looney, 2018, p.446). This is why teachers own beliefs play such a role in the development of their assessment literacy.
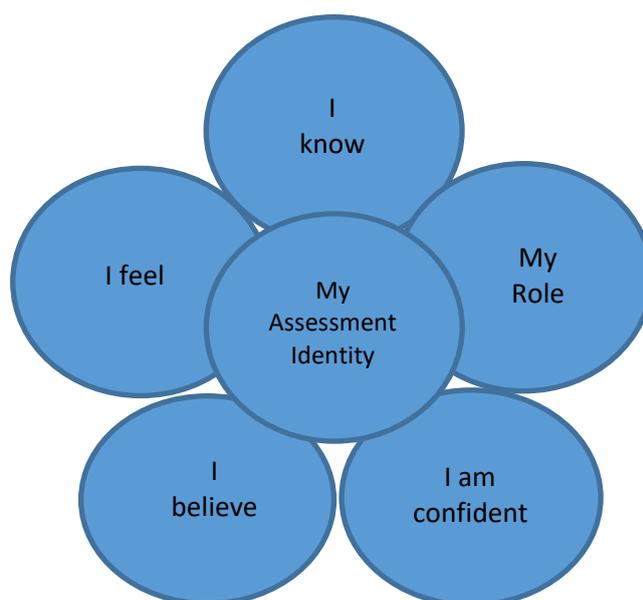


*Figure 2.2 Reconceptualising teacher assessment identity. A. Looney 2018*

Looney (2017) put forward the argument that the TAI model allows teachers to develop their practice and become more skilled in the concept of assessment competency by looking at their practice as *"not simply on what teachers do, but on who they are"* (p.16). This approach essentially focuses on the development of the teachers own assessment literacy by challenging their beliefs and developing their practice.

## 2.8 Conclusion

The literature review has presented the role played by teacher's beliefs and school culture in capturing an understanding of teacher's assessment literacy in Irish post-primary schools. The key components as set out earlier in the chapter play a role in implementing change. These components also challenge teacher's own beliefs, and the school culture that they teach in.

These areas include;
- Teachers individual beliefs and the whole school culture in which they teach
- Post- Primary Teacher Education Unions (ASTI and TUI)
- Whole School Culture
- Students and other school based stakeholders
- The Department of Education including the NCCA and SEC
- Teacher Professional Development

The impact played by education unions in Ireland since the introduction of the JC Framework has played a role in shaping the framework itself and how it is embedded into schools. The announcement of a reduced focus on the terminal examination was not well-received by the teacher unions, the largest of which condemned the dismantling of a 'credible, independent, objective and fair examination and certification system' (ASTI, 2012).

The value placed on the CBA and assessment tasks have been diminished down to ten percent from the original forty, which in itself challenges the idea of change and the value placed on this assessment mode. Other such work to rule directives in the early days of the introduction of the framework in schools under the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) union prevented teachers from engaging with change. This is also reflected in the components previously discussed in how they can challenge teacher's own beliefs, and the school culture that they teach in. It

challenges teachers' beliefs and the school culture around the reason behind change, why should they change their assessment practices and upskill to improve their assessment literacy when their own union is not in agreement. This presents a challenge for school culture and teachers' individual beliefs, down to the fact that it is extremely difficult to implement change when there is self-doubt about why such practice should be changed. It can be slow to change the culture of the school as there may not always be a collective buy-in. As with school culture, the students and the various stakeholders play a significant role in the development of teachers' assessment literacy. If they are driven by the end of year summative assessment, such as is in place in the Leaving Certificate, then this too can present challenges, which in turn can challenge teachers own individual beliefs as well as challenging the school culture around the rationale to develop their collective assessment literacy practices.

The Department of Education's role is bifold in that the inspectorate section of the department can evaluate and advise on the provision of teaching, learning and assessment, through engagement with schools as set out by the various models of inspection. This can bring accountability and develop changes in practice. Secondly, the role played by the department and particularly the minister of education in signing off on new specifications, curricula, circulars, and frameworks to guide the system plays a significant role in the development of teachers practice and none more so than that related to their assessment literacy. This can be clearly seen through the Junior Cycle Framework and the dual approach to assessment, as well as the planned senior cycle redevelopment which discusses the multicomponent-based approach to assessing students over the whole SC. Finally, the development of all this practice is guided by the support services. Currently, Oíde is the Department of Education support services informing teacher's professional development at post-primary level. These support services are expected to play a valuable role in the development of teachers' assessment literacy through forming professional development workshops at subject and whole school level to embed the changes implemented by the Department of Education to post-primary curricula.

# Chapter 3
# Research Design and Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

The aim of this study arises from my extensive experience of actively engaging with post-primary schools in various roles over the past two decades. This experience has profoundly influenced my perspectives and approach to this research, aligning with the views expressed by scholars such as Clough and Nutbrown (2002) and Bassey (1995). These authors emphasise the contextual nature of research, highlighting that the need to *"investigate specific issues arises from the researcher's operational context rather than in isolation"* (Clough and Nutbrown, 2002, p.11).

In this chapter, I will outline the rationale behind the chosen methodology, the selection of specific methods, and other decisions. The case study method has been selected as the primary methodological approach, which Yin (2014) defines as *"an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundary between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident"* (p.16). In this study, employing a case study analysis allowed for an in-depth exploration of a single post-primary school to assist the researcher in answering his primary research questions, which are:

- What do teachers do in the classroom concerning assessment practices?

- Do teachers' beliefs and culture inform their practices related to their assessment literacy?

- How is the successful provision of assessment practices unpacked in the case study school?

These research questions provided the researcher a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between teacher beliefs, school culture, and assessment literacy. By adopting this singular school to conduct my case study in, I have dealt with the complexities of the research phenomenon associated when dealing with a single authentic educational setting. This methodology, coupled with the selection of appropriate research methods, provided valuable insights into the research questions and contribute to the existing body of knowledge on assessment literacy in Irish post-primary schools.

All research and particularly "*social research, should be about understanding and improving the world*" (Bassey, 1995, p.4). This social research project is concerned with investigating the successful provision of assessment practices unpacked within the case study school which facilitate the pockets of successful engagement relating to assessment and education across post-primary schools. This focus of the research is "*not so much to prove things – but more to investigate questions and explore issues*" (p.4). Other researchers also contend that all research is about asking questions, exploring problems, and reflecting on what emerges to make meaning from the data (Clough and Nutbrown, 2002, p.4). This research sought to achieve all the above by asking key questions pertaining to assessment within the case study post-primary school and exploring how it transacts within the school.

Clough and Nutbrown, (2002) assert that researchers seek four possible aims from their endeavours:

- Policy development: This research will investigate if the factors identified in the selected schools in post-primary education can inform a national assessment.

- Improve practice: The pedagogical practice of the teachers in the selected schools will be analysed to investigate if common practices can be identified. If such practices can be identified, then these need to be acknowledged and emphasised as a model of good practice for all teachers.

- Professional development: What skills are evident in the teachers and leadership/management within the selected school, if there is a set of competencies and skills that improves teachers' beliefs and cultures around assessment practice. If this is uncovered or if any dimension of the competence deficit is discovered, then the professional development of all teachers and principals needs to be addressed.
- Further research: The nature of research in this area of teachers' beliefs and culture at post-primary, it would be presumed that this research will precipitate further discourse in the area, particularly on what is now happening around senior cycle redevelopment.

All research should have an overarching purpose and this *"purpose should be to make a claim to new knowledge"* (Bassey, 1995, p.3). This research led to the creation of new knowledge in teachers' beliefs and culture around assessment practices in education with direct relevance to post-primary education in Ireland.

To assist my study, five components are to be considered in the research design stage:

- The case study questions

- Its propositions

- The units of analysis

- The purpose of collecting the data

- The criteria for interpreting the findings (Adapted from Yin 2018, p.165)

Developing an analytical process will always reflect the research questions and which process best fits the research. For this study, I have selected Lichtman's three C-framework (see Figure 3.1). This framework was selected because it offered a perceived simplified three-stage approach. However, I was acutely aware that the data analysis process is far from simple. Lichtman's framework is built around three steps immediately identifiable for the novice analyst. The framework provides the opening for accessing and developing more complex reflexivity to the process; although complexity will inevitably arise, the process for this research is best instigated using a simplified three-step approach offered by Lichtman. She advocates a *"systematic approach"* to data analysis, albeit there *"is a lack of standardisation and few universal rules"* (2013, p.306).

Lichtman advocates a systematic approach based on three C's:

- Coding

- Categorising

- Concepts



*Figure 3.1 Lichtman's Three C's*

This three-C approach can be instigated using a six-step approach to data analysis. Put simply,

this process initially organises the data and then codes the data. Once the data is coded, it is then categorised, and finally from the categories key concepts derive. From here, perceptions and opinions of the key school stakeholders were sought, and an analysis of their perceptions and experiences were crucial in understanding what the successful provision of assessment practices are. Then the stakeholder opinions in the case study school were drilled down to develop this understanding by conducting interviews and observations with:

- The Principal and Deputy Principals

- The Teachers

- and any members of teaching, learning and assessment groups

- Teacher with posts of responsibility associated to the area/focus.

Since 2015 Irish schools as described are amidst a time of curriculum reform. During such times teachers' beliefs have played a key role in shaping what this reform has looked like and will look like at senior cycle. The area of teachers' beliefs is extremely complex, with many gaps around up-to-date Irish practice focusing on educational reform and cultural changes.

I have focused some of my questioning during the semi-structured interviews around the various stages of a teacher's career and how that informs their practice. Further gaps in the research exist around the impact that Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has had on Irish teachers since the introduction of the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) and has their conceptions of assessment changed due to their involvement in a national rollout of CPD to inform and develop practice.

Secondly, is CPD only worthwhile when teachers engage in the process, then try to implement a change of practice and then re-engage with CPD to map developments in practice. Thirdly, can effective CPD develop teachers' conception of assessment enough to inform a change of beliefs and culture within an individual, a school, or a system?

This process has allowed me to strategically engage in the process of developing a starting point for my research. It has shifted my focus from the original identification of assessment change and more towards the individuals within a system and why this change can sometimes prove difficult to implement. As previously stated, I examined teacher's stages of development through these three lenses which is captured in figure 2.1.

## 3.2 Rationale for the Research Design

The rationale for the methodology and selection of methods along with other related decisions is now explored for the reader. The selection of a case study as the methodological approach emerged from the research questions for this study:

- What do teachers do in the classroom concerning assessment practices?

- Do teachers' beliefs and culture inform their practices related to their assessment literacy?

- How is the successful provision of assessment practices unpacked in the case study school?

Permitting the questions to dictate the methodology follows the advice of Robert Yin, in case study methodology (2014, p.10). It is the research questions which must decide the methodological approach and questions relating to "how" and "why", which demand greater explanation and levels of analysis will "*likely lead to the use of a case study*". The first research question centres on the word "*what*", and this question highlights the exploratory nature of this study. Such exploratory questions can fit with a range of research methods, but specifically, this study will investigate the exploratory nature of the question using "*an exploratory case study*". The other research question for this study centres on "*how,*" thus also suitably fitting the criteria for selecting a case study exploratory approach (2014, p.10).

The case study method is "*preferred when examining contemporary events, but the relevant behaviours cannot be manipulated*" (Yin, 2014, p.12). This assertion is supported by Gilham, who states that the case study approach is particularly appropriate for studying human phenomena (2000, p.2). Such an analysis is possible using a case study as it will facilitate a process where we "*seek to find underlying reasons – in peoples feeling or perceptions or their experiences of what is going on*" (Gilham, 2000, p.7). Perceptions and opinions of the key school stakeholders will be sought, and an analysis of their perceptions and experiences will be crucial to understanding what the successful provision of assessment practices are.

This study is about investigating if teacher beliefs and school culture plays a role in developing assessment literacy in the selected case study schools can be developed or replicated in other

contexts or is it a case that the context itself is shaping the outcomes.

The stakeholders in the case study school are:

- The Principal

- The Deputy Principal

- The Teachers

- Professional Master of Education (PME) Student Teachers

- Teaching and Learning Group

Once the decision on the methodology and design was made, then the issue of limits arises. Limits may relate to the timeframe, or the amount of data collected. The researcher must set limits on the cases selected (Lichtman, 2013, p.93).

The rationale for selecting a case study methodology is further supported when we examine the definition of a case study supplied by Yin (2014), who states it is "*an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundary between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident*" (p.16). The overlap between the phenomenon and context was alluded to in the previous paragraph. The questions asked by the researcher are;

- Is it based within the phenomenon of being a selected school that have certain capacities or internal factors for success because of their context, or

- Is it the teaching and other curricular factors that may all be interrelated?

Using a case study approach allows for clarification across this area. The research study followed two primary aims, the first was to identify and investigate the case study school through qualitative interviews around teacher's beliefs and school culture relating to assessment literacy. The second was to inform the national narrative relating to assessment in post-primary schools.

## 3.3 Research Paradigms

The selection of a research method directly impacts on data, a view supported by Blaxter et al. declaring that *"different kinds of research approaches produce different kinds of knowledge about the phenomena under study"* (2010, p.59). The authors also note the clear distinction between a research method and methodology, where the former relates to the tools of data collection or analysis while the latter relates to philosophical meaning and paradigm. They conclude that the paradigm is *"a way of categorising a body of complex beliefs and world views"* (2010, p.60). It provides the lens through which we seek to answer research questions.

## 3.4 The paradigm selection

Cohen *et al.* assert that *"the purpose and nature of the research may be clarified by drawing on one or more of these paradigms; the paradigms can clarify and organise the thinking about the research"* (2018, p.9). When embarking on a research project, it is difficult to decide on a single paradigm that will provide the frame for the entire project. Both the positivist and the interpretative paradigms offer key components to a study. The positivist pursuit of scientific measurement through quantitative research methods and the interpretative paradigm, with its rich detail through qualitative methods, are all equally appealing (Clough and Nutbrown, 2002, p.14).

For this study, I have considered the research questions and the paradigm emerged from these questions. The interpretative paradigm, pursuing meanings through interaction and seeking to understand actions, was selected. This research aims to focus on the actions of people within the selected school and why these actions are present. The analysis involved qualitative descriptions and instruments which are within the interpretative paradigm. The use of a survey or other more scientific methods would not yield the type of data this study requires for the research questions to be addressed and answered.

This challenge can be circumnavigated by selecting the interpretative paradigm, which acknowledges that the world is multi-layered and that the *"values, biographies, perceptions, theories, environment and existing knowledge of the researcher influences what is observed"*. This latter point is pertinent to this study mainly because I have worked in education for fourteen years. Similarly, it is noteworthy that *"phenomena do not speak for themselves"* (Cohen

et al., 2018, p.17). Therefore, I must interact and interpret the data, and therefore, the interpretative paradigm would appear to be a natural and obvious fit. This paradigm contends that "*reality is seen as a construct of the human mind*" (1995, p.13). People perceive so we construe the world in "*similar*", but not always the "*same*" way.

Here the "*purpose of research is to describe and interpret the…world in attempts to get shared meanings with others*" (1995, p.14). The research is individual and relies upon the researcher's involvement. Consequently, this paradigm is subjective as the researcher endeavours to interpret the specific and tries to understand actions and meanings through their interaction with the research (Clough and Nutbrown, 2002).

The interpretative paradigm "*approaches to social research see the interpretation of the social world as culturally derived and historically situated*" (Blaxter et al., 2010, p.61). They contend that this paradigm is concerned with verstehen (understanding) as compared with euklaren (explaining). It is a paradigm where researchers begin with individuals, set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them, and employ a qualitative methodology (Cohen et al, 2000, p.23). This methodology is concerned with human explanations contained in words opposed to figures. A limitation of the paradigm and the associated methodology is its subjectivity. The data yielded will be glossed with the meanings and purposes of those people who are their source (2000, p.23).

## 3.5 Qualitative research methodology

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach (Taylor, 1998). The qualitative research paradigm focuses on studying things in their unique and natural settings to develop meaning or interpret an understanding, as Denzin describes as the interpretation of the "*phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them*" (1998, p.2). In relation to this study the focus is on teachers, their beliefs, and the school culture in which they teach, relating to assessment literacy.

This definition highlights its association with the interpretative paradigm; however, it describes the setting for qualitative research rather than the actual process. Creswell captures the essence of this method when he defines it as "*methodological traditions of inquiry that explores a social or human problem"*. It also "*builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting*" (1998, p.15). Creswell sees qualitative research as allowing exploration of the multiple dimensions of a problem or issue. The issue that is the subject of this study is culture, and beliefs concerning assessment and the aim is to explore its multiple dimensions as it is implemented in the case study schools. Therefore, a qualitative research method is both needed and desirable.

In support of this conclusion, this methodology allows for deep and wide exploration of an issue. In addition, Gilham asserts that this methodology allows the researcher to focus primarily on the evidence that will enable you to "*understand the meaning of what is going on*" (2000, p.10). This is the key benefit of qualitative research in this research study in the case study school where I interviewed thirteen participants having engaged with the teaching and learning group over six months. The data analysis followed a three-step process of coding, categorising, and concept development, which is expanded upon later in the chapter (Lichtman, 2013).

### 3.5.1 Research Strategy or the Methodological Approach: The Case Study

Case study as a methodological approach has been defined as an "*approach is an in-depth examination of a particular case or several cases*" (2013, p.90). The primary purpose of designing research is to help to avoid the situation in which the evidence does not address the initial research questions (Yin, 2014, p.29).

To assist my work, I have selected five components after careful consideration in the research design stage:

1. The case study research questions

2. Propositions of the Study

3. The units of analysis

4. The purpose of collecting the data

5. The criteria for interpreting the findings.

### 3.5.1.1. The case study research questions

The primary research questions for the study have emerged after a process of deliberation, a process which is paramount to all research studies, as *"framing good questions is the most important part of the research procedure"* (Gilham, 2000, p.17). A case study is most appropriate for exploratory questions. The three primary questions for this research study are exploratory; thus, the choice of a case study was the natural fit for the three research questions:

1. What do teachers do in the classroom concerning assessment practices?

2. Do teachers' beliefs and culture inform their practices related to their assessment literacy?

3. How is the successful provision of assessment practices unpacked in the case study school?

### 3.5.1.2. Proposition of the study

The research questions may not sufficiently point to what you should study and, when stated will point to where one should look for evidence. However, such propositions are not always relevant, particularly about exploratory case studies, and in this scenario, a specific purpose needs to be explicit.

This study seeks to explore the area of; A case study of teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools. Is there a commonality within the selected case or school and can such a commonality be replicated in other schools once similar supports and structures are provided.

### 3.5.1.3. The units of analysis

The units of analysis refer to the school for this study, which was selected for examination in the case study analysis. The selecting of *"the cases present a fundamental problem, both in defining the case and setting a boundary to the case"* (Yin, 2014, p.34). Defining the case will be related to the research questions; other issues will involve bounding the case, which is setting the context for the case study as this will determine the scope for the data collection. Yin defines

the desired case as one with "*some real-life phenomenon that has some concrete manifestation*" (2014, p.34). This will be done as we analyse the data from the case study school.

### 3.5.1.4 The Purpose of collecting the data

Using theory to generalise from a case study can be a challenge. Yin cites two types of generalisations, analytic and statistical. Statistical generalisation is the most popular but is not relevant to a case study as we are not using sampling logic or units. He believes that this is a fatal flaw for a case study; rather, we must be concerned with analytic generalisation. This type of generalisation may be used whether a case study involves one or many cases. Analytic generalisation is where there is an opportunity to shed empirical light on some theoretical concepts or principles. However, its aim is still to generalise to other concrete situations and not just to contribute to abstract theory building, where lessons learned from a case study may potentially apply to a variety of situations (Yin, 2014, p.40/41). For the purpose of this study I will be focusing on analytical generalisation.

### 3.5.1.5 The criteria for interpreting the findings

The choice of case study design centres on various decisions; the decision for which design best fits a study will depend upon the nature of the research questions and the anticipated data. The previous section reviewed and emphasised this aspect of the case study.

Four tests exist for assessing the quality of the "*empirical social research*", which is expanded upon and applied to this research in a later section of this chapter relating to the analysis strategy and approach.

### 3.6 The Case Study Protocol

The development of a case study protocol is recommended to increase reliability. Another advantage is the guidance it provides for the researcher through the full elaboration of its four constituent parts as illustrated in Table 3.1.

| Number | Name | Explanation | Application to this case study |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Overview of the case study | The purpose of the case study, key issues:<br>• Mission<br>• Goal<br>• Substantive Issues<br>• Rationale for selecting the cases<br>• Proposition<br>• Relevant readings | Explained in the various sections of this chapter |
| 2 | Data collection procedures | Need to be cognisant that you may not have full control over the data collection environment as with other research methods. As the researcher you may have to adjust to the individual teacher or schools ways, the nature of the semi-structured interview will need to be flexible and open-ended to reflect this fluidity. | Applied in the selected Case study school |
| 3 | Data collection questions | The substantive questions that I will ask must ask the participants to reflect your line of enquiry | Contained in the Ethical Approval Document |
| 4 | Guide for the case study | General outline for the case study and its intended audience. | Research |

The benefits to completing the case study protocol is that it keeps the researcher on target with the topic and can anticipate problems.

## 3.6.1 Observation of teaching and learning group

As part of the case study data collection, I sat in on the teaching and learning group within the school. This group mainly consisted of six teachers focusing on improving practices related to teaching and learning across the school, particularly with their students and school context in mind. However, the size of the group varied at different times as various teachers focusing on school based initiatives came in and spoke to the group about the programmes that were in

place, such as School Self-Evaluation, DEIS initiatives and feedback from various teach meets that were run in the school.

My engagement with the group was through an observation process where I sat in on five meetings over a six-month period. During the six months when sitting in on the teaching and learning group, I undertook a silent role, and I observed their discussions and took notes relating to these. I observed the process followed in the meetings and captured these discussions by noting down key points of interest. This helped me greatly to shape the discussion and questions that I was going to ask the participants in semi-structured interviews.

Overall, the primary areas considered by the school over the period when I sat in on the teaching and learning group were related to changes in their assessment practices. In chapter four, table 4.1 clearly outlines the six key areas that were discussed over the six months.

### 3.6.2 Qualitative semi-structured interviews

The use of qualitative methods enabled me to critique the situation focusing on the viewpoint of those involved in the semi-structured interviews that I conducted through *"investigating situations where little is known about what is there or what is going on"* Gilham (2000, p.11). This allowed me to engage and capture what this study is seeking to achieve. I then discussed what is taking place in the case study school through the semi-structured interviews. Finally, Gilham concludes by focusing on what way people *"behave, feel, think, can only be understood if you get to know their world and what they are trying to do in it"* (2000, p.12), which describes a key fact and enables one to capture the exact aspect of what a semi-structured interview sets out to understand and to ascertain relating to the individual thoughts and feelings of the interviewees, which is pivotal to this research.

Wellington states that the conducting of an interview is a popular method of qualitative research as it reaches *"parties which other methods cannot reach"* (2000, p.71). Cohen et al. contends that *"interviews enable participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their point of view". (*2000, p.267), which reinforces the point made by Gilham that interviews are a well-established method of capturing the viewpoint of those involved, and he is descriptive in his analysis of the

data by describing it as the "richness" (2000, p.62) in the data obtained.

A degree of structure must be contained across the process of conducting qualitative research interviews, for example if there is no list of questions, the interview is described as unstructured. Wellington points out that this can place a high level of demand on the interviewer, that they will need to have "*high levels of interviewer expertise, as the fluidity of the process could be very challenging as regards sustaining focus*" (2000, p.74). However, the other side of this would be that the skills of the interviewer can be too structured and rigid through focusing on a list of questions then we would be moving into what is known as a structured interview. Wellington reinforces his earlier point by stating that "*this type of interview can lead to inflexibility and reduces the interview to little more than a face-to-face questionnaire*" (2000, p.74).

The process of carrying out semi-structured interviews, positions the researcher to offset any negative connotations associated with a well-designed and regulated structured interview. This is described as a "*compromise*" by Wellington who states that this can be a tool to gather the "*most valuable*" information when conducting research and that it can provide "*flexibility… [within a] loosely defined framework*" for the interviewer (2000, p.74). Gilham asserts that a semi-structured interview is the most important form of interviewing as it can provide the "*richest single source of data*" (2000, p.65). The flexibility and opportunity to deeply engage with the participant throughout the interview and not be guided by structure is why I chose to use semi structured interviews as part of my research.

### 3.6.3 Selecting the case

The selection of the specific case to be analysed is crucial in a case study methodology. There is a myriad of ways in which a case may be selected, "*It is up to the researcher to identify the case and to set limits or boundaries and to consider one of three types of cases: the typical, the exemplary or model, or the unusual or unique*" (Lichtman, 2013, p.90 and 92).

For this case study, I selected the site to be selected based on engagement with assessment

change and how the senior management team is working closely with the school teachers to improve learner outcomes. Yin supports this contention that the case study methodology is paramount to the selection of the case. It may initially involve speaking and querying people "*knowledgeable*" while collecting "*limited documentation*". The need to "*have defined a set of operational criteria*" for selecting the cases that best fit your replication design is demanded (Yin, 2014, p.95). Developing these criteria should follow a two-step process. The initial step is "*collecting relevant quantitative data about the entire pool from some archival source*". Once this step is completed then, it is necessary to "*define some relevant criteria for either stratifying or reducing the number of candidates*" as is appropriate (Yin, 2014, p.95). Using the above knowledge and practical advice in site selection, the selection of case study school for this study followed the processing outlined below. The following table explains the stages in the identification and selection process for the case study school.

*Table 3. 2: Process for selecting the case study school*

| Step 1 | Gathered the names of all schools that I have worked with but not carried out an inspection in prior to this research. |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Step 2 | Identified the names of suitable schools and made contact to see if they would be interested in engaging with this research. |
| Step 3 | Collated the information gathered in step 2 and identified a case study school. |
| Step 4 | For the school identified in step 3, background information was gathered in the form of relevant inspectorate reports and school's literature. A further screening occurred to select the teachers and subject areas that may be relevant to provide the broadest sample. |

### 3.6.4 Limitations of the Case Study Methodology

The process of a methodological approach of the case study can be looked on some with "*disdain*". The disdain emanates from the concern over the "*traditional concerns*" associated with doing case study research (Yin, 2014, p.19). Limitations relate to the concern over the amount of qualitative data that was gathered and decoding what is the richest data which will add to the development of the hypothesis. The flexibility that I placed on the semi-structured interviews brought me down other areas of focus, and this required a particular skillset to

refocus the participants back to the question asked. This presented itself as an issue in some interviews as the topic can be a challenging area for many teachers that has enabled them to have to change their practice recently, and any mention of curriculum reform such as that at senior cycle may be quite raw on the back of the introduction of the Junior Cycle Framework. The flexibility provided by the case study with the semi structured interviews and the analysis of the teaching and learning group in the school enabled me to develop my questions when conducting the interviews with the participants to extinguish any such fears and engaged with them individually as I conducted this study. I was always mindful that this was one selected school, which is not representative of every post-primary school in Ireland. However, this was a case study focusing on one school, with a broad range of thirteen participants in relation to subject qualifications, professional qualifications and years teaching experience. It could be put forward that these three areas would represent a sample of post-primary teachers in most post-primary schools.

### 3.6.5 Generalisations in Case Study Research

Bassey states that "*the search for generalisations and the study of singularities represent two quite different forms of research inquiry and probably constitute the most important dichotomy in social science research*" (1995, p.7). Generalisations or what is also referred to as external validity, require an investigation of large populations with appropriate sampling leading to statements which can be used to predict what will occur in other situations. In contrast, the study of singularities is investigating something quite small or those based in an individual location. For a small-scale research study, investigating a single site and generalising is a "*thorny*" issue (Robson, 1993, p.51).


Bassey pronounces that a "*small scale research– will be in the form of study of a singularity*" due to limited resources (1995, p.9). Therefore, I must be mindful not to attempt to formulate generalisations because of research into a singularity. This concern is valid if one were simply investigating a single teacher and not multiple teachers with various experiences across a school. Robson affirms this view on the use of multiple engagement, "*a study may be repeated with a different target group …. to assess the generalisability of its findings*" (1993, p.73). This use of multiple participants also tests the reliability of the findings and aspires to gain "*exact

*replication*" or "*total reliability*". The methods for data collection of this study emerged after deep reflection upon both the research questions and the methodological literature as already discussed in this chapter.

## 3.7 Profile of Selected School

The school for this study was selected due to my own engagement with the school through CPD engaged with by, the school system. In addition, the location to Maynooth University was a factor, as was the fact that the school has actively engaged with and showcased changes to its assessment practices. The school's profile is presented in Table 3.3:

*Table 3.3: Profile of the case study school*

| Set of Information | Case Study School |
|---|---|
| School Classification | Community School (ETB) |
| Post-primary Schools in locality | Leinster |
| Regional Base | Midland |
| Urban/Rural Location | Rural |
| Number of Students | 515 |
| Gender | Mixed |
| Number of full- time Teachers | 40 |
| Publicly/Privately funded | Public |
| Language    Medium | English Speaking |
| DEIS* Participation | Yes |
| Predominant Socio-economic grouping | Low/Middle- class |

(*Delivering Equality of Education in Schools is the Department of Education action plan for educational inclusion and reducing the effects of social disadvantage in schools)

## 3.8 Delivering Equality of Education in Schools (DEIS)

Ireland has a historical legacy of disadvantage similar to many countries (geographical, educational, social and political). There is a disparity across the population, and this is then mirrored in education, with schools in disadvantaged areas struggling with special education, low levels of numeracy and literacy, disruptive behaviour, children who have low educational and employment aspirations and early school leaving. The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Initiative is the most significant national initiative that supports disadvantaged communities). DEIS was first introduced in 2005 and is funded by the Department of Education (DE). DEIS is based on long term action plans.

It is based on five goals:

- To implement a more robust and responsive Assessment Framework for identification of schools and effective resource allocation.

- To improve the learning experience and outcomes of children in DEIS schools.

- To improve the capacity of school leaders and teachers to engage, plan and deploy resources to their best advantage.

- To support and foster best practice in schools through inter-agency collaboration.

- To support the work of schools by providing the research, information, evaluation and feedback to achieve the goals of the DEIS Plan.

## 3.9 Research participants' identifiers

The rationale for selecting research participant identifiers is as follows. The fact that I selected case study analysis, I decided to use the identifier CS for case study. The following identifier focuses on the participant with the teachers and the number of teachers making up the identifier e.g., teacher one is CS/T1. This is repetitive for all participants as highlighted in table 3.4. The teachers identified for the case study all come from a different subject discipline and at the time of interview their subjects were all at different stages of implementation at junior and senior cycle as described by the department of education as a phased approach of introduction. There were teachers present from phase one subjects right through to phase five at junior cycle and some teachers present had new specifications to teach at senior cycle such as economics and agricultural science. The range of teaching experience was clearly represented from across the group, right from PME stage to teachers

with many years' experiences and is captured in table 3.4. This information in relation to the teachers is further highlighted in chapter four and a visual representation of their experience in years is capture in figure 3.2.

*Table 3.4 Research participant identifiers*

| Participants | Participant interviewed | Experience in Years | Subject Area | Qualification Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| CS/T1 | Case Study: Teacher 1 | 1-5 years' experience | Science and Agricultural Science | Level 9 |
| CS/T2 | Case Study: Teacher 2 | 1-5 years' experience | Art | Level 9 |
| CS/T3 | Case Study: Teacher 3 | 1-5 years' experience | English | Level 9 |
| CS/T4 | Case Study: Teacher 4 | 5-15 years' experience | Design & Communication Graphics (DCG) | Level 9 |
| CS/T5 | Case Study: Teacher 5 | 5-15 years' experience | Guidance | Level 9 |
| CS/T6 | Case Study: Teacher 6 | 5-15 years' experience | Physical Education | Level 9 |
| CS/T7 | Case Study: Teacher 7 | Greater than 15 years | Music | Level 9 |
| CS/T8 | Case Study: Teacher 8 | Greater than 15 years | History and Economics | Level 9 |
| CS/T9 | Case Study: Teacher 9 | Greater than 15 years | Mathematics | Level 9 |
| CS/PME1 | Case Study: Professional Master of Education Teacher 1 | 1 Year Student Teacher | Business | Level 8 |
| CS/MPE2 | Case Study: Professional Master of Education Teacher 2 | 1 Year Student Teacher | Modern Foreign Language | Level 8 |
| CS/SMP1 | Case Study: Senior Management Principal 1 | Greater than 15 years | History and Religion | Level 9 |
| CS/SMDP2 | Case Study: Senior Management Deputy Principal 2 | Greater than 15 years | Modern Foreign Languages | Level 9 |
| CS/TL | Case Study 1: Teaching and Learning Group | A combination of teachers | A mixed cohort of subjects | Level 9 |
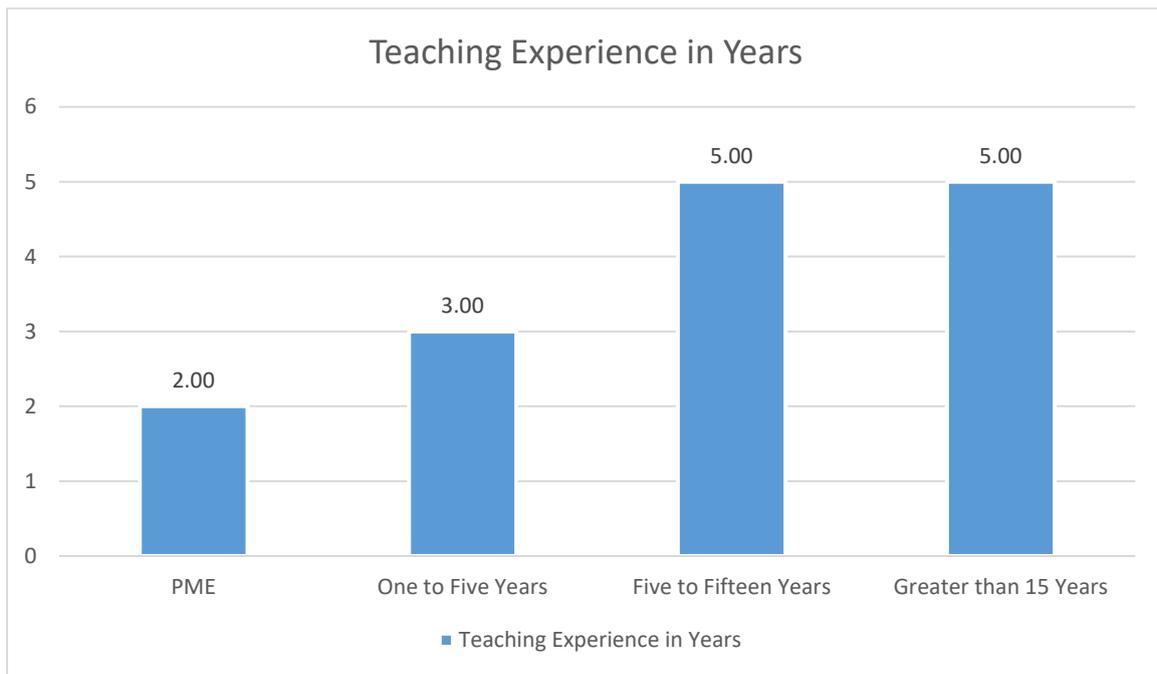
Figure 3.2 Teaching Experience

## 3.10 The pilot interviews

The importance of piloting all the research instruments is particularly important. Cohen discusses this further when one considers the importance of "*a pilot [to have] several functions, principally to increase the reliability, validity and practicality*" (2000, p.260).

For this study, several of my colleagues were asked the questions that I used as piloting the interview schedules with ongoing refinement of the questions. This involved conducting interviews with a draft schedule of questions. After completing the process, I was disappointed with the level of detail ascertained by the draft questions. This provided the stimulus for deeper thought on the questions and the development of appropriate additional prompts for some questions in the interview schedules. This need for additional prompts was applied to the interview schedules used in the case study school, allowing an iterative process to develop.

Another area for consideration is the amount of time needed for each interview and allowing the participant's time to think and develop their thoughts. This was apparent after the first set of interviews was completed and fully transcribed. Allowing participants time to consider their responses to questions and giving time for the prompts to ruminate and trigger deeper responses was evident.

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## 3.11 Validity and Reliability

Cohen et al. define validity as "*essentially a demonstration that a particular instrument in fact measures what it purports to measure*" (2000, p.105). Issues surrounding the validity of a qualitative research project can be addressed through "*honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data achieved*". In a quantitative project, data validity can be improved through careful sampling and appropriate statistical treatment. Cohen et al. contend that perfect validity is impossible in qualitative studies, believing that validity "*should be seen as a matter of degree rather than as an absolute state*" (2000, p.105).

Cohen et al. assert that reliability and trustworthiness are essentially a synonym for consistency and replicability over time, over instruments and groups of respondents (2000, p.117). It is about precision and accuracy. It contends that if the research were carried out on a similar group, in a comparable way, a similar result would be found.

## 3.12 Researcher bias

Researcher bias in interviewing and during the data analysis process is of vital importance to affirm the validity of the data. "*It is good medicine, we think, for researchers to make their preferences clear. To know how a researcher construes the shape of the social world and aims to give us a credible account of it is to know our conversational partner*" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.4). My background was discussed in the introduction chapter, and consequently was an aspect to be mindful of throughout the entire research study's data collection and analysis processes. Bias is particularly relevant during the data analysis process, which will be described later in the chapter.

This issue of researcher bias is further explored by Cohen et al. positing that, "*the issue here is that great caution and self-awareness must be exercised by the researcher in conducting qualitative data analysis, as the analysis and the findings may say more about the researcher than about the data*" (2018, p.666). I was very mindful of this throughout my research so as to not bring any unconscious bias that would influence the outcomes of the data. Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, I was acutely aware of this bias and always endeavoured to approach the process objectively, as far as possible. From my own experience as a teacher

and a senior department of education inspector it is not surprising that I would have held some bias. During my career, I have interacted with other teachers from many other schools who would have grappled with changes to the assessment culture in schools. I have heard their opinions and attitudes towards the changes in practice. My role as senior Inspector for the Department of Education would also have been shared with the participants during interviews. Despite reassurances given to teachers that this research was in no way connected to this role, I had a concern that they may still view my interest as connected to the Department. No participant overtly stated this concern, but one must be cognisant of perceptions. All these factors were considered both during the interview process, when appropriate probes search out the meaning of answers, checking was employed to check the authenticity of transcripts and during the analysis process described above.

### 3.113 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were at the forefront of my thought process when I considered case study analysis and what the future holds concerning designing, sampling, administering, and constructing this study. As I was focusing on a qualitative approach to this research, I felt that this would involve a greater level of human interaction. Robson states that this is an area that is "*complicated and susceptible to risks*" (2002, p.74). Stake further develops this idea that researchers are "*guests to the participants*" and that they should display a level of respect towards the "*code of ethics*" (1995, p.447). My research followed Maynooth University's ethical guidelines and I was further guided by the BERA guidelines. Therefore, I began the ethical review process before collecting data on my proposed research area as required in the Maynooth University guidelines. Bryman states, *"after consent is received from the participant, it is up to the researcher to ensure that participants rights are upheld and protected"* (2012, p.134). I provided the participants with all available information and the necessary consent forms as highlighted in appendix three, which will outline the aims of my research and guarantee their confidentiality throughout. Concerning ensuring that my research is ethically correct and that it protects any engagement with the participants, I tried to ensure that all participants were treated with the highest level of respect and be provided with the right to withdraw at any stage they wish. As interviews played a significant role in my research.

Finally, the framework below was used as a structure for my research to discuss areas such as; validity, reliability, and generalisability, which is covered by Yins' Case study analysis in addressing traditional concerns around case study research (Yin, 2018. p.18-20). I was always guided by the BERA guideline (2018). Gall et al. emphasise the necessity of "*having procedures for protecting human subjects or participants*" (1996, p.87) and sets out three principal procedures relevant to this study which I followed. They are:

A. Subject selection-. *This study's selection of subjects was based on the stated criterion provided earlier in this chapter.*

B. Consent-— each participant within the case study is informed about the research and is provided with the opportunity to withdraw at any stage of the research. I have described this in the appendix below *(Appendix 1).*

C. Privacy and confidentiality – The participants in this study were assured that all of their discussion would be private and that no "unauthorised persons" could access their information. The participants within the case study school were ensured that their data input would be confidential and that their "*names or locations would not appear within the publication*" This guarantee was visible on all related documentation and clearly explained in the participant information sheet *(Appendix 1).*

(1996, p.91-93)

The letter to the participants that expressed their interest in engaging with the research was intricately linked to the consent form. The competence and expertise I have were clearly stated. The participants were free to enter the research as they wished.

This included:

- A clear explanation of the procedures and the purpose.

- Description of any risks.

- Description of any benefits.

- An open discussion to answer any inquiries concerning the research if required.

- A statement highlighting that they can withdraw at any time.

Finally, of up-most importance, I made sure that the participants fully understood the nature of the research. All the criteria were considered when preparing the documentation to gain access to the case study school and consent from the participants. In the appendices, copies of all information letters (Appendix 1) and consent forms (Appendix 3) may be viewed for all participants and the school.

## 3.14 Storage of data

Once all participants were satisfied with the answers, and I analysed them, the storage of the data became paramount. All the data collected was never shared with any other party, and the participant's right to privacy and confidentiality was always guaranteed and explicitly stated to the participant at every interaction (https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for- educational-research-2018).

Deleting all identifiers was carried out with all data collected and using aliases were employed where appropriate and I consistently endeavoured to guarantee the confidentiality of all participants during the study.

Original audio, transcript, and survey data were compiled in electronic form, and all files were individually password protected and stored on my personal computer, which was also password protected. I chose confidential data storage because I was a part-time student and doctorate candidate who did not have full access to secure storage opportunities at the University.

Following suggestions from the publication "Introduction to the Responsible Conduct of Research", all data was backed up and saved in a secure place that was physically removed from the original data (Steneck, 2007, p.93). For the study, this physically removed location was a locked filing cabinet in my place of work. Any hard copies or written data files were also kept under locked conditions.

## 3.15 Data Analysis

The methods of data analysis are closely associated with the selected research paradigm. This methodology takes an approach to data collection and analysis; they are either qualitative or quantitative. The process of data analysis consists of "*examining, categorising, tabulating, testing, or otherwise recombining evidence, to produce empirically based findings*" (Yin, 2014, p.132).

I conducted thirteen interviews and engaged with the teaching and learning group over six months in the case study school, therefore, a considerable amount of data was gathered, and there was a need to engage and analyse the data deeply to get the richest data to answer the research question and understand the angle that the interviews were taking. To do this, I analysed the data via pen and paper and carefully aligned my steps to Lichtman's three C's as highlighted from the outset of this chapter. This was a slow process, but was one which I found fruitful, with the imperative focused on catching the meaning of what the data was reporting on the culture around assessment practices related to teachers' beliefs and school culture in a post-primary school. The approach that I undertook in the data analysis of the selected school was to look at each of the participants' input. The discussion chapter explored the commonalities which emerged from the individual stories.

## 3.16 Organising and sorting the data

As the data for this qualitative study "*takes the form of words, not numbers*", the process of data analysis and the seeking to reduce this quantity of data is aided using appropriate tables and displays (Lichtman, 2013, p.307). Miles and Huberman (1994) support their use in data analysis. They offer a flow model for qualitative analysis consisting of three components (1994, p.10). The three concurrent components are outlined in table 3.3:
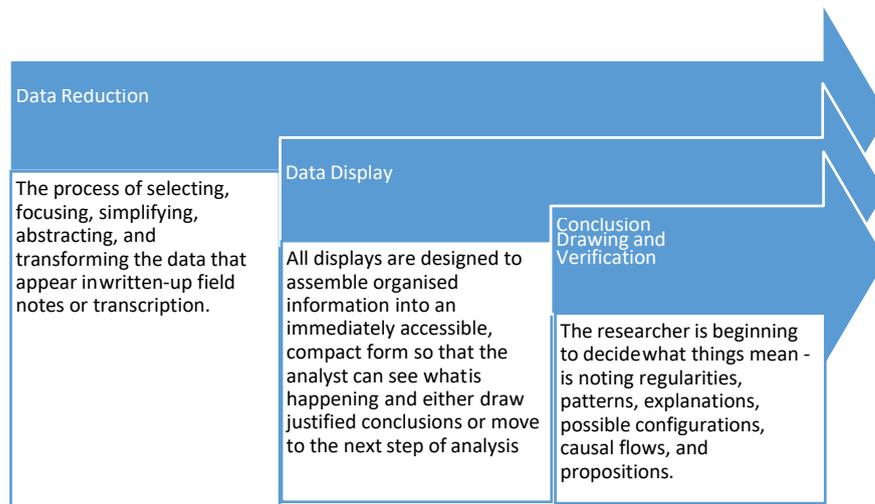


*Figure 3.3: Components of Data Analysis Adapted Flow Model from Miles and Huberman (1994, p.11)*

There are various computer software packages which can aid the data analysis process. CAQDAS or Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software is prevalent, and popular packages exist such as NVivo, AQUAD, and MAXQDA. For this study, I used a paper-based form of data analysis, as "*software does not analyse material; humans do*" (Cohen *et al*., 2018, p.650). The software is highly effective in organising the data and "*organising data files*" (p.652).

However, using such software will not "*do away with "the human touch" as humans need to decide and generate the codes and categories*", essentially, CAQDAS will not do the thinking, reflecting and analysis of the data. Thus, its use for this study was not required. Another concern is in the realm of reflexivity. Finally, it can also be a concern that such software "*can over-simplify complex issues*" and the amount of data collected did not merit the use.

As alluded to previously in this chapter, many researchers have developed steps or frameworks

to assist one in the data analysis process while also cautioning that no one process is correct. Lichtman's Three C's approach to data analysis (2013), Gibbs Framework for Data Analysis (2007) and an adaptation of Charmaz's Constructivist Model of Grounded Theory (2006) are all frameworks which contributed to the decision that I made in selecting selected Lichtman's three C framework; Codes, Categories and Concepts. Though similarities exist between the frameworks, this one was selected because it offered a perceived simplified three-stage approach. However, I am acutely aware that the data analysis process is far from simple. Lichtman's framework is built around three steps immediately identifiable for the novice analyst. The framework provides the opening for accessing and developing more complex reflexivity to the process, but tough complexity will inevitably arise; the process for this researcher is best instigated using a simplified three-step approach offered by Lichtman. She advocates a "*systematic approach*" to data analysis, although there "*is a lack of standardisation and few universal rules*" (2013, p.306). Lichtman advocates a systematic approach based on three C's as described in figure 3.1 earlier in the chapter;

1. Coding
2. Categorising
3. Concepts

This three-C approach can be instigated using a 6-step approach to data analysis. This involves the initial organising of the data and then the coding of the data. Once the data is coded, it is then categorised, and key concepts derived from the categories.

These three actions are expanded below;
- Step 1: Initial Coding
- Step 2: Revisiting initial coding
- Step 3: Developing an initial list of categories
- Step 4: Modify list based on further research and reading
- Step 5: Revisiting your categories and subcategories
- Step 6: Moving from categories to concepts

## 3.17 Coding the data

This coding process was used when looking at the transcript. It involved reading and close re-reading and then a complete immersion into the interview transcript. Here the value of my transcribing of the participants' interviews was exemplified. Each interview transcription was put into codes; it demanded constant reviewing and deep reflection on the transcript passages. It continued until all the interviews were coded.

- Step 1- Initial Coding

This step involves going from the responses to the interview questions to a summary of the ideas in the responses. It involved intensive reading of each of the case study interview transcripts as they were transcribed. I read the transcripts many times to identify an appropriate initial code. This process was carried out over many weeks. With each reading of the codes new codes were identified. The code can be "*a word, a phrase or the respondent's own words*" (Lichtman, 2013, p.252). It "*enables the researcher to identify similar information*" (Cohen *et al*., 2018, p.669). I carefully and intensively read the transcripts and I arrived at the initial set of code for the data. See figure 3.10 below for the initial set of codes.

- Step 2- Revisiting initial coding

Many initial codes did emerge from step 1; therefore, it was necessary to revisit these codes and seek to refine or "*collapse*" the codes where possible. Having access to the physical transcript for this step was essential for my analysis and development of the code. It allowed me to re-read and analyse to develop the creation of memos which can be pinned transferred into my codes. Gibbs sees memo-making as integral to the data analysis process. They are "*essentially notes to yourself*" and are "*a way of theorising and commenting as you go about thematic coding ideas and about the general development of the analytic framework*" (2007, p.30). This second step concerns removing redundancies, renaming synonyms, or clarifying terms (Lichtman, 2013, p.253). Some of the codes did "*decay*" while others did *"flourish"* (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.61). After completing these steps, the initial codes that emerged from steps 1 and 2 are displayed below in table 3.5.

*Table 3.5: Initial codes selected and refined from steps 1 and 2*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Time to engage with assessment in the classroom and develop an understanding | The role of the teacher their beliefs | Teachers' passion and confidence | Sharing of practice and trialling new strategies |
| Collaboration with colleagues | Support of school leadership | Initial Teacher Education | Preferred methodologies |
| The importance of CPD | Teachers' perceptions of assessment and their own assessment literacy | School culture and its location | Keys skills across the curriculum |
| Education Reform and redevelopment | Department of education policy and Inspection focus | CAO and the leaving certificates summative approach | Personal background of the teacher |

## 3.18 Categories emerging

The next step in the six-step process is the development of an initial list of categories:

- Step 3- Developing an initial list of categories

Once the codes have been refined, as displayed in the previous figure, I could now seek to organise the codes into a category. This involved careful consideration of the codes and developing an appropriate category for the emergent codes whilst being aware of the research purpose and aims. Again, this part of the process involved careful and intensive reading of the data (Lichtman, 2013) careful consideration of the initial codes and, eventually, the provisional selection of a category for the initial codes. I was endeavouring to link codes under a relevant category. This step took much time and rumination before moving on to step four.

- Step 4- Modify initial list based on additional re-reading of the case study interview transcripts

This step follows from the initial creation of the category; again, some categories collapsed by removing redundancies and I came down to one singular category focusing on teacher's assessment literacy. It again exemplified the iterative nature of the process, with constant reflection and revision being an integral part of data analysis, along with time to reflect purposefully on their selection. The identified category was assessment literacy.

- Step 5- Revisiting your categories and subcategories

The category was again reviewed and considered carefully following a process of deliberation and re-reading of the transcripts with related codes. Cohen et al. state that "*the analysis is a construction of meaning rather than a complete reflection of reality and, in this, reflexivity is an important feature*" (2018, p.665). However, we must again be conscious of researcher bias at this stage and all stages. This is the essence of step 6, to reflect and use reflexivity to create meaning from the data.

It involves much more than simply reporting on the data gathered. Again, time and reflection on all aspects of the research study are demanded, with a focus on the research questions. In consideration to answering these questions, thematic concerns or concepts arose that helped to determine answers to the questions and the development of a framework for assessment in schools.

- Step 6- Moving from categories to concepts

The last step in this process was to move from the category identified to the key concepts "*that reflect the meaning you attach to the data".* Lichtman strongly *believes that "fewer well developed and supported concepts make for a much richer analysis than looselyframed ideas*" (2013, p.254). She suggests that "*five to seven concepts should be the maximum*". This last step takes time, much revision, and reflectionfor the researcher, as "*sometimes your initial thoughts are quite superficial*" (Lichtman, 2013, p.255).

The importance of moving from insignificance was paramount for my process. After many weeks of reflection and purposeful reading of all the data material that I collected, the development and evolving concepts were eventually decided upon. The codes evolve as the data analysis process does not stop because the sixth step is completed. The six-step process helps provide a framework for the data analysis process, but I am cognisant that the process is not linear and can evolve over time. The four emergent concepts are displayed below;

- School Context

- Curriculum and Assessment

- Teacher's beliefs and Culture

- Leadership and Management

## 3.19 Final comments on the data analysis process

Lichtman asserts that the "*meaning from qualitative data is a process that moves between questions, data and meaning*" (2013, p.255). The emergent concepts from the data analysis process are displayed in figure 3.4, along with the analytic codes. These provide a lens through which the data from the case study schools was analysed and formed the basis of the description that I will provide in the next chapter while also speaking to the emerging successful provision of assessment practices unpacked in the analysis of the case study school.
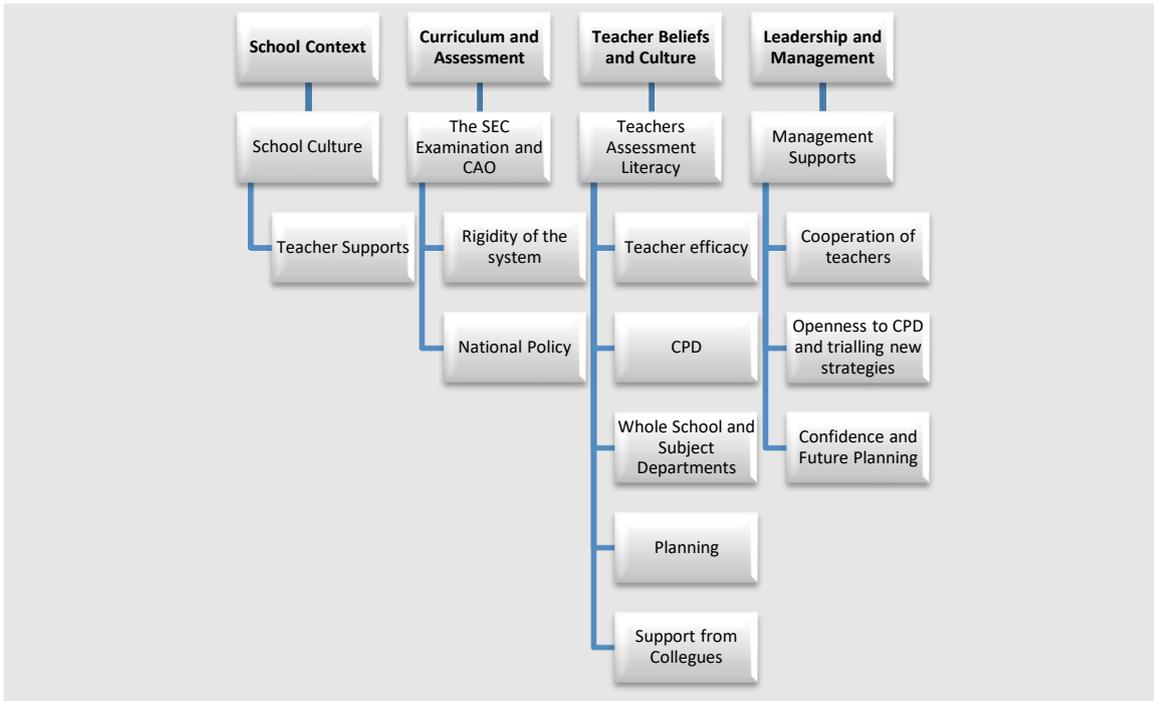
*Figure 3.4: Emergent concepts and analytic codes*

## 3.20 Conclusion

Considerations regarding ethical obligations were a concern that I always held during the study. The steps and safeguards to uphold these ethical obligations were described in the chapter, relating to ethical obligations, storage and access to the transcripts if required by the participants.

Using the three research questions to guide the research design and methodology, an interpretative paradigm was selected. A case study methodological approach was decided upon so the information gathered from the case study school could be described and analysed, and the emergent provision of assessment practices unpacked in the case study school could be identified. Lichtman's three C approach using six steps to data analysis was employed. Arising from this process, four concepts with extended analytic codes were developed. It is these concepts and analytic codes which were used to structure the narrative for the descriptions of the data findings for the case study school in the next chapter and how they inform the emergent and developing successful provision of assessment practices arising in the research study. The code category and concept from the chapter can be clearly viewed from figure 3.5 where Lichtman's 3 c's approach clearly expands to take into account my research.

| Code | Category | Concept |
|------|----------|---------|
| Initial Code listed in table 3.5 | 1.Teachers assessment Literacy at Individual Level  2. Teachers assessment Literacy at whole school level  3. Teachers assessment Literacy at National Level | School Context  Curriculum and Assessment  Teachers Beliefs and Culture  Leadership and Management |
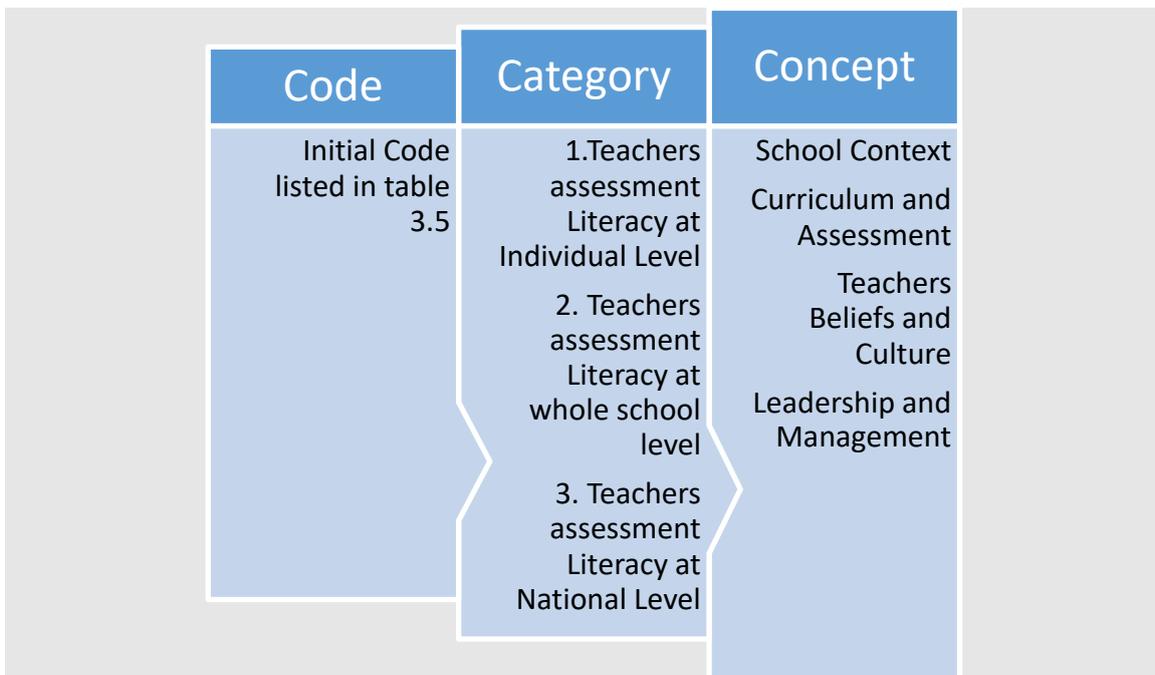
*Figure 3.5: Code, Category and Concept*

# Chapter 4
# Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the quantitative data I collected as part of the research. The case study school is presented as an individual story of the school's journey relating to teachers' beliefs and understanding of assessment literacy in order to support the reader in identifying commonalities and differences as they presented in the school.

Data are presented using the following thematic concepts of school context, curriculum and assessment, teacher beliefs and cultures, and leadership and management. The identified category is teacher's assessment literacy.

I structured the chapter around each of the four thematic concepts and discussed the case study findings in detail. The research participants' identifiers are displayed in table 3.4 and are applied for each of the participants in the case study school in the chapter.

## 4.1 Emergent Code, Category and Concepts

The emergent Code, Category and Concepts from the data analysis process are displayed in figure 4.1 along with extended analytic codes. These provide a lens through which the data from the case study school was analysed and formed the basis of the story which I have described in this chapter while also speaking to the successful provision of assessment practices that arose from the analysis of the case study school.

*Figure 4.1 Emergent Code, Category and Concepts*
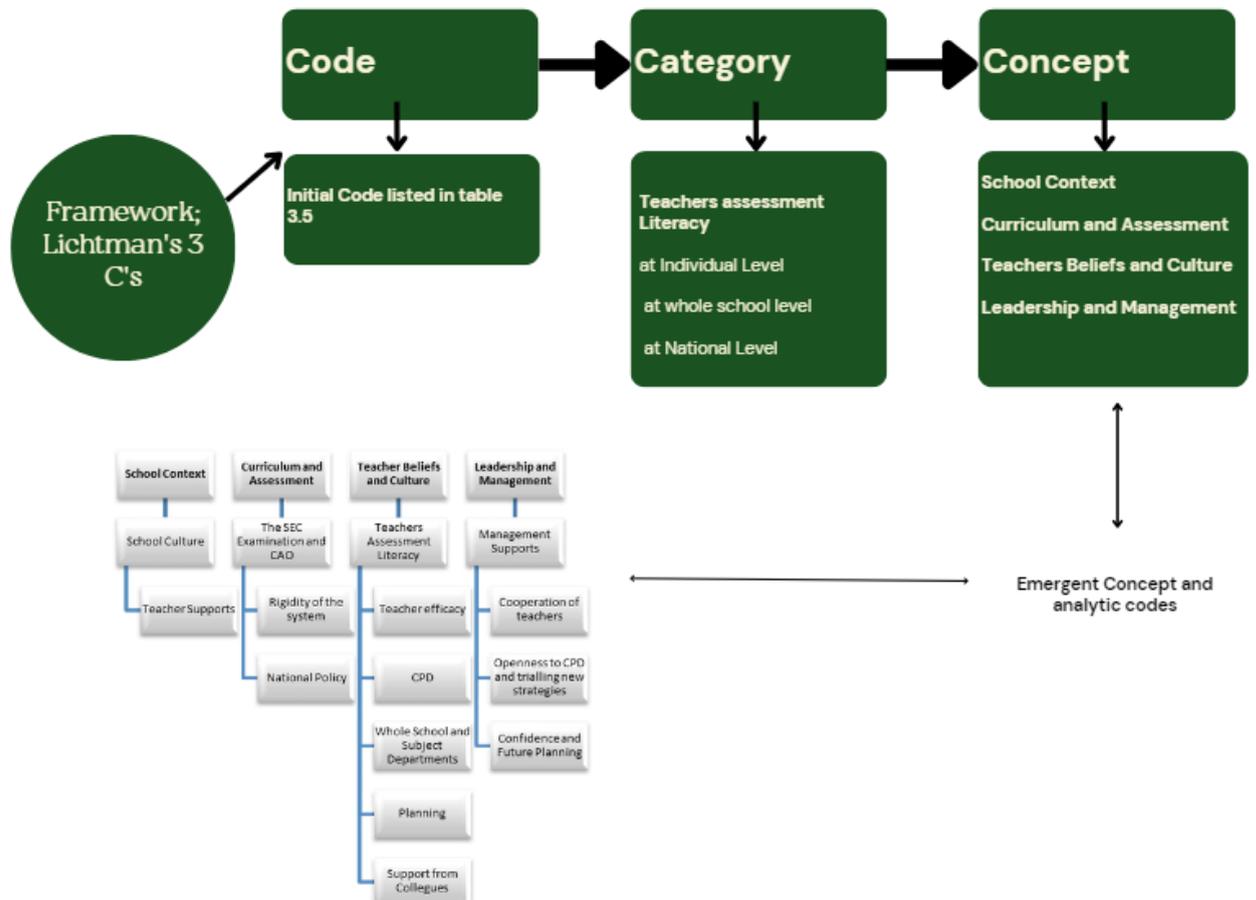


## 4.2 School

The selected case study school is co-educational in the midlands. The school participates in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the action plan of the Department of Education for educational inclusion. The school offers the junior cycle, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), Transition Year (TY) the Leaving Certificate (established), and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

It is under the auspice of Louth, Meath Education Training Board (LMETB). It has a student population of 463 with 42 full-time teachers. The school is the only post-primary school in the rural village. It does have one post-primary school within eight kilometres and two post-primary schools within fourteen kilometres. Two of these schools are co-educational and one is a single sex girl's school. As part of the research study thirteen teaching personnel were interviewed, which included nine teachers, two Professional Master of Education (PME) student teachers, and the senior management team which consisted of the principal and deputy principal. I also engaged with the teaching and learning

group over a number of months in order to get a greater understanding for what happens in the school in relation to change that they have about their understanding of assessment literacy and the teachers' own beliefs and the school culture. Table 3.4 outlined the research participant identifiers that I used for the case study process.

A starting point in conducting the research was the identification of the number of registered post-primary teachers there were in Ireland. I consulted two sources to ascertain this information; the Department of Education (DE) and the Teaching Council. The DE on October 10th, 2022 indicated that there were 22,358 post-primary teachers registered. This figure refers to the number of post-primary teachers that are paid by the DE during the academic year previous, 2020-21. This was an extremely large number of teachers. Due to this I decided that a case study was to be chosen as the most practical and appropriate methods of collecting data for this research. This decision will be now discussed in further detail through the hypothesis, "*A case study of Teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools*".

## 4.3 Developing Teachers Practice- A focus on Assessment Literacy

When teachers were asked to discuss the initial motivation for developing their assessment literacy and with a particular focus to introducing formative assessment practices, they one hundred percent responded that it was down to the introduction of the Junior Cycle framework initially and changes to senior cycle subjects, with CS/T2 stating that,

> *The learning outcome-based specification and the principles of junior cycle required me to tailor my practice, develop my own assessment literacy focusing on my assessment practice. I needed to provide evidence to students of how to improve and not just provide them with a grade. CS/T2*

Interestingly teachers spoke about the location of the school as having an impact on the culture and in some case, teachers' own beliefs. Many of the case study participants cited its closeness to Maynooth University and Navan Education centre as a positive. Given its isolation from a large urban area this was perceived by many to be an advantage when initially engaging with CPD.

> *With our closeness to the University in Maynooth and easy access to Navan Education centre, it provides many different opportunities to engage with continuing professional development, trial new ideas, network with teachers from other schools and for PME students to come to the school and trial new ideas, in some instances*

*it could be said that this adds something new to a subject department, new ideas, methodologies and opportunities to have discussions from a different viewpoint. CS/T3*

This view was equally shared by one of the PME students whose perception echoed the sentiment of the aforementioned teacher. He believed that

*Due to the nature of the PME and the school's proximity to a university town that the culture of some subject departments, not all, including the teachers own beliefs were wider to be open to change. This is mainly down to the fact that qualified teachers were used to dealing with PME students on a regular basis as well as having recently all engaged with some whole school and subject CPD offered by various support services. CS/PME2*

The principal further reinforced the claim that the school has actively engaged in CPD in recent years, and she stated;

*The Junior Cycle Framework was the catalyst for driving change across the system and definitely in this school. The various national CPD that was provided developed teachers ability to reflect on their practice in a way that they may not have done before. CS/SMP1*

She continued:

*I feel like the fact that we are an ETB school has also facilitated a smoother transition towards change relating to teachers' practice around assessment and their own assessment literacy. This is mainly down to the fact that our teachers engaged with reform from its infancy and were not dealing with industrial relations issues. Teachers were able to lean on one another inside the school due to the fact that this change was incremental and introduced in a phased way. They also had the network of other schools and subject departments within the ETB to lean on. This was a major factor in addressing teacher's needs, their beliefs and culture relating to challenges that they may have faced around their teaching and assessment practices. CS/SMP1*

The deputy principal developed this important point further

*School or subject department culture in the past was a barrier to change, however since 2015 and the national roll out of CPD as well as our teachers engaging in many other CPD events such as instructional leadership and TL21 just to mention a few proved a positive factor in the implementation of a new culture, one where the learner was central to the teaching, learning and assessment process. I suppose what I am saying is that teachers were all in this together, they realised that the specifications around learning outcomes required a different approach to be taken focusing on teaching, learning and assessment, so the culture of the school which may be a barrier in some other instances did not become a barrier to developing assessment literacy and practices. This could be down to the fact that as a senior management team we provided the teachers with autonomy, asked them to*

*check in with us when required and facilitated as many opportunities as possible to upskill and engage in CPD when offered. CS/SMDP2*

It is very clear from engaging with the school and from unpacking the SMDP2 comments that the leadership element of the school is pivotal for developing school culture and to improving teachers' own beliefs. Without this leadership of learning the process of developing practice while engaging with CPD can be left to chance. The evidence that presented when senior management's point of view, when they enable teachers to engage in CPD with a focus on improving learner outcomes and experiences that the teachers own beliefs, and the culture of the school will benefit. It is down to the autonomy to develop as a professional and to set the agenda around what is the whole school's approach to develop teachers' assessment literacy in this case.

The majority of teachers interviewed had a high level of qualifications, with many presenting a number of postgraduate or master's qualifications. This was not a surprise due to the level of qualification required to become a post-primary teacher in recent times due to the introduction of the professional masters of education in 2014. Seven of the thirteen teachers interviewed had a post graduate qualification and the other six held a masters level qualification. I have depicted this visually in the figure 4.2 below.
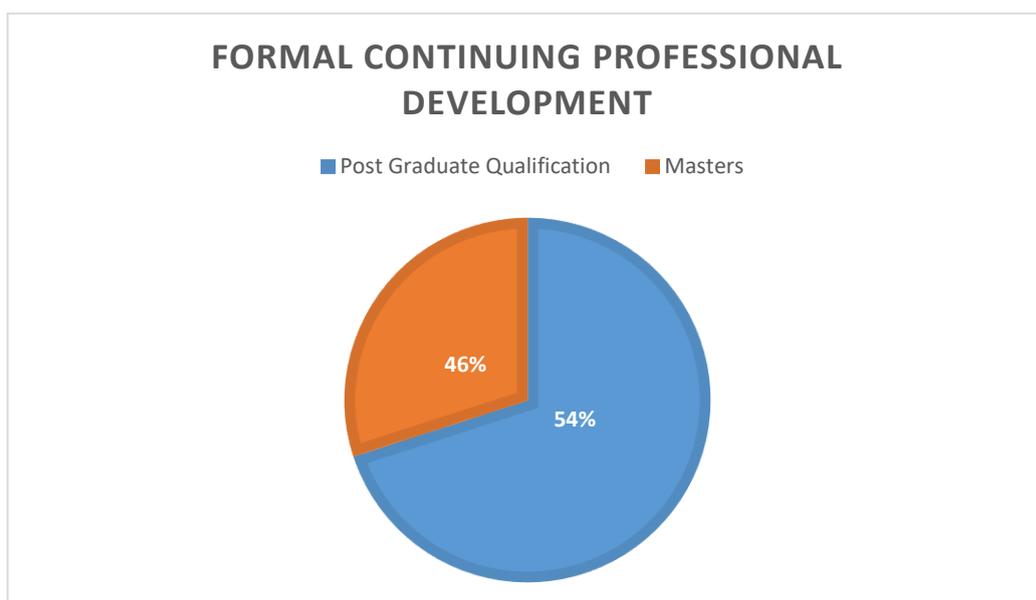


*Figure 4.2 Formal Continuing Professional Development*

When I questioned teachers further relating to the CPD that they engaged with since the introduction of the junior cycle framework and any subject that they taught around senior cycle reform, the teachers all expressed that they had actively engaged with a large quantity of CPD in their subject area and at whole school level. The majority of the teachers developed this point further focusing on the fact that a large proportion of their CPD was focused on developing teacher's assessment practices. It is clear to see from figure 4.3 that there is a high level of engagement with CPD in their two subject areas, whole school CPD and any additional CPD was also recorded. A high proportion of this CPD was in line with the national roll out of junior cycle for teachers CPD and some in recent times relating to the introduction of a new subject specification at senior cycle.
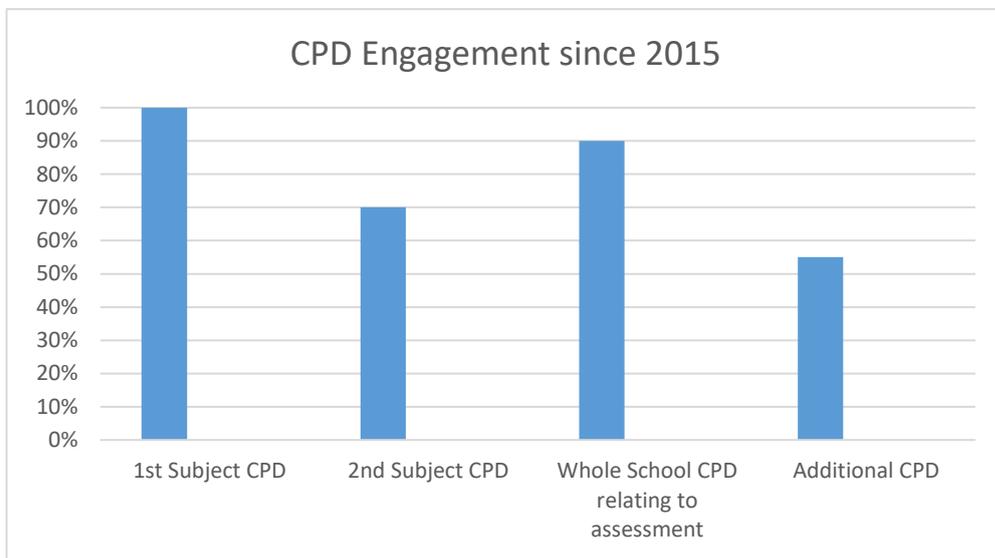


*Figure 4.3 CPD Engagement since 2015*

The principal further reinforced the claim that the school has actively engaged in CPD in recent years, and she stated that there was a change of culture for the school in that they got a brand-new school building in 2018, a new senior management team and additional posts of responsibility to develop practice throughout the school. This she stated was

*One of the factors in developing teacher's beliefs and the school culture. The CPD assisted in helping them address any issues relating to changes in their understanding of assessment literacy and how to implement this into their practices. While the change of environment, a change of direction placed on teaching, learning and assessment by the newly appointed senior management team certainly focus the teaching staff on developing their assessment literacy and improving teaching and learning practices. It would be remit of me to say that the new building, new technology and fresh start did not also play a part. CS/SMP1*

The Deputy Principal reinforced this by stating that

*The new specifications and a learning outcome-based approach to teaching, learning and assessment caused teachers to think about their practice, reflect on what was required to develop a learner centered approach and to see how they could as teachers blend their practice to meet the ongoing changes relating to assessment. CS/SMDP2*

When I further questioned the teachers on the impact that CPD engagement had on their own assessment literacy and how it would inform their practice. Over ninety percent of those interviewed agreed that the initial CPD engaged with was thought provoking and that it got them questioning their practice. However, it was not until they returned to the classroom and tried different methodologies did the change make sense. One teacher described this as

*CPD was integral in getting me to think about changing my assessment practices, it provided me with some tools to explore and implement new methodologies within my classroom, but it was not until I trialled different assessment methods did I really understand why I was changing and what was best suited to meet the needs of my learners. CS/T9*

A second teacher reinforced this point in stating that

*Senior management facilitated engagement in CPD, an open-door policy to share and develop the trialling of methodologies, which was massive for me personally. It was great to see how some practical teachers approached modelling of practice and how language teachers developed literacy skills. This not only reinforced my beliefs in why we are changing our approaches to assessment and developing our own assessment literacy, but it has also re-energised me as a teacher. I got the sense that this rippling effect had similar outcomes in relation to the whole school's culture relating to assessment throughout the school. CS/T5*

Throughout the case study interviews, teachers all expressed various *"light bulb moments"* or experiences that assisted in developing their assessment literacy which would inform their practice in meeting the needs of change around assessment in their subjects.

They identified such areas as;
- Staff Meetings
- Teach Meets
- Peer Observation

- Open Door Policy

- Digital Platform

- Engagement with external CPD

- Student Voice/Discussion

Assessment literacy is defined by Willis et al. (2013, p. 242) as "a *dynamic context-dependent social practice that involves teachers articulating and negotiating classroom and cultural knowledge's with one another and with learners, in the initiation, development and practice of assessment to achieve the learning goals of students*". From engaging with the CS/TL it was clear to see that they had developed their own take on assessment literacy, describing it as

> *Merging past practice with new reflective learner centered approaches where the teacher engages with the learner through discussion, feedback and assistance to improve the outcomes for the learner. CS/TL 2022*

For me this presented a clear solid footing relating to the culture of this school, their assessment literacy and the assessment practices including they wanted to go from here. The (CS/TL) group worked closely with all teachers in the school through teach meets, peer observation, mentoring and reflection to improve the assessment, teaching and learning practices with the case study school. Towards the end of the 2021/22 academic year, they were working towards developing an assessment framework and policy to be shared with all staff members to improve the practice across the whole school community.

According to Price et al. (2012), assessment literacy includes sound knowledge of the following:
- connectedness of assessment and learning

- assessment principles such as reliability and validity

- assessment techniques and methods

- assessment criteria, standards, and policies

- feedback purposes and processes (2012, p.10)

My engagement with the CS/TL group was one of the observations where I sat in on five meetings over a space of six months. On engaging with this group, I simply observed their discussions relating to the developing practice they were discussed around areas such as CPD, assessment across the

school and their own understanding of their assessment literacy. I recorded these meetings with pen and paper. They assisted me in framing my research and in developing my findings for this study. As I engaged with the CS/TL group over these five meetings and through interviews with teachers involved, it was clear to see that the approach as discussed by Price (2012) was unfolding for the group of teachers within the case study school. Many teachers stated that assessment literacy was promoted within the school in many ways. An example of this was expressed by CS/T7 who stated that

> At a whole school staff meeting the CS/SMDP2 provided a valued input into changes to practice focusing on assessment, highlighting the need to look at the formative and summative moments across the school year, making sure that students are not burdened by over assessment, then time was allowed to meet in our subject departments to discuss what changes to our practice may be required and we developed an assessment schedule for our department which was included in our planning document under an action plan.

This was further reinforced by CS/T3 who discussed the impact that this had on her practice in the classroom by highlighting

> After the initial whole school input and the fact that we met as a subject department, we now had a framework to work off, I thought how would this transact and how do I need to reflect on my practice as a teacher to ensure I unpack the learning outcomes, in order to provide the best possible experience for the students in the school. I tried many methodologies, and it was really through peer observation and discussion that I started to settle into a pattern of change. This was enlightening for me, as I had done things a similar way for the past twelve years and I could actually see the benefit to my students by including them more in the learning process and engaging with my peers more through reflective discussion and feedback.

From engaging with the school over a number of months it was clear to see that a culture of teach meets, open door policies, planning on the schools digital platform and staff meetings had all created a cultural shift to facilitate teachers to discuss their own beliefs and cultures relating to assessment literacy in a safe place, to look at blending their practice, the old and the new as Clare Wyatt Smyth would describe as "*grafting*" (2014) as evident in figure 4.4 below, in order to address the challenges faced in relation to changes in assessment practices in Irish post-primary schools.
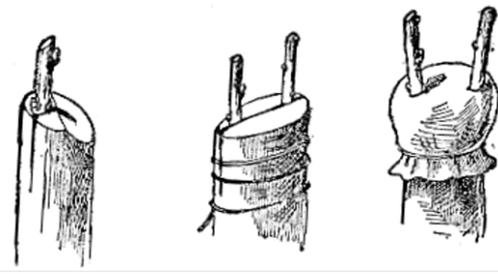
For me I use this idea of trying to develop teachers' practice. Yes, there is a shift required but the majority have the skills to make that shift through a little thought, CPD, developing a conceptual frame and putting their student at the centre of the process. Clare Wyatt Smyth research in this area is centered on a horticultural theory of grafting.

If we imagine combining our approaches of assessment;

The summative and formative

- What's old?

- What's new?

- How do we bond them together?

This rationale and blend of practice, so that we are more inclusive and place the learner at the centre of the assessment process that is what is known as grafting. Wyatt Smith talks about a conceptual shift of our practice as teachers to reinforce the message. From engaging with the CS/TLG they have described the learning environment throughout the school as one of change, where a conceptual shift is happening. This was further described by teachers as a *"cultural shift, where the students are central to the learning process, where assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process and where student voice plays a key role."*

One teacher within the group described the experience where the teachers are now *"the facilitator of learning, rather than the font of all knowledge which would have been the case in this school in the past."* This led to rich discussions around challenges that emerged such as meeting the needs of all students through differentiation and to the idea of having to dictate the pace of the learning can be difficult at times. Other issues raised throughout these meeting was some experiences of where

another teacher simply could not make the connection or implement the active teaching approach effectively, however she had remained committed to the approach of changing from a chapter textbook driven approach to a learning outcomes approach where assessment was to be an integral part of the teaching and learning process. CS/TL Stated that

> *I think to be honest not to throw any one under a bus, as a teacher of business before becoming a guidance counsellor I think it's fair to say that other teachers prefer a more structured environment and they have defined learning outcomes, but it's very rigid teaching and personally I would feel unless you have real life examples from enterprise to back up your definition when teaching a subject like business, whether that be local or national who are actually involved in the area then you can or may have lost the students as they cannot join the dots sometimes from theory in the classroom to practice into real life examples. CS/TL5*

This CS/TLG acknowledged that different teachers were moving at different paces, depending on their beliefs, engagement with CPD and knowledge of new specifications. However, an appreciation for the teacher's role to create a student-centered approach to teaching, learning and assessment to improve learner outcome and experiences was central to many, if not all, discussions observed. This was reinforced by the teachers in developing their assessment literacy to implement this practice back into their classrooms. A strong point came across throughout the case study interviews and that was, the support of colleagues was instrumental in driving changes to assessment practices in the school.

This was strengthened through the support of the Principal and Deputy Principal in leading the learning process through *"allowing time to meet, plan, discuss and reflect."* This filtered into the facilitation of peer observation and in some cases informal mentoring. CS/T2 describes this in more detail.

> *I was observing a teacher's practice across a different subject area, this was my first time in this teacher's classroom or within the practical subject room, I was re-energised by the modelling of practice, this was assessment in action. The teacher modelled practice, the students tried to engage in the task, while this was happening the teacher circulated and supported students on a one-to-one level and then student who moved at different paces perfected the task, finally presenting it to the class group and uploading the staged process to the digital learning platform. On reflection I started to work on a professional one-to-one peer mentoring with this teacher, in an informal way, where we discussed changes to assessment practice, placing the student at the centre of it and allowing them showcase, make mistakes and complete the various assessments set. This was an almost life changing moment in my teaching career and is one which I have brought back to my classroom.*

Collegial support was essential to the success of developing teacher's assessment literacy and to the changes to assessment practice within this school. This point was acknowledged by the principal who was aware that no single teacher could deliver the change on their own, but the culture needed to be cultivated and managed for each teacher, each subject department and then the whole school to progress with engaging in change.

*It just so happens those teachers who are member of the CS/TLG lead from the front, helping out with presentations, developing practice, setting up internal and external CPD/speakers in order to develop this practice of change to assessment in our school, with the benefit of placing the student at the centre of the teaching, learning and assessment journey, if that is not the case, why do it? One needs to consider the impact that this model of distributed leadership has had on the school culture and at individual level at a teacher's core of the own beliefs and culture. I believe fully that this was a catalyst for change in school culture, teachers own beliefs, and it is why we as a school are doing our absolute best to provide the best possible teaching, learning and assessment for our students. CS/SMP1*

The deputy principal further reinforced this point that a

*Primary reason for the support offered by the many teachers in the school was because they recognised the benefits for students and the support, they as teachers were to their colleagues. All the participants interviewed for the study lauded the skills developed by the students through the change of practice and that the teacher was essential to nurturing these skills in the students. CS/SMDP2*

Interestingly the principal reinforced this point that the teachers all have

*The ability and the talent but it is up to us as a senior management team to nurture and develop this. If you do not, it does not matter what you do, if you have not someone pushing them from behind to reflect and engage in the teaching, learning and assessment process then you will not achieve change and then teachers will start to question their beliefs and the schools cultural shift may be more difficult to change. CS/SMP1*

In relation to formulating practice around assessment culture, the school is working towards developing an assessment policy. They feel that this may benefit the expectations of the school community in formulising practice across the whole school. Both management and teachers of the case study teaching and learning group felt that this would be the next step.

The Deputy Principal stated that

*As the school moves towards one-hour lessons in 2022/23 we hope to develop our assessment policy to reflect the changes we have made to assessment to date, and it will also be timely as we discuss methodologies and practice relating to the shift from forty-minute lessons to one-hour lessons. CS/SMDP2*

Overall, the primary areas considered by the school over the period where I sat in on the CS/TLG were related to changes in their assessment practices. Table 4.1 clearly outlines the six key areas that were discussed over the six months.

*Table 4.1 School based changes to assessment practice*

| |
|---|
| **Our Assessment Literacy** |
| **Streamlining of Practice** |
| **Student centered approach to assessment** |
| **Assessment to meet the needs of all students** |
| **Reduction in over assessment** |
| **Expectations aligned to our DEIS Plan** |

A main viewpoint that was relevant to all thirteen teachers interviewed as well as discussion at the CS/TLG was focused on the lack of national policy relating to assessment changes nationally in Ireland. This highlights how at times the assessment component of the teaching and learning process is left to operate in isolation within the classroom. At whole school level then it is still viewed as a measurement due to the state examinations and the CAO. This separate entity is also reported on when commenting on national policy and supports.

*Well, I suppose the challenge presented with changes to curricula and the focus on assessment change. There is reference to assessment at junior cycle within the Framework, the classroom-based assessment comes with guidance during a particular timeframe, however, to make meaningful change to practice it is really left down to the teacher and the school to trial, embed and perfect assessment for learning approaches as required by a learning outcome-based specification. CS/T3*

A view shared by a second teacher states that,

*I would be aware of the positive impact of CPD in the area, but unless you trial and experiment with assessment approaches you won't know what works. This is probably the biggest challenge I faced. I obtained subject CPD*

*and whole-school CPD, all of which was very informative. However, I felt there was a lack of national policy in relation to dealing with assessment change, yes the CBA was a change of practice, but the SEC examinations are still the end goals for all students and the CAO drives the system, whether we like it or not. I do see that our changes in practice relating to assessment has improved attainment in the school by equipping students with the skills to perform well within the summative state examinations. CS/T9*

I think this is fundamentally the issue that is presenting across post-primary schools nationally. Teachers are looking for direction in developing their assessment literacy. They feel that if there is a policy in place that values assessment and not just summative assessment, then maybe change will be fully implemented. From engaging with the participants, it was clear that the leaving certificate, which is predominately summative in nature is certainly defining teachers' assessment literacy and without meaningful change to this, one would wonder if teachers' assessment literacy will change at all. Another teacher commented on the fact that to her it is

*The equity for students, the lack of national policy and direction relating to continuous assessment at senior cycle, some subjects have multiple examination components, some have one and others have none. What does this say to the students and the teachers as we try to improve our approaches to assessment and how we teach our students? I realise that senior cycle reform has started, and this will improve the outcome for students as well as the equity associated with certain subjects and examination components. Once this shift of practice comes at national level only then will we see the true value of assessment for learning, the learner centred approach and how the student can show real change and development over the cycle of the programme. Until then the leaving certificate and the CAO system will continue to dominate and to an extent stall the excellent practice that is happening within our school and nationally across many other schools. CS/T5*

Despite the lack of national direction or policy around assessment change across the post-primary school system, support is offered through CPD in line with the Junior Cycle for Teachers. This CPD is aligned to the Framework for Junior Cycle and through any new specifications that have been introduced at senior cycle by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). CS/T5 observations focusing on the lack of equity afforded to all subjects and hence the student cohort national is a valid point. The teacher states that this level of equity and in other words the equal opportunity for all students to engage with a multi component-based approach to assessment in all subjects is currently not an option. This is certainly relevant in the fact that not all subjects share an equal opportunity for students to be accessed regularly throughout senior cycle. This may also contribute in no small way to the variations evident in practice relating to teachers' assessment literacy, as not all teachers are required to prepare students at senior cycle for a multi component

approach to assessment. This is of importance to this study, as it may contribute to why all teachers are currently not fully engaged with developing their own assessment literacy as the system nationally has not placed a full value on this at the current time. However, once senior cycle reform is in place this will no doubt change, mainly due to the assessment arrangement that are put in place for all subjects.

The principal of the school offers an interesting approach stating that;

> *I would not be as concerned around the lack of formal policy relating to assessment, I have tried to use the SSE process to identify the needs and address the concerns at junior and senior cycle. If we really transition to an assessment for learning or assessment as learning approach, then we truly see the benefit for our students and in turn I will have no doubt that this will improve their outcomes at SEC level. I have tried to facilitate this approach with the whole school community. CS/SMP1*

This is also raised by a teacher stating *that,*

> *Yes, I can see the benefit of a national framework or policy of assessment in guiding schools or assisting their development of the process, however if teachers work together, engage with specific CPD and try to do what we are trying to do in this school by addressing an outcomes based approach and aligning it to our schools targets, where the student is at the centre of the learning process then I have no doubt that outcomes and cao entry to desired courses will be obtained. CS/T4*

While the CS/TLG have discussed this in detail over the months they felt that "*a whole school policy on assessment would be enough to inform and develop practice to centrally develop and improve assessment outcomes for students and in turn develop teachers' assessment literacy*" (CS/TLG). This is clearly telling us that schools require further advice and CPD on developing their assessment practice as well as taking the necessary steps to form an assessment policy to ensure a consistent approach across the whole school in relation to assessment. This will also go a long way to improving teacher's beliefs and the culture of the school, as the policy will be the expectation for all to deliver a similar approach to developing assessment literacy and making changes to their practice.

## 4.4 Conclusion

The emergent concepts and extended analytic codes were used as a lens to view the role of teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools. Figure 4.1 provided an overview of the emergent themes with analytic codes and their presence in the case study school.

The centrality of the teacher for success was evident in the school, their passion for assessment as part of the teaching and learning process was central which included their ability to reflect and change their practice to improve the outcomes of their students.

Key support was in place, primarily from school management, CPD, and colleagues. The location and context of the school emerged as a minor factor. Also, the school had a vested interest in assessment due to changes to curricula, senior management, and a change of culture due to a new school building and rebranded name that went beyond simply the educational value. It may not have directly influenced the assessment process, but all teachers interviewed agreed that it was a fresh start, which clearly implies that the school culture was impacted by such these changes. Internal CPD and training from both internal and external agencies was a common factor, in particular the support of CPD, colleagues and senior management. Other enabling factors emerged such as the support of the school community, in particular the trust placed in teachers by management. Significantly, the lack of a national policy was a factor raised across the discussions in the school.

# Chapter 5
# Discussion

This research study was initiated by reflecting on my practice as a business, accounting and economics teacher, a seconded PDST advisor and a senior inspector for the Department of Education. This broad experience has prompted me to consider how assessment change has started to embed itself within the system and what role teacher beliefs and school culture play in developing assessment literacy in Irish post-primary schools. In my context, much autonomy was afforded to me as a teacher, and how I interrogated changes to my practice as an element of the curriculum and how I taught in the classroom. After reflecting on my practice and from engaging with the literature relating to teachers' beliefs, school culture and the role that assessment literacy play in schools, clarity on the issue and associated hypothesis developed.

The role of teachers' beliefs, school culture, and assessment literacy presented a challenge throughout the research, and this became the genesis for this research study, whose purpose is to identify the role of teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools and how best the various education stakeholders, can develop, support and enable the development of assessment literacy within Irish post-primary schools. The stakeholders most prevalent in this research are the ITE, Post-primary teachers, post-primary principals, CPD providers, the NCCA, The Department of Education and The SEC.

The assessment landscape, nationally and internationally, is characterised by many factors and purposes, driven by priorities such as economics, performativity, and curriculum change. All these conflicting priorities that feed into the purpose of assessment present a great challenge to the Irish education system at the national and international levels (Wyse et al., 2016). The full implementation of junior cycle is still presenting a problem for some teachers that the system is responding to. This challenge may continue forward as the redevelopment of senior cycle, which is currently at the consultation stage.

The JC Framework (2015) introduced a dual approach to assessment, involving classroom-based assessment spread throughout the various years of junior cycle with a summative externally assessed, state-certified examination at the end of year three. Up to this point the Irish educational

context has been dominated by summative examinations run by the state examinations commission (SEC). Teachers now are centrally positioned within the assessment process and are tasked with a shift relating to their assessment beliefs. Particularly focused on their practices and the development of their assessment literacy. It is widely acknowledged that teacher assessment capacity has many components (Looney, 2017; Xu & Brown, 2016); beliefs have been shown to play a particularly significant role in times of educational change (Fullan, 2007; Gardner & Galanouli, 2016). I have seen this transact within the case study school as one teacher (CS/T1) stated that

> *"my belief system was reshaped by the changes to junior cycle science specification and then at senior cycle with the introduction of a new agricultural science specification…The need to reflect, evaluate and change my approach to teaching, learning and assessment was set upon me by the very nature of expectation around the assessment components within the subject…This enabled me to seek out CPD, colleague collaboration and support and to move toward developing my own beliefs, developing my knowledge relating to assessment, and, I suppose, a change of culture within our subject department at the whole school level".*

It is clear to see the impact that this has had across many levels, which I plan to contextualise and discuss further.

This study has engaged with literature focusing on the role that teachers' beliefs can play in blocking or reducing the need to challenge ones thinking and can place particular educational problems that influences teachers planned intentions and actions. To develop this point, one should consider that at this time, in the curriculum reform in Ireland and understand how Irish teachers conceptualise assessment. This would become a vital starting position for the development of support and CPD. Studies about teachers' perspectives on the need for curriculum reform highlight the importance for all stakeholders to be involved in curriculum change (Fullan, 2007; Herold & Fedor, 2008). Most teachers interviewed as part of this case study believed there was a need to change the previous curriculum and that they were happy that this change had happened.

For instance, CST6 stated that

> *"I can understand the need for curriculum change, the need to develop a well-rounded learner who can bring the skills learned to a real-life context. In order to do this, something needed to change, and it has; we now need to develop our practice, confidence and belief to evaluate assessment in a more meaningful way to develop learner outcomes and reduce some of the stress currently placed on students within the current system".*

Considering the recent curriculum reform in Ireland, this research has tried to investigate the role of teacher beliefs and school culture in developing teacher's assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools. To explain the successful implementation of the third research question, these are the 3 categories that emerged.

- Individual

- Whole school and

- National

The approach that I took was following Lichtman's 3 C's; Coding, Categorising and Concepts. The initial step was to produce a code. This is listed as the initial code collected from the semi structured interviews in table 3.6. From there the category that emerged was teacher's assessment literacy. Finally, these concepts below emerged:

- School Context

- Curriculum and Assessment

- Teachers Beliefs and Culture

- Leadership and Management.

The formation of these concepts contains analytic codes as displayed in figure 4.1. The study aimed to answer the question of what role teacher beliefs and school culture plays in developing assessment literacy in Irish post-primary schools. To date, I have critically reviewed teachers' assessment literacy and how it is conceptualised, while focusing on the available literature and research across the Irish educational landscape with a focus on policy and beyond. The chapter begins by presenting a brief descriptor of the case study school and then through a discussion of the findings. The chapter then concludes by acknowledging a framework to support future development across the three levels, individual, whole school which will be expanded on in further detail in chapter six.

## 5.1 The School

The school was in a rural setting in the midlands of Ireland, and the teachers were very engaged and familiar with the changes to the junior and senior cycle. They spoke honestly and openly about how their beliefs and school culture have evolved in recent years. This was discussed in chapter four. The evaluation of practice, the flexibility shown, and the open perspective has impacted how the assessment was perceived within the school. It was not solely viewed as the remit of one teacher or a collection of teachers within a subject department with responsibility for evolving teachers' beliefs, and the school culture relating to assessment literacy across the school community. The wider perspective of developing competencies and life-long skill development was recognised and prioritised by the senior management team, the teaching and learning team and all teachers in the school. Senior management's role in leading the teaching, learning, and assessment process through a distributed leadership model will be discussed later in the chapter. It played a key role in this school developing their practice at individual and whole school levels. Teachers displayed a broad understanding of the need to engage with their subject specifications and align their practice to the Frameworks now in place at the junior cycle and new specifications now also in place at senior cycle. This was led by senior management team within the school. The teacher was central to the process and a particularly important stakeholder involved in the dialogue on the wider benefits, associated skills, and approach in changing practice and placing the student at the centre of the process. Through my engagement with the school on conducting the semi-structured interviews, my central focus was based on the teacher's interpretation of their own beliefs and school culture relating to assessment literacy. This was conducted over the six-month period, where I engaged with the teaching and learning group and conducted the thirteen semi-structured interviews. However, the role of the senior management team in the school was visible when looking at whole school support in supporting the implementation of what was required to facilitate and meet teachers' needs as opposed to individual supports that most teachers engaged with by themselves and within their subject departments.

## 5.2 Discussion of the Findings

Currently, the JC Framework is at full implementation and can now be examined by the SEC and through the CBA process. Most teachers nationally have received several different CPD inputs on their subject and at the whole school level across the post-primary system. Some of this input is

clearly related to assessment practices. At senior cycle, this process is only in its infancy as described in previous chapters, and teachers are starting to engage with formal CPD around senior cycle reform. In the Irish post-primary system teachers typically teach across both levels.

The provision of assessment literacy practices is identified within each support level. If these are present, this will result in successful outcomes and clearly established enablers or drivers of implementation. The composite of these will help inform a framework to support future development at the system level across the post-primary system. This supported the study in providing evidence that answered the research question. The three levels of support, arising are evident in table 5.1. The evidence gathered supported the provision of answers to the research questions and the development of a possible solution to the research problem.

*Table 5.1: Teachers' Assessment Literacy in Post-Primary Schools*

| Individual Level | • Individual – Teacher Beliefs and Cultures | • Teacher assessment literacy<br>• Culture and belief<br>• CPD |
|---|---|---|
| Whole School Level | • School context and culture | • School culture<br>• Teacher support |
| | • School organisational structures | • School leadership and management<br>• Collaboration<br>• Confidence<br>• Collective Teacher beliefs |
| | • Support of CPD groups | • Internal CPD |
| National/System Level | • Curriculum and assessment | • SEC examination<br>• CPD Provision<br>• National policy |

I will now develop this further and present the findings through the three levels of support. These three levels are inter-changeable and do not carry equal weight. One concept crosses more than one level and they are interlinked which can then impact the teacher's assessment literacy to varying degrees. I have analysed the case study school data and tried to present the three levels relevant to the data from the case study school.

## 5.2.1 Individual – Teacher Belief and Culture

The successful provision of assessment practices within the case study school relating to the individual that were clearly evident from the case study analysis were;

- Teacher assessment literacy

- Culture and belief

- CPD

To understand these three areas, one needs to consider the fact that they are all interlinked. The result from the case study analysis verifies this. Teachers recognised the need to develop their assessment literacy to improve their practice. This required them to challenge their inner beliefs of what they had done up to this point in relation to their teaching, learning and assessment process. None of this would be achievable without the buy in from the senior management team who facilitated this through allowing teachers to go and receive the necessary CPD required to improve and amend their assessment literacy. The senior management team are also pivotal in the fact that they then allowed the teachers showcase their learning from CPD and facilitated such events as internal CPD, which had an impact on the school culture. I plan to describe how this transacted in relation to the individual by referencing it with direct quotes from the teachers who took part in the case study analysis.

The level of engagement and support of every individual across the case study school may be identified as an important finding. In one instance, CS/T6 motivation for supporting and enabling changes to their assessment practice originated from their own personal circumstances, in particular their own experience of schooling and the fact that they did not want their students experiencing a similar experience to their own. This teacher proudly opened the classroom to their colleagues, engaged in peer observation, reflection and attended many CPD sessions to develop and reflect on their practice. She stated

> *"In recent years, the drive to place the student at the centre of the learning and engage in more active assessment has increased due to reform particularly at junior cycle and a new specification that I teach at senior cycle. I felt a need to engage in CPD externally and internally in order to develop my assessment literacy and be comfortable in making this change. You speak about beliefs, for me this was moving out of my comfort zone, changing what we did here within the subject department, and I suppose across the school, so this was a change*

*in my belief, moving out of my comfort zone. Once I started to engage in CPD I became more informed, I felt that it would be good to share this practice through teach meets, peer observation and anywhere else I could across the school to facilitate others on making this journey or transition" CS/T6.*

Whatever the individuals' motivations and articulated reasoning for the need for assessment to change within the school, all the teachers who participated in the case study acknowledged the importance of developing knowledge, skills, understanding, and values as a means of developing the potential within their students. This exemplified the necessity for having a group of teachers within the school who had the support of the senior management to drive and implement improvement to their practice, which was centrally based around developing their own individual beliefs relating to assessment literacy and the impact that this will have on the school's culture. The Junior Cycle Framework cites *"the importance of professional development and collaboration between teachers for informing their understanding of teaching, learning and assessment and their practice in the classroom" (2015, p.8).* The evidence for this was clear within the case study school and teachers spoke about the opportunity afforded to them from senior management to engage in CPD where required to develop their practice and improve their own assessment literacy, which in turn was facilitated in the school through using a variety of assessment approached to allow their students showcase their understanding or a topic. This is further re-enforced across the junior cycle framework where it states that "*schools will therefore need to use a variety of assessment approaches that will allow students to demonstrate their understanding of concepts and skills and their ability to apply them in ways that would not be possible in a written examination*" (2015, p.35). Taken together, the assessment elements undertaken will provide a "*broad picture of the student's learning journey through the three years of junior cycle*" (2015, p.35-36). A teacher from the teaching and learning group spoke about how this was implemented within the school

*"Senior management facilitated the establishment of the teaching and learning group. When we addressed assessment literacy as a need, we approached senior management about CPD, what transacted was a full level of engagement for members of the teaching and learning group which resulted in the development of our own practice over a period of time and engagement with different CPD providers. From here we trialled the various methodologies and understandings that we now shared of assessment. We then produced an assessment policy in conjunction with the senior management team. This allowed us now to trial and roll out expectations at whole school level of what was expected in relation to assessment in our school". CS/TLG*

Another teacher added that

> *"This was not always met with acceptance, a small minority of teachers in certain subject's department expressed a concern about why there was a need to change what they were already doing, this was a challenge that we faced. We tried to upskill these teachers through internal CPD and offered them opportunities to engage in some peer observation of our lessons."* CS/T1

Across some literature early adopters are described as champion teachers. Eyal and Yosef-Hassidim (2012) believed that educational champions are teachers who introduce innovations in schools. They are "*someone committed to innovation and are dedicated to fostering and promoting innovation in an organisation by going beyond job requirements*" (2012, p.216). Within the case study school there were plenty of teachers who were driven by the motivation for being a lead teacher and focused on placing the student at the centre of the teaching, learning and assessment process in developing their own assessment literacy and the knowledge, skills, understanding and values of a given subject area for their students.

A significant factor in the case study school was the situation where initially the development of teachers' assessment practices and literacy was led within the case study school by management and implemented by the teaching and learning team. However, the development of practice relating to assessment literacy and the impact on teachers' individual beliefs quickly gained traction, which was then driven by individual teachers and subject departments and impacted on school culture. I will speak about this in more detail in the next section when I investigate the findings relating to the whole school.

The teachers from the case study school spoke about how they modelled risk taking for their students and moved away from the tried and tested methodologies, which they felt were didactic in nature. This in itself was challenging their own beliefs and trying to improve their assessment literacy. In the infancy of the development of practice, this change of practice challenged teachers own individual beliefs, focusing on whether they were doing the right thing and placed additional time and work demands on all concerned, as the learning process is perceived to be longer when they are implementing and developing practice. In addition to being aware of the additional time demands of teaching a learning outcome-based specification, the teachers in this study were also acutely aware of their need to develop their own pedagogical practice, their approach to teaching

and in particular their own assessment literacy based around their own beliefs. This was reflected by CS/T4 stating

"*Once we had engaged with the necessary CPD and started to amend our practice we noticed that the actual process of teaching within the class needed to be reframed, we had to look within ourselves to amend our practice. Yes, we now had gained new knowledge, we felt more comfortable, we had a plan in place in relation to how the development of our assessment literacy would enable students to be more central to the process, however, we did not think about the transaction of this within our forty-minute lessons. This required some time to adjust, particular to introduce or front load assessment within our lesson. I personally found this to be a challenge within the time we currently have. Essentially this challenged my own beliefs, it required me to look at my practice and the culture of our school, the forty-minute lesson, was this enough time to embed meaningful formative assessment practices*".

This sentiment was echoed through the case study, that the impact of such developments would need to be considered at a wider level for the individual impact to be truly fulfilled.

On the back of this the senior management team within the school have engaged with the teachers, students, and other stakeholder and as of the 2022/23 academic year they are trialling one-hour lessons as a means to potentially alleviating such concerns as previously addressed. This will have an impact on the individual no doubt, but it is also something which I will address at whole school level. This is a clear indicator to the interrelated link between a teachers own individual belief and how when this is challenged that a school's culture may need to be looked at it order to get everyone else on board to improve the assessment literacy of teachers.

The role of the teacher and their placement within the assessment process as the practitioner, requires a change of belief and culture from the teacher as they focus more on becoming an assessment practitioner. A shift of teacher's beliefs and change of style is required for the teacher to become a facilitator of the teaching, learning, and assessment process to encourage students to engage more deeply with the assessment process as part of the everyday teaching and learning that takes place. At times, the teachers in this case study stated that they had to take a step back and let the students take the lead in the classroom. This can be considered as a curriculum shift. The realisation that curriculum as a practice cannot be understood adequately or changed substantially without attention to the context is nothing new to us in education. It is not a new understanding and has significance for the assessment process and the teachers implementing it. The curriculum is

contextually shaped, and so will the assessment process be within the school's curriculum (Cornbleth, 1990, p.6). This is a substantial change for many teachers because it requires a complete shift of mind or "*metanoia*'' (Senge, 1990, p.13). Senge defines metanoia "*as a shift in approach from the sole consideration of transmission of knowledge to an acknowledgement of the importance of skill development in their pedagogical approaches*" (1990, p.13). Metanoia is not easy to promote or command in teaching, yet for skill development to flourish in classrooms, students must be allowed to become active participants in their own projects and learning. This demands what Seikkula-Leino (2011) called a "*shift in pedagogy*" where the teacher must change their entire pedagogical approach (Leino, 2011, p.110). This transformative change or metanoia enabled the teachers within the case study school to develop their own beliefs and culture to improve their assessment process. The findings in this study indicate that it is imperative that teachers adopt a facilitator approach to assessment for it to be successful. What I mean by this is that it is not the sole responsibility of the teacher, as we have seen three categories emerge from individual, whole school and national level that impact a teacher's belief and culture relating to assessment literacy. Teacher competency and efficacy are required to support teachers in evolving and becoming another factor in the implementation of successful change. Such a shift in pedagogical practice was clearly identifiable in the approach taken by all the teachers interviewed. They observed that more was required from the teacher than simply teaching subject content and they were all happy to adopt this approach to changing their pedagogical approach within the subject department and their own individual classes, resulting in a greater level of whole school support. One teacher spoke about this concept stating that

> "*at the outset, I needed to get my own understanding correct, but once I was comfortable in my own framing of what was meant by assessment literacy and how it was transacting within my classroom, then and only then could I bring this from my own individual lens, to the whole school lens, which was my subject department of Music and then slowly embed it across the whole school*" CS/T7.

However, it is interesting to note that some teachers reported that they shifted back to a more traditional didactic mode for examination classes, as this felt like a safe space. In addition, they viewed this approach as different from the norm and as reported by one teacher that they felt they were pushing against the system in trying to promote skill development within the classroom, a feeling that had receded in the past number of years but had not completely vanished. This opinion was also expressed by another teacher, who reported that she too had gone through this process

but a renewed value on the importance of student voice and group discussion within the classroom slowly started her to re-engage with the assessment for learning approach and a further development in her own assessment literacy was required to do this, as initially she was challenged by the senior cycle curricula and wondered if this was the way to go forward in preparing students for senior cycle. They felt that students' communication skills and independent thinking skills developed, as did their confidence in vocalising their opinions and having a say in the classroom. This is not a new concern and throughout the introduction of the Junior Cycle into post-primary curriculum in Ireland, many teachers and stakeholders questioned the value of prioritising key skill development and they viewed the changes as a "*dumbing down*" of standards within the national system (ASTI, 2019, p.2). This contrasting opinion was an outlier in the case study school. However, it warrants discussion and development within the CS/TL group, where they pointed out that

> *"Not all teachers are full on board with the need to develop their assessment literacy and have stated that the students who they teach are performing consistently higher than the national norm for their subject. That their approach focusing on the SEC examination is yielding a fantastic result".*

I observed the CS/TL group discussing this issue and outcomes, such as time to develop practice, opportunities to listen to student opinion on the style of teaching and assessment they now engage with, and greater levels of collaboration need to be developed across the school to ensure that this was fully a whole school initiative. Traditionally, teaching is examination centered in the post-primary school system in Ireland, and any methodologies that are not anchored around examination preparation are viewed as a distraction. This is evident within literature from Trant (2007, p.6) who described this situation, suggesting that in Ireland curriculum as a process is neglected and the emphasis of a curriculum as a product is overdone to the "*point of distortion*". He claims that the use of summative assessment in Ireland combined with its overarching managerial aspect has resulted in an *"examination- led curriculum [and] what tends to be taught is what is examinable and what is most examinable is often of least importance. Other forms of teaching and learning, such as debating, questioning, and investigating come to be regarded as wasteful of time"* (2007, p.190). Yet, it was the development and understanding of assessment literacy that played a role in transforming teachers' beliefs within the case study school that enabled the teachers to change their practice.

It was this change of practice to their teaching methodologies that was central to all teachers involved in the case study analysis which resulted in successful implementation of practice and

outcomes within the school. This will be further discussed at the school level regarding the impact and importance of collaboration and support.

Teachers may have the requisite knowledge of what they deem effective practices. However, they are not always fully confident about their enactment of this practice. For this reason, I focused on teachers' beliefs and culture as part of this research. Teachers may have subject knowledge and confidence, but not always the belief that the assessment process will be effective. Most importantly, based on their prior experiences and context, they may consider that some assessment processes should not be a part of their role as teachers and in their interactions with students. As shown in the case study findings, some teachers can have mixed feelings related to assessment, and this can sometimes be more focused on the outcomes from these assessment moments. In Chapter Two, I focused on Looneys et al. (2018), teachers' assessment identity, which has five interlinking dimensions. They are, I know, I feel, I believe, I am confident; and my role. This framework provides an overview of teachers' beliefs regarding their own assessment identity. However, there are many multifaceted dimensions of teacher assessment identity, which are cited in the work of Pryor and Croussouard (2010) and Ecclestone and Pryor (2003), who have identified teachers' own assessment identity relating to how they feel and how their own knowledge frames their beliefs and cultures related to assessment. One of the main findings of this research is the inter-link between teachers' beliefs, school culture, their understanding of assessment literacy, and the many components that play an equal part in developing their own assessment identity. I have tried to capture this process of teachers' own assessment identity by focusing on their beliefs, cultures, and the interlinked dimensions of teacher assessment identity in figure 5.1, which was derived from the findings of the case study engagement. I have developed this framework described as "*Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy Framework*" based on my analysis of my codes, categories and concepts.

This is my findings around the individual. It is based around the codes, concepts and three categories that have arisen from my research relating to teachers' assessment in the case study school. The Framework is inspired by Looney et al., however there are external factors that affect this framework that do not play a part in Looney's framework. As Looney's framework is mainly internal, my findings represent the multifaceted dimensions that all combine to play a role in developing assessment literacy and informing teachers' beliefs and school culture. There is no equal weight provided to the six areas and it can be multi-faceted and interchangeable depending on the context. They are all

interchangeable and multifaceted depending on the category of the individual, the whole school and national level relating to assessment literacy.
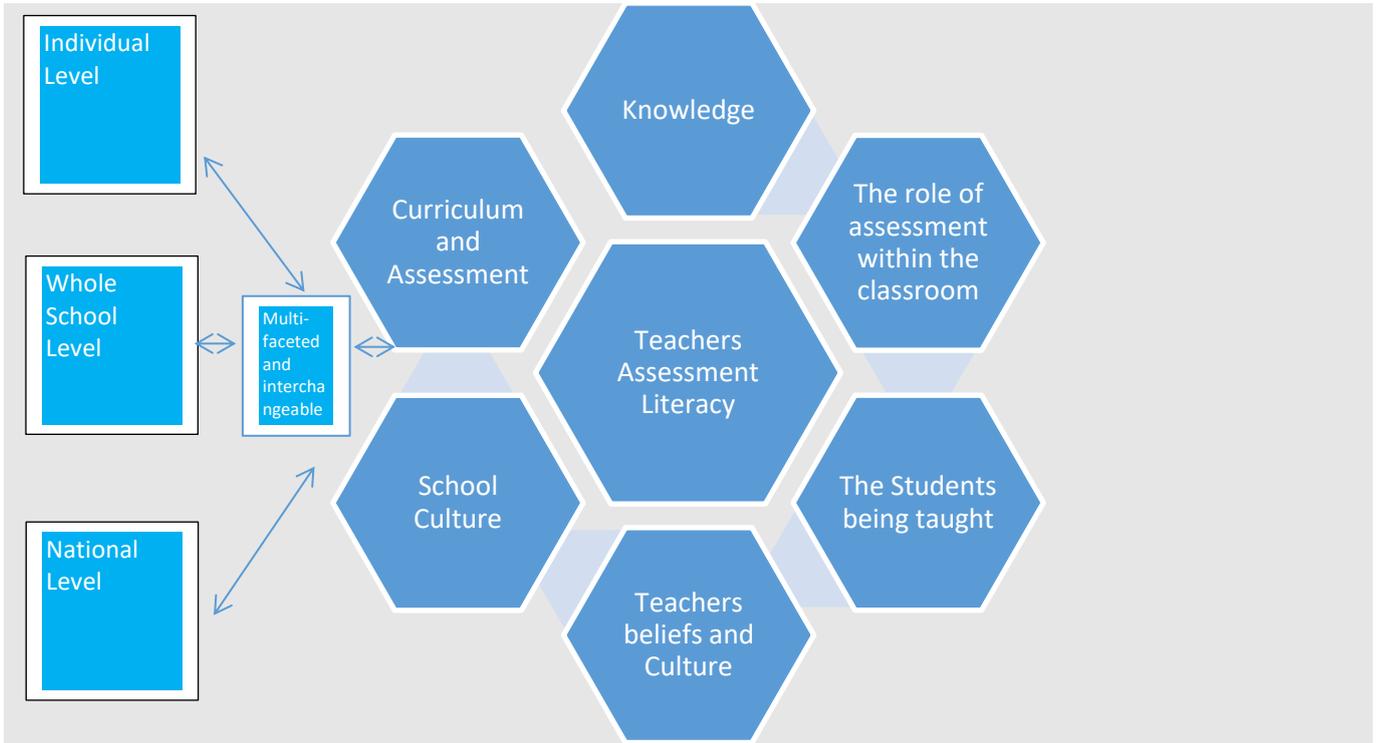


*Figure 5.1 Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy - Framework*

To unpack this framework, six components must be addressed. They are;

- Knowledge

- The role of assessment within the classroom

- The students being taught

- Teachers' beliefs and Culture

- School Culture

- Curriculum and assessment-national reform

## 1. Knowledge

The focus on knowledge was a key finding, particularly around the development of teachers' assessment literacy. Avalos (2011) defines professional development "*as how teachers learn, how they learn to learn and how they perform their knowledge to support students learning*" (2011, p.13). Some key findings from the case study presented evidence that teachers feel that CPD does not prepare them for the real needs of their students in meeting what is required from curriculum reform particular in the area of assessment literacy. Reference to sporadic CPD and the goodwill of colleagues internally within the school who collaborate and lead initiatives within the school was clear to see. One teacher reinforces this by stating that

> "*However, a more meaningful journey of professional development around teaching, learning and assessment was discussed over the course of a teacher's career. The CPD is fine in preparing you to look at the teaching and potential the learning of the new specifications, however a failing within it is the lack of understanding among teachers relating particularly to assessment literacy and the requirement that we need to meet in line with a learning outcome specification and a multi component based approach to assessment*". CS/T5

Cosán (the Irish for pathway) is the National Framework for Teachers' Learning (CPD) which has been developed by the Teaching Council. If one is to consider The Teaching Councils publication known as Cosán, A Framework for Teachers' Learning (2016). It discusses and places teachers own autonomy and professionalism at the centre of the framework which allows teachers to engage in learning opportunities that benefit them and their students. This can be framed within teachers own assessment literacy on the back of changes in Irish post-primary schools at junior and senior cycle in recent times. As stated by Cosán professional learning should further enhance teachers……

> "*Professional autonomy. The concept of professional autonomy is closely related to that of professional responsibility, as both are based on the premise that teachers, as professionals, are trusted and also committed to act in the interests of others*". This concept emerged strongly from teachers' feedback and it is clear that they are seeking a framework that will "*trust teacher's professionalism*" and "*allow responsible professional judgement from individual teachers/staff…*" (2016, p.7).

During the case study, all teachers reported changing or adapting their pedagogical knowledge and practice to develop their own assessment literacy and in turn improve assessment practices across their lessons. This clearly affirms the teacher's belief plays a key role in improving or preventing changes to their own practice. This was reinforced by a teacher who had come from a different

jurisdiction stating that

> *"When I taught outside Ireland there was a greater focus on the role of teachers in how they assess their students, so in turn the understanding of assessment literacy was greater, maybe this is the issue here in Ireland and is something that will develop as Irish teachers engage more and more with the CBA process at junior cycle".*
> *CS/T3*

The need for the Teaching council to be more stringent in the enforcement of Cosán would be a clear recommendation which may be more centrally aligned to the Departments of Educations new schools' support service, Ireland known as "*Oíde*". This in turn may assist teachers in developing their beliefs and improving their assessment literacy, which in turn would impact the school's culture where they teach.

## 2.   The role of assessment within the classroom

As we have seen from the findings, assessment plays a significant role in the classroom. The teachers' main driving force in developing their own beliefs about assessment literacy was to inform their classroom practice and, in turn, improve their own knowledge and the assessment culture of the school. By aligning this to the learning outcomes within the specification that the teacher teaches, they tracked greater levels of development around broader knowledge of the given topics displayed by the students. CS/T6 stated that

> *"as I front loaded assessment with a focus on oral language development in my mfl class I could clearly see where students were having issues and how as a teacher, I could use the assessment process to find out where these challenges arose and how I could tweak my teaching process to meet the needs of all learners within the class."*

It is clear from CS/T6 observation that when teachers were comfortable engaging with their own assessment literacy and aligning it to what is set out within their specifications, then learner outcomes improved. This in turn had a knock-on effect on teacher's beliefs and confidence relating to their assessment literacy as they could see the improvements.

### 3.    The students being taught

The students being taught in the case study school were not engaged in this research. However, teachers did always reference the impact that their assessment identity had on the students that they teach.  One teacher stated that

> *"The development of my own beliefs and understanding of assessment literacy allowed me to unpack my learning outcome based specification, align the intentions and clearly assess the students understanding in a more meaningful way, in turn this then allowed me to develop their answers with effective feedback the communication used to improve learner outcomes". CS/T7*

From this statement it is clear to see how the teachers own assessment literacy was starting to develop on the back of their beliefs, which in turn was having an impact on the outcomes of students that the teacher taught. This in turn may influence the whole school culture.

### 4.    Teacher beliefs and Culture

The teachers that engaged with the case study exhibited self-belief in their own judgements as teachers and practitioner understanding of the learning process within their classrooms. Bandura defined this as self-efficacy where "*beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments are achieved*" (1997, p.3). The teachers all displayed confidence in their own ability to evaluate what works best in their own classroom and in selecting the correct mode of assessment to use when required. All teachers participating in this study did have formal education training, with a variation in qualifications at level 9 on the NFQ framework.

Five of the teachers interviewed for this study had received formal training focusing on some area of assessment as part of the teaching and learning process, an engagement in TL21, Magenta Principles and Instructional Leadership. The other teachers had to rely on their own capabilities and belief system, what worked best for them and their students. A critical and key factor here must be the training and education of teachers (Leffler, 2009, p.105). A recent publication by Pearson and the UK Government published in December 2020 stated that, "*While teachers of course have a huge amount of knowledge around assessment……..All too often this knowledge has been gained by ad-hoc arrangements, brief introductions at initial teacher training and possibly through involvement with examinations boards"* (2020, p.16). This is a key point that resonates throughout this study and one which can be scaled up for future studies.

## 5.    School Culture

All teachers reinforced the impact that senior management had on allowing them to develop their practice through engagement with CPD and opportunities to meet as a team of teachers at the whole school and subject department levels. However, some did admit that their own level of beliefs relating to assessment literacy needed to be developed and that there were significant and varying degrees in the level of confidence among the teachers within the school. Gleeson points out that while there is much rhetoric around educational change, the reality is these reforms have *"primarily involved changes in subject matter rather than classroom practice and school culture"* (2009, p.121).

This is an interesting point which the case study school did not fully agree with. They felt that the role played by the senior management team within the school certainly played a pivotal role in improving teacher's individual beliefs relating to assessment literacy, which in turn impacted the whole school's approach. This was reinforced by CS/T7 who stated that

> *"The culture of this school has changed immensely in recent times, mainly down to the management's role in fostering and developing teacher's individual and collective practice around their teaching, learning and assessment practices. This was done through an openness and an opportunity to engage in whatever form of CPD an individual teacher felt would help inform their practice, with a central message from management focused on assessment practices and moving from a summative to formative approach. In other words, they set the expectation, provided the support, and allowed it time to embed and develop".*

From this quotation one can start to see the impact that senior management's willingness to assist teachers in obtaining CPD can have on their practice.

## 6.    Curriculum and Assessment- National reform

A recommendation for specific assessment focused on CPD is relevant in Ireland and can be echoed from engagement with the case study school and is a worthy consideration. On that needs to focus on educational development from ITE to CPD.

In Australia, there is a programme known as QTP (Quality Teacher Program) that clearly establishes how CPD for teachers should be implemented. In the absence of a broader and coherent CPD policy framework, Irish teachers engage in CPD activities as far as their professional development is concerned. However, given that curriculum reform and policy affect how CPD is enacted and

practiced, this study recommends an investigation into policy developments around CPD throughout a teacher's career.

The OECD report that teachers need to develop "*skills and apply this to knowledge*" (2014), while Shriki and Patkin  point out that teachers have "*professional development needs in areas of didactical knowledge and the capacity for dealing with emotional aspects of students' learning*" (2016, p. 336).  This implies that it would be worthwhile in developing curriculum and assessment in time of curricula reform that teacher's needs relating to their assessment literacy should be identified and the CPD provided should inform their practice to drive improvement

### 5.2.2 Whole School Level

In this section, I explore each of the factors and associated enablers within the case study school. The successful provision of assessment practices relating to the whole school that were clear from the case study analysis are as follows:

- School context and culture
- School organisational structures
- Support of CPD groups

To understand these three outcomes, one needs to consider the fact that they are all interlinked. The results of the case study analysis at the individual level, with the development of the Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy - Framework in figure 5.1, clearly identify these and contextual categories. The successful provision of assessment practices under these categories assisted the school in developing teachers' individual beliefs and cultures towards teacher's assessment literacy. We will now examine the individual's role in developing the whole school's practice. We observed findings from the individual level, which references the impact of school management and CPD provision. At the school level, we will examine how the individual's beliefs and understanding of assessment literacy were scaled up from the individual to a whole-school initiative.

The school is in a rural area in the midlands of Ireland. It is an LMETB school. The school partakes in the DEIS programme and has an enrolment of four 463 students consisting of 257 boys and 206 girls at the time of writing.  The senior management team comprises a principal and deputy principal. I

was aware of the principal and deputy principal of the school as my role aligns to evaluation and advisory work within this region. The school referenced an opportunity to further develop its assessment culture and improve practice across the whole school. The school has had several Department of Education published inspections in recent years with assessment reported as been good or very good, which is the top of the quality continuum of the Looking at our Schools publication (LAOS). I have abstracted some of the comments relating to assessment from the three most recent subject inspection reports published on the Department of Education's website, government of Ireland.ie. These are highlighted in Table 5.2.

*Table 5.2 Extract from subject inspection reports*

| |
|---|
| "Good quality assessment practices are implemented across the subject". |
| "The overall quality of assessment practices was good with some very good practice evident in lessons". |
| "Planning and preparation for the subject was very good. Schemes clearly document content, student learning activities and types of assessments". |
| "Formative assessment strategies observed included oral formative feedback and "show-me-boards" at the end of lessons to revise and assess student knowledge. This is good practice". |
| "Homework is regularly monitored and good examples of homework corrections were observed in a lesson where teachers written comments identified strengths and guided students towards improvement". |
| "Parents receive updates on student progress following appropriate and regular formal assessment of students". |

It is clear to see in recent times that the school at a whole school level is engaging effectively with assessment literacy and this is informing the context and whole school culture. The feedback provided by the DE subject inspections is from three different inspection reports, which leads us to believe that this is having a positive impact at whole school level. I have used these reports as a barometer to measure where the school is at and aligned it to the analysis of the data from my case study.

A key factor in this school culture is related to the senior management team. The senior management

team welcomed the case study and used it as a method of developing practice within the school through collaboration and distributed leadership. We have heard from many teachers across the research in how the support provided from senior management to facilitate them to engage in CPD, meet as a subject department, trial practice in their classroom, have opportunities to peer observe and present at internal CPD within the school to date just to mention some of the initiatives in place.

The principal also recognised the benefit of the case study stating that

> *"these conversations are hugely beneficial for the school community and the value that it may place on personal development for teachers who engaged with the case study will be a positive one, which in turn would improve learner outcomes and experiences". CS/SMP1*

The value of existing in and learning within a school environment that places an emphasis on collaboration and development of practice cannot be underestimated and is widely acknowledged as a valuable learning experience and context for students. An environment where rich conversation is held around teaching, learning and assessment will benefit the school community and improve its culture. All teachers that took part in the case study had high expectations and were open to engaging in and with the process.

The Exploring the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle: A longitudinal study Introductory report prepared by the University of Limerick which references *"Assessment in Ireland is a massive cultural concept, but then when we changed assessment, we didn't have a national conversation about it and have a campaign to change people's minds, the way we did about smoking, or we did a for plastic bags"* (2022, p.61-62). This is an interesting point and one that did not come about in the case study school. The senior management team and teachers referenced curriculum change and the impact that can be had on school culture and how deep levels of engagement and discussion can change and improve a school's culture, with the principal stating that

> *"the impact of the changes on the culture of the school is positive, teachers generally accepted curriculum reform and were anxious to embed the practice as best they could, in order to provide students with the best possible learning opportunity. This was done through collaboration at many levels across the school and meaningful discussions relating to teaching, learning and assessment were central to the process". CS/SMP1*

The junior cycle longitudinal study notes the *"shared language of the Framework for Junior Cycle*

*eroded traditional subject boundaries and enabled teachers to move beyond conversations about subject content to broader pedagogical and assessment issues as well as more school-wide issues"* (2022, p.63). This perspective was reinforced in the case study school where the principal expressed her views relating to assessment when reflecting on the cultural shift that was evident in her school stating that

> *"we have benefited greatly from a change to the assessment process and how assessment looks in our school, moving away from a time of heavy assessment moments that were once prevalent across the school academic calendar" CS/SMP1.*

The senior management team recognised that the initial effort and leadership displayed by the teaching and learning group to build capacity within the school relating to assessment needed to be

> *"carefully managed so that it was an achievable target and could be scaled up at whole school level. This has happened now, and it has changed the culture of the school through opportunities for co-curricular collaboration, greater levels of teacher confidence and opportunities to share new learning for CPD or the trialling of methodologies" CS/SMDP2.*

This did not happen overnight. Through discussion with the senior management team and through the engagement with the teaching and learning group they both spoke about the initial over reliance on three or four subject departments was something that they looked at. Other such initiatives as the development of cooperative teaching, peer observation, focus groups and structured meetings to discuss assessment across the school and reinforce the positive work done to date by the Teaching and Learning Group were organised. The teaching and learning group is central to what is happening around the development of the school culture and practices relating to assessment literacy. The group is open to any teacher that wishes to join. Teachers who are members of the teaching and learning group voluntarily take part outside of their teaching timetabled provision. This was what senior management felt was not sustainable in the long term and that is why they have tried to develop the practice across the school by reinforcing the work of the teaching, learning and assessment group, providing CPD in the area and placing the responsibility back on all subject departments within the school with assessment, teaching and learning central to every meeting agenda and to the work of every subject department in the school to date, this is carried out in a controlled manner with all subject department agendas required to have assessment on the meeting agendas. At the end of the school year, the subject departments report on their engagement and setup with assessment and action plans for development across the short, medium, and long term.

The presence of collaboration and collegial support that was displayed throughout my engagement with the school showed that it was attainable and when it was driven at the school level by the senior management team, as the leader of learning and implemented by the subject departments, it can start to impact teachers practice which shapes the learner experiences within their classrooms.. Teacher support is central to this; collaboration, confidence, and willingness to be involved facilitated these changes happening at the whole school level. Senior management provided the teachers with tools to look at the development of assessment literacy across the whole school, but it was the teachers who developed their own individual practice and then scaled it up across the whole school, which impacted school culture.

Fullan (1993) discussed the importance of teachers combining their own purpose, which is rooted in their own beliefs and cultures, and aligning it with the skills of change agentry. Fullan states that *"moral purpose and change agentry, at first glance, appear to be strange bedfellows" (*1993, p.18). However, if one is to examine this moral belief, purpose, and the rationale for change then they align as "*natural allies*" (Fullan 1993). To be clear the moral purpose and teachers' own beliefs and culture are aligned within the case study school around developing their own beliefs related to assessment literacy practice which in turn brings about change and is clearly improving the culture of this school. The role of the deputy principal and principal (senior management team) throughout this case study as a decision maker, policy developer and supporter of developing practice and capacity of their teachers within the school is a key organisational structure. From the perspective of curricular development, change and innovation, the senior management team supports and encourages teachers to become agents of change within their own classrooms, subject departments, and one-self. This agency is widely advocated by Fullan (1993) and has resonance with the work of Stenhouse (1975) who state that teachers behave as extended professionals when they are involved in the design of the curriculum they teach, so the curriculum is relevant to the individual learner context. So, if professionalism keeps teachers close to the needs of their students, then change agentry causes them to develop better strategies and in this case that looks at the development of assessment literacy.

Fullan (1991) discusses the role of the organisation in developing;
- shared vision-building

- organisational structures

- norms, and

- Practices of inquiry; the development of increased repertoires of skills and know-how among organisational members; and collaborative work cultures (p.36).

To relate to the case study finding of organisational structures, it is imperative for teachers to engage in change, and this is prevalent throughout the findings within the case study school where they have fully embraced the change to their practice, culture, their own beliefs, and ideals. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) also states (2019) that

> *"change is both personal and professional. Realising lasting changes in teaching and learning can involve changing deeply held beliefs about life and the world, and long-established dispositions in relation to particular aspects of learning, education, and society. It can also involve changing familiar, habitual practices that have stood the test of time" (p.17).*

At the school level, the senior management team discussed how the Board of Management and the Education and Training Board (ETB) supported the process of change, right down to the change of the time per class from 40 minutes to one-hour as they see such a development as a way to implement more active methodologies and engage deeper in developing their assessment practices. The deputy principal spoke about the need for collaboration and the expectation of senior management to deliver in order to support teachers and create a positive school culture stating

> *"this is a major body of work that has resulted in the trialling of one-hour lessons across the school, on back of this we had to look at our curriculum offered, the availability of teachers, rooms etc. It is a complete change to timetabling and has knock on effect right through to the bus times, I hope you can see how dedicated and willing we are to address this development and meet the needs of our teachers and students in a supportive manner. This hopefully speaks to the cultural shift in our school" CS/SMDP2.*

In-line with the Department of Education's LAOS publication that focuses on the importance…

> *"Of leadership and management: The quality framework sees leadership and management as inseparable. It is a fundamental principle of the framework that, for schools to be led effectively, they must be managed effectively. Therefore, both leadership and management skillsets are considered at all times as serving the school's core work: learning and teaching. The framework defines school leadership by its impact on learning. It acknowledges that effective leadership is essential for schools to be places where successful learning happens" (LAOS, 2022. p.10).*

It is clear to see that the principal and deputy principal of this case study school are clearly working at a highly effective level and align their work to the quality continuum and are engaging at a highly effective level, *"The principal works very effectively with the board of management to create and maintain a learning organisation that delivers high-quality learning experiences for all students and staff"* (2022, p.37). This was clearly evident in the case study school as the discussion involved all stakeholders and representatives from the school staff as they made a presentation to the Board, focusing on the schools' capacity to develop their practice and on the change to assessment proposed at the national and local levels, which will improve learner outcomes within the case study school. The senior management in this case study school was very supportive and was aligned to the Department of Education's LAOS publication as a leader of teaching and learning,

> *"The principal, the deputy principal and other leaders in the school expect and encourage teachers to develop and extend their learning, teaching and assessment practices, and to share and discuss practices that have proven successful at improving students learning" (2022, p.36).*

The senior management of the case study school clearly supports the early adopters and leaders of change that challenges the teacher's own individual beliefs, culture, and the school's culture. To do this, the senior management team supported teachers in developing and implementing any initiatives and this support has included some structural and resource support, encouraging multidisciplinary collaborations; promoting extended teamwork; giving members of the teaching and learning team more time.; This is reinforced by Eyal and Yosef Hassidim who state that senior management teams should be *"exercising tolerance regarding possible failure; providing resources; offering fair compensation; and giving workers leeway to plan, develop, and carry out their innovation"* (2012, p.217). The thirteen teachers in the case study school viewed their principal's support as imperative to the development of teacher's beliefs and understanding of assessment literacy and to improving the school's culture and practice relating to assessment. Teachers expressed how this support varied from class cover to allow the team to meet and discuss developments, reflect on their practice individually and collectively, develop surveys, analyse these surveys and far wider ranging support such as in-house and external CPD as well as time to plan and support other teachers in developing their assessment literacy and practice. CS/T1 captures this well when explaining the support offered by the principal

> *"Our principal was so supportive when it came to facilitating teachers to develop and improve their assessment literacy, she allowed us time to engage in CPD, offered additional supportive internal and external training, while providing teachers with the autonomy to embed their new learning into practice. Some whole school goals and targets were set aligned to SSE which enabled us early adaptors to embed our practice and improve the whole school approach to developing teacher's assessment literacy".*

Another area where the principal supported the members of the teaching and learning team was through the development of a whole school policy for assessment. This was an agreement relating to teaching and learning which would be put in place across the school and implemented across the various subject departments. This was still in draft stage when I ceased the research but it will continue to challenge teacher's beliefs and cultures as well as change the school culture to focus on pedagogical development across the school curriculum. I feel that addressing some of the concerns raised in the individual feedback, particular those outliers relating to not wishing to change their practice due to the attainment received in state examination. This assessment policy goes some way to bringing these teachers on board, as it provides them with a sounding board and clear goal to work within.

During the interviews and observations, CPD provision emerged as the main enabler for change throughout the case study. The Junior Cycle Longitudinal study reinforced this point where it stated that

> *"The professional development provided by the JCT was viewed positively. Its innovative model of delivery utilising practicing teachers and focusing on both subject-specific and whole-school issues was seen to support teachers and schools and positively contribute to the implementation of the changes"* (2022, p.71).

This is an interesting quotation as in developing my conceptual framework, I distinguished how teachers evolve, change, or alter their practices throughout their careers. My focus was to examine whether their belief changes in relation to their conceptions of assessment and development of their literacy. Having engaged with the case study school it is clear to see that impact that the teachers' stage of career has on their practice. Starting at Initial teacher education, teaching experience and CPD and the pivotal role in relation to teacher's beliefs and need for more structured CPD to develop those beliefs. In relation to this case study, it was the focus on CPD to develop teachers' assessment literacy which would make them more comfortable and informed of development and potential change their conceptions of assessment or change within a system or school that they teach in with

respect to different stages of a teacher's career. This was echoed throughout the case study engagement as teachers felt that they were *"on a journey of discovery"* (CST5) and constantly *"touching base with my values, my understanding, reflecting on my practice in order to develop and improve my attributes as a teacher"* (CST8).

These are very interesting observations which were further reinforced by two other teachers who stated that *"initial teacher education need to change in order to reflect what we are now expected to do as teachers"* (CST8), it needs to

> *"critically show us that the profession is not static, there is a perception or misconception out there that once you become permanent as a teacher that is it, we have seen many times in the past decade major changes to schooling in Ireland and with the introduction of Senior Cycle reform this may continue for many years ahead"* CS/T2.

This is reinforced from Cosán stating that "*Central to Cosán, therefore, is a vision of teachers as professionals who are intrinsically motivated to take ownership of their professional development and steer the course of their own learning journeys*" (2016, p.6). As educators we all know the importance of professional development and it is front and central to the discussions held across this case study school. Researchers have long recognised the importance of professional development for teachers in its role around changing classroom practice, improving outcomes and school culture (Borko, 2004). Professional learning often takes place in formal settings, such as professional development programmes, teaching research groups, and formal mentoring programmes (Timperley, 2011). Teachers also can learn through informal interactions that occur during peer teaching, collaborative planning, and mentoring between colleagues (Little, 2012). This was observed throughout my engagement with the case study school and certainly I would argue that some of the richest forms of teacher professional development that was discussed in chapter four and five was evident within the case study school. They included both internal and external supports from colleagues and external agencies, including changes made to practice on the back of subject inspection reports that had happened within the school.

This not only developed practice, changed teachers' beliefs and cultures but it enabled a whole school approach to informing the schools assessment culture. It was evident that the school's senior management team harnessed this willingness amongst the teachers in the case study school and

recognised this model of professional development as key in the given context, which was reinforced by the principal in stating that

> "we have great teachers in the school, with high levels of assessment literacy who have engaged in formal professional diplomas and masters in the area, as a model of professional development who are willing to work collaboratively. I tried to encourage leadership growth through a distributed leadership model, one in which all teachers can lead and develop practice collaboratively with their colleagues. In relation to the teaching and learning group and the focus they have placed on assessment, it was beneficial for the practice to be entrenched within our school, as they understood our context as a deis school; they knew the students who sat in front of them and ultimately, they know what is possible." CS/SMP1

Teachers also agree with the principal about the collaborative atmosphere in the school and one expressed that

> "we as a teaching and learning group felt very strong about our own ability to work collaboratively to develop the assessment practice within our school, we have many members who have formal qualifications in the area, who know the students, understand the staff dynamics and most importantly know what pace to go at. We also took strength in the fact that throughout the past year's teachers would be receiving messages at CPD event from JCT in their subject clusters and at whole school level from the Junior Cycle Implementation Support Team, across PDST in-service and through other formal courses that they may engage with. So, we could use the learning from these days to re-inforce and strengthen our message internally". CS/T9

The literature reinforces the fact that school leadership can create a learning environment at schools by helping teachers to identify their development needs, by encouraging experimentation, by finding and allocating resources to support teachers' learning, and by enhancing the implementation of new learning (Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011; Vanblaere & Devos, 2016). According to the Teaching and Learning International Survey- (TALIS), teachers using collaborative practices are more innovative in the classroom, have higher job satisfaction, and hold stronger self-efficacy beliefs (European Commission, 2013). Research shows us clearly that many teachers can be development leaders in their own schools. For instance, Alexandrou and Swaffield (2014) demonstrate that teacher leadership can facilitate broader professional development within school communities. MacBeath and Dempster (2008) present five principles for teacher leaders in their work. First, they should focus on the learning of everyone in the school. Second, they should create and sustain conditions that favour learning. Third, they should engage in explicit, transparent, and inquiry-based dialogues. Fourth, they should allow everyone to influence school operations, and finally, they

should maintain internal and external accountability to examine how the results align with their school's goals and principles. Of course, there also are some conditions that allow teacher leadership to flourish, including professional trust (Smylie, Mayrowetz, Murphy, & Louis, 2007), perceived autonomy (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007), supportive administrators, and time and resources, such as structural and organisational assets along with space and time (Birky, Shelton, & Headley, 2006). With this in mind, it is clear to see that the journey travelled by the case study school was successful in developing teacher beliefs around assessment literacy which informed a whole school approach through collaboration and professional development.

The OECD (2009) defines professional development as an activity "*that improves the knowledge, skills and expertise of the individual*" (2019, p.18) and Guskey (2002) defines it as "*systematic efforts to change teacher's classroom practices, attitudes and beliefs, and thus learning outcome*" (2002, p. 748). From engaging with the case study school, the support of CPD groups is pivotal in the development of teacher's beliefs and cultures around improving assessment literacy practices within the school.

### 5.2.3 National

In this section, I will explore the successful provision of assessment practices in the case study school with a focus on curriculum and assessment and the role played by examinations, CPD and national policy.

At present in relation to post primary schools in Ireland there is no direct department of Education policy relating to assessment. However, the Junior Cycle Framework states that

> "*all assessment in junior cycle, formative or summative, moment-in-time or ongoing, SEC, NCCA or teacher-designed, should have as its primary purpose, the support of student learning…………and that a dual approach to assessment, involving classroom-based assessment across the three years and a final externally-assessed, state-certified examination can enable the appropriate balance between preparing students for examinations and also facilitating creative thinking, engaged learning and better outcomes for students*" (2015, p.35).

This was the start of curriculum changes that impacted assessment practices. It was the biggest change that the education landscape in Ireland has faced in recent years.

It is a challenging experience for school and teachers, which has followed suit into senior cycle where the framework is currently being reformed and the review to date states that

> *"The many strengths of current senior cycle assessment approaches were affirmed during the review. Review participants spoke positively about the varied ways teachers use assessment to scaffold and support student learning, with a variety of approaches to assessment used across the four programmes, including projects, tasks, key assignments, reports, portfolios, practical's, orals, interviews and examinations. Teachers and parents place high value on having a system of assessment at senior cycle which is widely viewed as objective and fair. A desire to broaden and rebalance existing assessment approaches, building on key strengths already evident in senior cycle assessment emerged from the review. It was also suggested that assessment could be further spread out over time" (2019, p.16-17).*

In the senior cycle at present, out of the thirty-seven subjects, twenty-four included two or more assessment components in the form of practical's, projects, and orals. So, what is under consideration is a review of the current weighting provided to these components and the potential for setting at a minimum of forty percent over the two years. So, in theory teachers are already engaging with multiple assessment components but it is the value of this engagement with assessment that is currently under review. From the process that is now embedded at junior cycle, this should provide an easier transition for teachers nationally.

Throughout the case study, many of the teachers expressed a desire to see this reform transact across the post-primary schooling for students with one teacher stating that

> *"if we are to engage in reform and look at how we approach assessment as part of the teaching process, then due consideration needs to be provided to the process and students and teachers effort and time needs to be considered with a higher value placed on the continuity of senior cycle which would improve students chances of achieving a more reflective grade for their efforts and not one that is solely dependent on the sitting of a terminal state examination". CS/T8*

The deputy principal reinforced this also stating that

> *"we are now at a cross roads, a point where the value of the external moderator, the SEC, needs to become more involved in the process. We have asked teachers, students, and all stakeholders to reflect and implement changes to their practice and at school level for the most part we feel that we have implemented this process. However, it is very hard to get buy in from every stakeholder when the process still places such value on the sitting of one*

*examination which can reflect students efforts over their school life cycle, when this shift happens where the process is moderated and assessed over the course of the cycle then we will fully see the value that is placed on continuous assessment and the key skills of developing lifelong learning for our students". CS/SMDP2*

This captures the mood nationally. If we are to ask teachers to develop their practice, to change their beliefs and cultures relating to assessment, we need to show them that it has value for the learners that sit in front of them daily.

At present, the system nationally works towards preparing students to sit the state examinations in 6th year, known as the leaving certificate. Most senior cycle students choose the established Leaving Certificate programme. This two-year programme covers a wide range of subjects. Subjects are normally studied at either Ordinary or Higher Level. Irish and Mathematics can be studied at the Foundation Level. Foundation Level is geared to the needs of students who might have difficulty with subjects at Ordinary or Higher Level.

As part of the Case study, teachers expressed a desire to see a fairer system that encourages students to engage more deeply with the teaching, learning and assessment process over the two years of senior cycle stating that *"when the system moves to a more representative approach where students are encouraged and rewarded for succeeding over the two years of the programme, then I think we will finally see full acceptance of what we are trying to achieve"* (CST4) with another teacher stating that

> *"in DEIS schools like this, students take a number of practical subjects and are rewarded for the progression over the two years of the programme when they engage in various modes of assessment, it is interesting to see how motivated they are for these subjects against the more traditional subjects where there is not as heavy weight placed on continuous assessment. This really is where we as a school need to look at the equity for teachers and students and to fully get the system to move forward; I think we need to place more trust in the process and assess the students as they deserve to be assessed over the timespan of the subject which they study". CS/T1*

This is an interesting observation and one that the Department of Education has set out to improve in two action plans. Firstly in 2019 they looked to set a goal where they would *"equip education and training providers with the skills and support to provide a quality learning experience"* as well as setting a strategic action under this goal to *"Improve teacher education to provide practitioners with the right skills for 21st century teaching, learning and assessment"* while continuing to look at the *"reform of initial teacher education to ensure teachers are equipped with the right skills for 21st*

*century teaching, learning and assessment*" (2019, p. 28-30). Will this now go to informing national policy. This is further addressed in their Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 goal one where they are looking to

*"Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students, in schools and early years settings….by providing every child and young person with a learning experience that supports them to reach their potential and to develop the knowledge and skills they need to navigate in today's complex world….through developing and improving learning and assessment through continuation of the programme of curricular reform and an exploration of new approaches to teaching and learning" (2021, p.18).*

Finally the Department have recognised the need to *"Strengthen the learning experience through curriculum and assessment development, including early years curricular provision, embedding the new primary curriculum and the Junior Cycle and advancing reform of the Senior Cycle"* (2021, p.18). For me in concluding this study, this recognises the need to provide extra CPD to support teachers in improving their assessment literacy, a review of the state examinations and the need to develop national guidance and policies to support the implementation of reform at Junior and Senior Cycle. As regards national policy, a common view repeatedly expressed and shared by the casestudy school was the need for a focused guidance document relating to assessment. The school reflected on their own practice and the outcomes form their teaching and learning group in developing a school-based assessment policy. Successful implementation of assessment in the schools depended on individual and whole school supports and necessary support for sustainable curricular provision at national system level was missing.

The Chief Inspectors report from 2022, reinforces the major changes we have observed as educators across the system to date stating that

*"Inspectors noted that teachers had made significant advances in the use of student self-assessment and peer-assessment in junior cycle lessons. These practices enable students to review their progress and are important in helping them in the next steps of their learning. To build on this, it is important that teachers incorporate the explicit teaching of assessment skills and the modelling of quality judgements into their classroom practice. Inspectors observed the development of very good practice in this area in some subject areas. The sharing of expertise across subject departments will, therefore, be a key factor in the further development of practice in this area" (2022, p.132).*

While an area for development was noted relating to assessment stating that "*challenges remain in relation to how assessment is carried out, how assessment findings are used, and the quality of formative feedback that students receive*" (2022, p.171). Teachers in the case study school did reference the importance of inspection and how when a subject department within the school had an inspection in 2021 that it focused the teaching and learning group to implement the recommendations across the whole school stating that

> *"the findings from the subject inspection was in a specific subject area, however as a teaching and learning group we looked at the learner experience and the impact that such findings relating to assessment could have across the whole school community, this report had a specific finding relating to assessment stating that the level of detail and frequency of written feedback on students work varied. Subject department teachers should agree with a standard for the provision of written feedback on students work at specified times, so we looked at this at the whole school level and what formative assessment meant, how we could implement it and improve our practice, so yes in the lack of clarity at times or the need for a national assessment policy to guide schools, we feel that inspection can do this well as its tailored towards our unique context in a specific time. CS/T9*

From engaging with the action plan for education and the focused placed on improvement in assessment and the need to support teachers during curriculum reform there seems to be a desire for the development of a national framework or policy around assessment. However, to date no action has been taken.

This research study has identified the provision of assessment practices which facilitated the case study schools journey to date from the individual teacher to the subject departments and then to the whole school. The scarcity of various elements at the system level is also discussed. Upon discussion and distillation of the findings in the case study and across the five chapters, the key underlying enabling factors which supported the development of teacher's beliefs and cultures in assessment were identified. Taking due consideration of the research questions, these are now applied to the development of a proposed framework to support assessment at system level and so help alleviate the disjointed and somewhat fragmented implementation on a school-by-school basis that is clearly evident at the present time.

# Chapter 6
# Conclusion

This chapter is a conclusion based on my research from engaging with the case study school and linked to my educational experience to date. It presents a framework that I have developed that will support future development at system level following the three areas that have emerged from the research. It will then analyse my newly developed Teachers Self-Assessment literacy Framework that was developed on the back of my research findings. This can be used to develop teacher's assessment literacy across an individual, whole school and national level.

It will then conclude by identifying potential future research on the basis of my findings.

## 6.1 A framework to support future development at system level

It is an assumption of this dissertation that any policy developed for assessment to guide whole school policies nationally focusing on assessment would be welcomed within schools. Schools therefore must embed the enabling factors identified in the case study. This should be reflected across the educational system and be present in all post-primary schools. Emerging from the data that I collected from the case study, I have developed a framework based on my finding that is in place "*to Support Future Development at System Level*" towards the embedding of assessment literacy in all post-primary schools would be worthwhile.

I have proposed three pillars at system level which are factors that are clearly identified across chapter four and five. These are captured in figure 6.1. The definition for assessment is taken from the NCCA's definition in that assessment is the process of *"generating, gathering, recording, interpreting, using, and reporting evidence of learning in individuals, groups, or systems, which relies upon a number of instruments and methods. Educational assessment provides information about progress in learning"* (NCCA).

It is of vital importance that assessment is part of the teaching and learning process and embedded across all subjects in post-primary schools. To implement this the following areas have emerged from the case study;

1. Continuum of Professional Development – Life Long

2. State Examinations and School based Assessment

3. National Assessment Guidance

These are summarised on the following table with some suggested areas of focus.

| National Assessment Guidance | • Department Guidance on Assessment<br>• Develop a student based assessment framework<br>• School Based Assessment Policy |
| State Examinations and School based Assessment | • Assessment Components<br>• School Based<br>• Cycle of the Programme<br>• State Examinations |
| Continuum of Professional Development-Life Long | • Initial Teacher Education<br>• Newly Qualified Teacher<br>• Continuing Professional Development<br>• Develop Assessment Literacy<br>• Accreditation |

*Figure 6.1: A Framework to Support Future Development at System Level*

## 6.1.1 Continuum of Professional Development- Life Long

A truly clear and concise message was central to the case study analysis of interviews and engagement with the various teachers and that was based around the need to provide a meaningful continuum of professional development starting at Initial teacher education level and moving through the phase of newly qualified teacher right through to the development of learning throughout ones teaching career. As the main focus was around teachers' beliefs and culture relating to assessment, it was felt that teachers at times are reacting to the needs of the system without adequate focused support where they can track progression and personal development over the course of their careers. What did arise was the central idea of teacher's assessment literacy and the need to develop a greater understanding of this. Teachers spoke about receiving CPD on methodologies to impact teaching and learning, but struggled with their own beliefs, culture and understanding of the why and how to implement changes to their assessment practice.

Dylan Wiliam, advocates for an explicit expectation that teaching should be a learning profession focusing on the fact that

> *"Teaching is such a complex craft that one lifetime is not enough to master it…, but by rigorously focusing on their classroom practice, teachers can continue to improve throughout their career. Therefore, we need a commitment from teachers — not one to attend a certain number of hours of professional development per year but a career-long commitment to the continuous improvement of classroom practice, as well as an agreement to develop their practice in ways that are likely to improve outcomes for students" (2011, p.7).*

Within an Irish context the idea of a career long commitment to professional development as we can see from the engagement with the case study school and through my own engagement with schools in my role is starting to gather traction but not fully in a meaningful way. With the introduction of Cosán that describes CPD and teachers professional learning as an "*a life-long learning, that comprises the full range of educational experiences designed to enrich teachers' professional knowledge, understanding and capabilities throughout their careers*". The policy also sets out the Teaching Council's position regarding the development of a coherent national framework for teachers' ongoing professional learning, but it is yet to be fully implemented. The literature on effective professional development is based on the studies by Ball and Cohen (1999) and Van Veen, Zwart, and Meirink (2012). Other studies by Gable and Burns (2005), Hooker (2008), Sutherland, Scanlon & Sperring (2005), Butler & Schnellert (2012) and Watson (2005) examined the models, methods, and forms of professional development all which would be extremely useful to frame the new model of CPD in an Irish context. This is at a particularly suitable time in an Irish context as the support services have merged into one from the academic year 2023/24 and are now known as Oíde.

One example to consider would be the Australian model as discussed by Mukan et al. (2019) where teacher professional development standards are implemented taking into consideration the stage of the teachers' career, what their needs are and the requirements to their knowledge, skills, competencies, and attitudes (2019). This may very well provide a conceptual frame for consideration in light of the current reform that we are experiencing across the Irish post primary educational landscape and may go some way to developing teachers own beliefs cultures, school cultures and that of the system in identifying what is required in order to improve the outcome of the learners within our schools.

The importance of in school CPD and the knowledge of the context came across strongly from the case study analysis and this really assisted the school in developing their practice. One teacher was quoted as saying "*we were all in it together and we leaned on our colleagues*" CS/T6 and another teacher was quoted stating that "*we know the students and context, only us as teachers in the school can work collaboratively to implement and change the culture of this school*" CST4. On a national level there may be merit in developing a CPD model of in school support and accreditation in line with a continuum of development. It would be beneficial to look at other jurisdictions and see where this was embedded successfully.  Other jurisdictions such as Norway provided funding for in-school CPD during the years 2006 to 2010 as part of their national approach to improving quality of classroom assessment (Nusche et al., 2011, p.34). Ireland has provided a similar approach offered by the JCT on the introduction of the Junior Cycle Framework, but as expressed by teachers in this study, this is something that should be looked at further in order to meet the needs of all teachers, particularly as senior cycle reform has begun and teachers are facing with new challenges to developing their assessment literacy in light of changes to the additional assessment component (AAS) proposed across all subjects at senior cycle (DE, 2023).

One possible approach would be to train teachers to become assessment champions focusing on the development of assessment literacy through a model of "*train the trainer*" by preparing a teacher per school to act as a contact for any areas relating to assessment. This assessment champion would be tasked with organising in-school training and working with classroom or subject groups on such activities as joint assessment design and moderation. This role could be considered as a structure within any future development of continuum. It would not be a major change for schools and the Irish context as presently at junior cycle there is a similar approach taken with the co-ordination of junior cycle programme been undertaken by the junior cycle programme coordinator. This role is at present responsible for leading the school's engagement in the revised junior cycle by managing, leading and mediating change to respond to the evolving needs of the school community. Therefore a similar approach could be provided to what I am proposing above, relating to assessment development across schools.

Teachers should be encouraged to share examples of good assessments through an online e-learning platform. The online teacher education platform known as Scoilnet could be used in collaboration

with the support services to include modules on assessment, which could be linked to any reform that is currently in place. I would recommend that the Department of Education plays a more active role in engaging with the Teaching Council of Ireland in monitoring the quality of initial teacher education programmes by setting programme-specific accreditation criteria and developing guidelines for the design of initial teacher education programmes, including the development of assessment literacy components, in order to develop the concept of teachers assessment literacy.

## 6.1.2. Proposed changes to State Examinations and School based Assessment

The experience reported within the case study school supported the idea of more autonomy linked to the assessment process. Teachers expressed a desire for a great level of opportunity for the students to showcase their learning over the engagement with the course, whether the junior or senior cycle. They also looked for this to be done in a manner where there were more components in the assessment process, which was moderated by the SEC, and that students could use towards their total SEC grade. Classroom-based assessment is a favoured approach by the participants, and many examples of junior cycle CBA's and practical subject components have been discussed. The research clearly states that "*among the different types of assessment, classroom assessment has the greatest impact on student learning*" (Absolum et al., 2009, p.4).

This is an interesting observation because the process of classroom-based assessment produced such negative feedback from the teaching profession on the introduction of the junior cycle framework in 2015. This clearly implies from the case study school that a greater weight attached to the second component of assessment across the curriculum would have far more reaching effects for the learners, the teachers, and the post-primary sector in Ireland.

In recent decades, as most OECD countries have adopted competency-based curricula, there has been a growing interest in performance-based assessments, such as experiments or projects. These types of assessments require students to mobilise a wider range of skills and knowledge and demonstrate more complex competencies, such as critical thinking and problem solving (OECD, 2013, p.1). Encouraging and developing effective, reliable, and performance-based assessments can be challenging. OECD countries that have tried to promote this kind of assessment have found that teachers have required far more support than initially envisaged. For classroom-based assessment

to be effective, there is a need to develop teachers' pedagogical practices, beliefs, and cultures related to assessment literacy. This is clearly evident across the three categories identified from this research. The need to develop the teacher's assessment literacy to inform the whole school approach which will then have an impact nationally is clearly expressed throughout the engagement with this case study school.

This is extremely timely as nationally the education sector at post-primary is facing into the challenge of senior cycle redevelopment where the external component known as the additional assessment component (AAS) may be as high as fifty percent for some subjects and forty for others over the two years and the SEC component of terminal examination therefore only carrying fifty or sixty percent. This is a major shift in an educational concept for Irish teachers and will take time to embed. That is why I feel strongly in relation to the development of the Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy – Framework as a tool to assist teachers, schools and educators in developing their assessment literacy. It also reinforces the evidence gathered across the study in reflecting the case study teachers expectation in developing practice related to additional assessment components at senior cycle.

### 6.1.3 Development of a policy relating to national assessment guidance

The quality framework entitled "*Looking at Our School (2022) – A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*" (LAOS) is the lens through which teaching, learning and assessment is evaluated in Irish schools. It sets out domains for evaluating teaching, learning and assessment practices and approach within schools with descriptors or statements of effective and highly effective practice (DE, 2022, p.12).

Within this framework assessment is front and central across teacher's individual, teacher's collective practice and learner outcomes and experiences. This enables teachers to better understand the standards of effective practice and highly effective practice concerning assessment practices across their work. However, there is no national policy or guidance on assessment or expectation that schools should have their own individual policy relating to assessment practices. On the back of the research findings, this needs to be addressed. The case study school spoke about developing their assessment policy and engaging with the various stakeholders and how useful an exercise this was in creating a centralised policy that set the expectations for all members of the school community.

The Education Act 1998 part V sets out that;

> "*The Principal of a recognised school and the teachers in a recognised school, under the direction of the Principal, shall have responsibility, in accordance with this Act, for the instruction provided to students in the school and shall contribute, generally, to the education and personal development of students in that school. (2) Without prejudice to subsection (1), the Principal and teachers shall—*
> - *Encourage and foster learning in students,*
> - *Regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents*" *(1998, Part V, S21, p.25).*

This section b is interesting in that it may be perceived as an avenue for changes to be made to how students are evaluated or assessed and how schools report on this assessment. It is an avenue to explore further opportunities for change and for the development of a school-based process or policy relating to assessment. The case study findings provide the reader with an understanding of

assessment literacy aligned to curricular reform and expectations of teachers. This clearly highlighted the need for development in the area of assessment literacy and how teachers' beliefs can improve if the necessary supports are in place to inform them, which in turn can play a pivotal role in improving school-based culture around assessment.

This study has made a significant contribution to the literature on assessment literacy relating to teachers' beliefs and school culture in Irish post-primary schools as the case study clearly establishes the link between meaningful professional development and the impact that it can have at individual and whole school levels in improving practice.

## 6.2 Conclusion

Considering the nature of this research as an in-depth case study with one school the researcher was able to develop and tease out many issues relating to assessment literacy, teachers beliefs and cultures and changes that are been implemented nationally that are impacting teachers practice. However this research was unique in that it engaged internally with a school over a period of time as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with thirteen teachers. The finding of the research does give a very good insight into future policy development such as Senior Cycle redevelopment. As this research was focused on a case study school, I will conclude by re-engaging with my framework entitled *"Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy"* and how it can be used in schools. It would be worthwhile to consider the three levels as a tool to investigate teachers' practice in light of future policy changes and senior cycle redevelopment.

The three levels are;

1. Individual teachers' beliefs

2. Whole school level

3. National.

It is an assumption of this dissertation that any future policy developed for assessment, to guide whole school policies in the area nationally would be welcomed within schools.

The framework developed as part of this thesis would assist schools in developing Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy by considering the six components across the three levels. This would facilitate

teachers and schools in developing their assessment literacy and assist them in identifying challenges that may exist. This is clearly evident in figure 6.2 where teachers and schools could engage with the framework to inform and develop their assessment literacy.
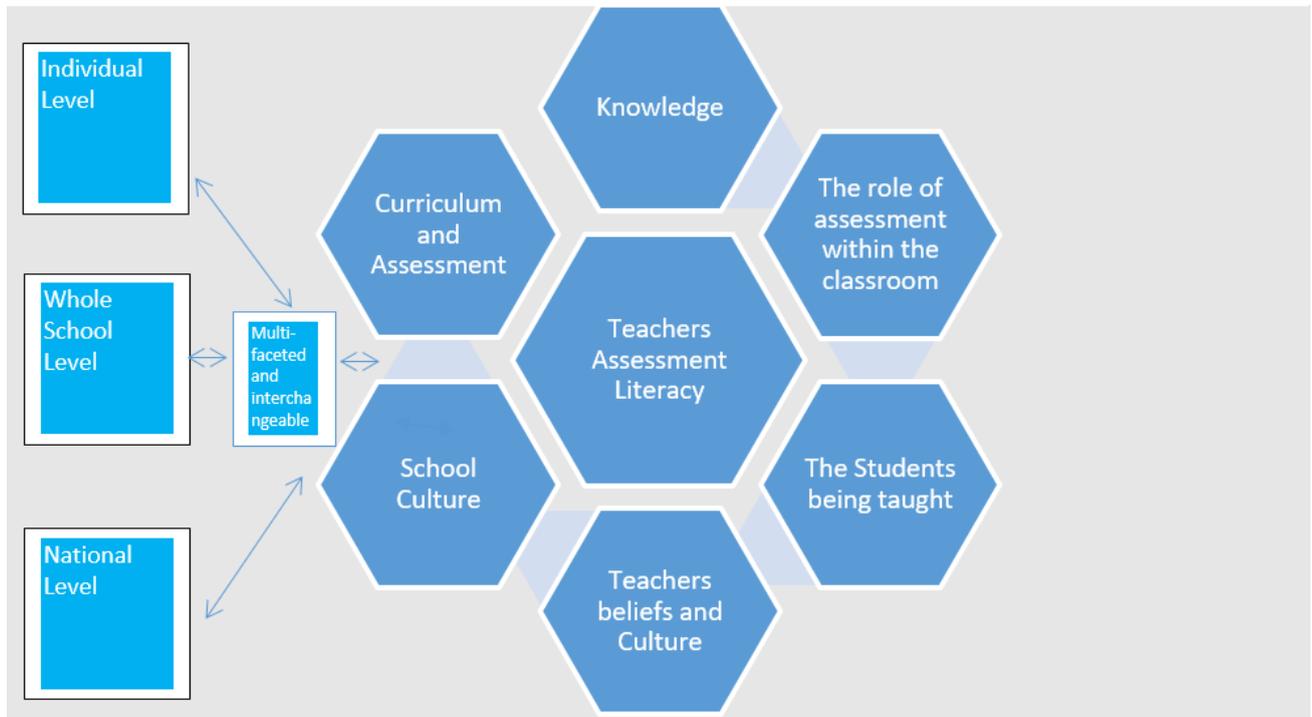


*Figure 6.2- Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy – Framework*

This body of work set out to conduct a case study of teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools. To achieve this, three primary questions for this research study were explored.

- What do teachers do in the classroom concerning assessment practices?

- Do teachers' beliefs and culture inform their practices related to their assessment literacy?

- How is the successful provision of assessment practices unpacked in the case study school?

The related discussion based on the three research questions established a positive outcome within the case study schools teachers' assessment literacy.

The categories identified at three levels; individual level, whole school level and national level through the captured discussions within the case study were used to assess the potential support

areas for schools in developing teachers' beliefs and the schools culture relating to assessment literacy. The investigation with the thirteen participants and the teaching and learning group within the case study school produced a framework on the back of the findings related to the code, category, and concept, known as Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy – Framework containing six components. They are;

- Knowledge

- The role of assessment within the classroom

- The students being taught

- Teachers beliefs and Culture

- School Culture

- Curriculum and assessment-national reform

It is hoped that the Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy Framework will be used across the three categories identified; individual, whole school and national to inform and develop teacher's assessment literacy. It may also facilitate strategic planning and policy development at national level to inform the system in relation to teachers' understanding of assessment literacy and in developing CPD for teachers in improving their beliefs related to assessment literacy. This in turn will improve the whole school culture of where they teach, through a more informed understanding of the assessment process, which will enable teachers to engage more deeply with the principles of assessment relating to the specifications that they teach and any internal and external assessment that their students will take over the cycle they are studying at junior and senior cycle. Interwoven within the research question is the role of teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy. The research study has clearly recognised that teachers' beliefs and school culture play a pivotal role in the outcome of teacher's assessment literacy.

This research has contributed to knowledge in the field of assessment literacy. The use of the case study as a research tool has provided me with a "*unique and distinctive contribution*" to this area. I feel that this research, has identified a gap in the academic literature relating to the role played by teacher's beliefs and school culture in developing teacher's assessment literacy within an Irish

context in post-primary schools (Cohen et al., 2018, p.390) which up to this point was a very small body of work. The study addressed this gap and facilitated an in-depth analysis of assessment literacy relating to teachers' beliefs, school culture during times of curricular reform. This is an area to date that there is not much research or investigation within an Irish context.

## 6.3 Potential Future Research

This research study engaged with the case study school over a six month period where semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen teachers and an engagement with the schools teaching and learning group that took place five times over a six month period.

On the back of my Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy Framework containing six components, which is a development of Looney and colleagues teacher assessment identity framework (2014).
Based on the findings of this research it is my opinion that the proposed Teacher Self-Assessment Literacy Framework could be scaled up further. This is one case study school, the benefits of scaling this up across a further study would further test the frameworks capabilities and impacts that it may have. Someone can use this framework and structure their research further.

A review of the impact of curricular reform across the system at junior cycle relating to teachers beliefs and school culture around assessment literacy would be beneficial, while a longitudinal study focusing on the outcomes of teachers belief's and school culture on the back of curriculum reform would be very beneficial to track the impact this has had on the school culture and across the three levels of individual, whole school and national.

The framework proposed to support future development at national level needs to be monitored and evaluated closely when aligned to the provision of teachers' professional development throughout their careers from ITE, to, CPD and finally to professional development. As with all frameworks refinements may be necessary when implementing at a national level where the six components may play greater or lesser roles at the time of the research.

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# Appendices
## Appendix 1: Participant Invite Letter



*Participant Invite Letter*

**Challenges that Irish teachers are facing, in relation to the changes to assessment practices in post primary schools?**

Dear teacher,

My name is William Donnelly and I am a doctoral student with the School of Education at the National University of Ireland Maynooth. I am conducting a research project into the challenges that Irish teachers are facing, in relation to the changes to assessment practices in post primary schools. The focus of this research project is role of Teacher beliefs and culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools.

My interest within this subject emerges from having engaged with the changes to assessment practice as a post-primary teacher, worked with schools while on secondment to the PDST and closely observed this practice in action over the past five years as a post-primary inspector with the Department of Education. To date, few studies have examined the links with teacher's beliefs and cultures and the outcomes of assessment change in second levels schools in Ireland. This paucity of research is set within a context whereby at national level the importance of assessment is much lauded and persistently identified as a key action towards creating a learner centred approach to education.

As a participant in the study you will be asked to partake in a semi structured interview. This interview will seek to ascertain your opinion and insights into assessment within your school. The interviews will take place at a mutually agreed time and place. It is envisaged that the interviews and engagement with the school will be over a semester, from January 2022 to May 2022. The interview and engagement with your colleagues and staff will, with your permission only, be audio recorded so I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The audio recording will only be reviewed by me who will transcribe and analyse them. They will then     be destroyed.

Confidentiality is completely assured and your participation and identity will remain confidential. The information will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study will become part of a Doctoral thesis and be available in the Library at the National University of Ireland Maynooth. Taking part in the study is your decision. You do not have to and can withdraw your co-operation at any time. If requested, a copy of the interview transcript will be made available to you for your inspection and final approval. There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with the study.

By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to reflect upon your own and colleagues academic training, current practice and professional experience. This research also represents an opportunity to have your opinions included in research that has the potential to benefits students, teachers and school leaders here in Ireland at national level.

If you have any questions or concerns about participating in this study, please do not hesitate to contact me directly at William.donnelly.2020@mumail.ie.

Alternatively you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Zerrin Doganca Kucuk, School of Education Maynooth at Zerrin.DogancaKucuk@mu.ie

I thank you in advance for your willingness to help in generating new knowledge in this field with a view to advancing our understanding of how best improvements can be made for students who attend second level schools in the future.

Yours faithfully,

William Donnelly

# Appendix 2: Principal Participant Information Sheet



*Principal Participant Invite Letter*

**A case study of teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools**

Dear Principal,

My name is William Donnelly and I am a doctoral student with the School of Education at the National University of Ireland Maynooth. I am conducting a research project into the challenges that Irish teachers are facing, in relation to the changes to assessment practices in post primary schools. The focus of this research project is the role of assessment in Ireland and the main issues addressed in teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools

My interest within this subject emerges from having engaged with the changes to assessment practice as a post-primary teacher, worked with schools while on secondment to the PDST and closely observed this practice in action over the past five years as a post-primary inspector with the Department of Education. To date, few studies have examined the links with teacher's beliefs and cultures and the outcomes of assessment change in second levels schools in Ireland. This paucity of research is set within a context whereby at national level the importance of assessment is much lauded and persistently identified as a key action towards creating a learner centred approach to education.

As a participant in the study you will be asked to partake in a semi structured interview. This interview will seek to ascertain your opinion and insights into assessment within your school. The interviews will take place at a mutually agreed time and place. It is envisaged that the interviews and engagement with the school will be over a semester, from January 2022 to May 2022. The interview and engagement with your colleagues and staff will, with your permission only, be audio recorded so I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The audio recording will only be reviewed by me who will transcribe and analyse them. They will then     be destroyed.

Confidentiality is completely assured and your participation and identity will remain confidential. The information will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study will become part of a Doctoral thesis and be available in the Library at the National University of Ireland Maynooth. Taking part in the study is your decision. You do not have to and can withdraw your co-operation at any time. If requested, a copy of the interview transcript will be made available to you for your inspection and final approval. There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with the study.

By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to reflect upon your own and colleagues academic training, current practice and professional experience. This research also represents an opportunity to have your opinions included in research that has the potential to benefits students, teachers and school leaders here in Ireland at national level.

If you have any questions or concerns about participating in this study, please do not hesitate to contact me directly at William.donnelly.2020@mumail.ie.

Alternatively you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Zerrin Doganca Kucuk, School of Education Maynooth at Zerrin.DogancaKucuk@mu.ie

I thank you in advance for your willingness to help in generating new knowledge in this field with a view to advancing our understanding of how best improvements can be made for students who attend second level schools in the future.

Yours faithfully,

William Donnelly

# Appendix 3: Participant consent Form



**A case study of Teacher beliefs and school culture in developing assessment literacy in Irish Post-Primary Schools**

## <u>Participant Consent Form</u>
### Name of Researcher: William Donnelly

Please tick as appropriate. By ticking "YES" to the following four questions, you are   affirming your desire to participate in this study.

1. I confirm that I understand the information contained in these documents and I have had enough time to consider my participation in this study.                              YES ☐NO☐

2. I confirm that I was provided with contact details for the primary researcher of this study and was encouraged to ask any questions I may have.                              YES ☐NO☐

3. I certify that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or prejudice. I also understand that I may re-join the study at a later date if I so choose.                              YES ☐NO☐

4. I agree to take part in this study and to partake in a semi structured interview. YES ☐NO☐

5. I agree for the semi structured interview to be audio recorded interview.   YES ☐NO☐


Signature of Participant:


Date:

Name of School:

# Appendix 4: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule for Teachers



**Semi-Structured Interview Schedule for Teachers**

| Q. | **Changes to assessment practice within the school, how was it introduced into the school and did it impact your practice and student outcomes** |
|---|---|
| Probes | Any particular event or factor which triggered its introduction |
| | Engagement with agencies or CPD |
| | Was the initial motivation for introducing formative assessment to emerge internal or external to the school |
| | Student desire, teacher desire, policy change in Assessment which prompted its introduction in the school |
| Q. | **When you think back on the changes that you have made to assessment practices in your classroom/practice, is there any significant or particular events which stand out?** |
| Probes | Light bulb moment<br>Particular subjects/teachers<br>Particular CPD<br>Notable failures<br>What are the outcomes and affects<br>Has classroom practice evolved due to this change<br>Has student experience changed<br>Is there a difference in attainment outcomes of students |
| Q. | **Reflecting to date on the changes to assessment practice and teachers conceptions of assessment, what are some of the contributing factors facilitating your success?** |
| Probes | Student<br>Teachers<br>Parents<br>Local community<br>Result<br>Outcomes<br>Technology<br>Practical component<br>Leaders of change<br>Areas of study |
| Q. | **How is assessment literacy promoted within the school?** |
| Probes | Formal<br>Informal<br>Teach meets<br>Internal CPD<br>Other |

| Q. | **Has the way in which assessment culture/literacy is promoted changed in the school?** |
| --- | --- |
| Probes | If so why and how<br>What are the outcomes<br>How are these identified<br>How are they developed<br>How do we continue to drive change/evolve<br>Have you played any part in its evolution<br>What were the challenges<br>What were the benefits to date<br>How can you measure this |
| Q. | **What factors with the school structure facilitate the successful evolvement of assessment literacy, culture, conceptions and practice?**<br>Teachers<br>Classroom practice<br>Team teaching<br>Peer assessment<br>National policy change<br>New specifications – JC and SC<br>CPD<br>Upskill- Internal v external |

| Q. | **What supports are provided by the school management for the teachers** |
| --- | --- |
| Probes | Structural supports<br>Staffing supports<br>Financial supports<br>Training<br>Time<br>Any specific examples |
| Q.<br><br>Probes | **How are the participant teachers selected who are involved in the delivery of the assessment teaching and learning team/ programme(s) in this school**<br>Expression of Interest<br>Area of further study<br>Posts of Responsibility<br>An identified need |
| Q. | **What are the primary benefits of the changes to assessment practices for the school?** |
| Probes | Students<br>Teachers<br>Impacts<br>Accreditation<br>Engagement<br>Outcomes<br>Classroom culture and environment<br>Teacher beliefs<br>Teacher understanding of assessment |

- My focus as interviewer:
- History of their involvement in education
- Their understanding of the meaning of the term assessment
- Experience of assessment practice in their own background
- Training in the area of teaching, learning and assessment
- Benefits of a students centred approach to assessment
- Classroom strategies employed in their provision of teaching learning and assessment
- Supports available for the delivery of teaching methodologies relating to changes in practice
- The role of teachers beliefs and culture relating to change in assessment practices

# Appendix 5 Semi-Structured Interview Schedule for Teachers


Maynooth University
National University
of Ireland Maynooth

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule for Teachers

| Q. | Brief personal and professional biography |
|---|---|
| Probes | College attended<br>Degree awarded<br>Number of years teaching<br>Further level of qualifications |
| Q. | How would you define assessment |
| Probes | |
| Q. | How would you define culture/beliefs |
| Probes | |
| Q. | Formative assessment within the school, how was it introduced into the school |
| | Any event or factor which triggered its introduction |
| | School personnel/management interest in assessment practice from internal or external inputs? |
| | What was the initial motivation for introducing and changing how we assess your students internal or external to the school |
| | Student , management desire or teacher desire for change which prompted its introduction in the school |

| Q. | Changes to assessment practice within the school, how was it introduced into the school and did it impact your practice and student outcomes |
|---|---|
| Probes | Any particular event or factor which triggered its introduction |
| | Engagement with agencies or CPD |
| | Was the initial motivation for introducing formative assessment to emerge internal or external to the school |
| | Student desire, teacher desire, policy change in Assessment which prompted its introduction in the school |
| Q. | When you think back on the changes that you have made to assessment practices in your classroom/practice, is there any significant or particular events which stand out? |
| Probes | Light bulb moment<br>Particular subjects/teachers<br>Particular CPD<br>Notable failures<br>What are the outcomes and affects<br>Has classroom practice evolved due to this change |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Has student experience changed<br>Is there a difference in attainment outcomes of students |
| **Q.** | **Reflecting to date on the changes to assessment practice and teachers conceptions of assessment, what are some of the contributing factors facilitating your success?** |
| Prob es | Student<br>Teachers<br>Parents<br>Local community<br>Result<br>Outcomes<br>Technology<br>Practical component<br>Leaders of change<br>Areas of study |
| **Q.** | **How is assessment literacy promoted within the school?** |
| Prob es | Formal<br>Informal<br>Teach meets<br>Internal CPD<br>Other |
| **Q.** | **Has the way in which assessment culture/literacy is promoted changed in the school?** |
| Prob es | If so why and how<br>What are the outcomes<br>How are these identified<br>How are they developed<br>How do we continue to drive change/evolve<br>Have you played any part in its evolution<br>What were the challenges<br>What were the benefits to date<br>How can you measure this |
| **Q.** | **What factors with the school structure facilitate the successful evolvement of assessment literacy, culture, conceptions and practice?**<br>Teachers<br>Classroom practice<br>Team teaching<br>Peer assessment<br>National policy change<br>New specifications – JC and SC<br>CPD<br>Upskill- Internal v external |
| **Q.** | **What supports are provided by the school management for the teachers** |

| | |
|---|---|
| Prob es | Structural supports<br>Staffing supports<br>Financial supports<br>Training<br>Time<br>Any specific examples |
| Q.<br><br>Prob es | **How are the participant teachers selected who are involved in the delivery of the assessment teaching and learning team/ programme(s) in this school**<br>Expression of Interest<br>Area of further study<br>Posts of Responsibility<br>An identified need |
| Q. | **What are the primary benefits of the changes to assessment practices for the school?** |
| Prob es | Students<br>Teachers<br>Impacts<br>Accreditation<br>Engagement<br>Outcomes<br>Classroom culture and environment<br>Teacher beliefs<br>Teacher understanding of assessment |
| Q | **What supports are available for assessment around teaching and learning within this school?** |
| Probes | ✓ |
| Q | **Is skill development a key focus for them in their teaching?** |
| Probes | NCCA junior cycle Key skills<br>NCCA senior cycle Key skills |
| Q | **Would you view assessment as the sole preserve of the schools teaching and learning team?** |
| Probes | Elaborate further |
| Q.10 | **Would you welcome the opportunity to become involved in the delivery of internal or external CPD for assessment?** |
| | Seek elaboration |

My focus as interviewer:

- History of their involvement in education
- Their understanding of the meaning of the term assessment
- Experience of assessment practice in their own background
- Training in the area of teaching, learning and assessment
- Benefits of a students centred approach to assessment
- Classroom strategies employed in their provision of teaching learning and assessment
- Supports available for the delivery of teaching methodologies relating to changes in practice
- The role of teachers beliefs and culture relating to change in assessment practices