

POST-PRIMARY TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT

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Introduction

Post-Primary Teachers' Conceptions of Assessment is a study by Marie Darmody under the supervision of Dr. Zita Lysaght and Dr. Michael O'Leary. The purpose of this research is to elicit baseline data about post-primary teachers' conceptions of assessment in the Republic of Ireland. Post-primary education in Ireland is in the midst of much curriculum and assessment change and teachers are at the coalface of this change. With the introduction of new forms of classroom assessment which aim to guide and deepen learning, teachers will have an increased role in the assessment process. However, teachers' beliefs provide a lens for the translation of policy into practice and so when considering the implementation of assessment reform, one needs to know what teachers believe about the nature and purpose of assessment. Engagement with teachers' beliefs could prove to be an important stepping stone in the long term development of teacher assessment literacy, thus supporting educational assessment practice at post-primary level in Ireland. Adopting a non-experimental cross-sectional design, this study surveys a large sample of post-primary teachers in Ireland using the abridged version of Brown's (2006) Teachers' Conceptions of Assessment Inventory (TCoA-IIIa).

Background to the research

Post-primary education in Ireland is in the midst of significant curriculum and assessment change at junior cycle. Central to the change is in the introduction of a new model of assessment which aims to meet the needs of the 21st century learner and consequently to present a much broader picture of student learning throughout the junior cycle. A new dual approach to assessment involving ongoing classroom-based assessment and a final externally-assessed examination represents a significant departure from the former Junior Certificate examination which was completely externally assessed. As key agents of change and influential mediators on the continuum between policy and practice, teachers will play a vital role in the implementation of the new assessment practices. The proposed policy reform measures will require active engagement, critical reflection and deep understanding on the part of the teacher. Teachers will need to effectively use and interpret assessment information in an unprecedented manner, to reconcile formative and summative assessment procedures and to create a classroom environment where all parties engage with learning and assessment as an iterative reflective process. This is not an easy task and the success of such change depends, at least in part, upon teachers' understanding of the rationale behind it as well as their belief in it.

As human practitioners, teachers enact their own "educational philosophies" (Yan & Cheng, 2015) which provide a lens for the translation of policy into practice. Research has indicated that teachers' beliefs serve to filter information and content entering the cognitive domain, to frame particular educational situations or problems and to guide teachers' intentions and actions (Fives & Buehl, 2012). More specifically, in relation to assessment practices, recent studies have drawn attention to the impact of teachers' values on

assessment for learning (AfL) practices (Warwick, Shaw & Johnson, 2015), the impact of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs on their intentions towards AfL (Yan & Cheng, 2014), the effect of teachers' beliefs about learning on their application of AfL (Marshall & Drummond, 2006) and the relationship between teachers' beliefs about feedback and their feedback practices (Brown, Harris & Harnett, 2012). In the domain of teacher summative assessment, self-efficacy beliefs appear to impact upon teachers' intentions to conduct school-based assessment (Yan, 2014), a study by Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski & Gunn (2010) illustrated the effect of tacit knowledge on teacher judgements and the findings of a study focusing on validity in teachers' summative assessments (Black, Harrison, Hodgen, Marshall & Serret, 2010) suggested that "an appeal to the beliefs and values that underlie their commitment to their subjects can be a way to make validity a more salient feature of their work" (p.227).

The aforementioned studies point to teachers' beliefs and values as key influential factors in their educational practice. In light of this evidence and given the fact that post-primary education in Ireland is in the midst of significant assessment change, it would seem reasonable to suggest that the introduction of the new assessment initiatives should take account of "how teachers conceive of the phenomenon" (Gebriel & Brown, 2014, p.17).

Research methodology

Research Design

Careful consideration was given to the creation of a research design which would best enable the researcher to elicit baseline data about post-primary teachers' conceptions of assessment. A cross-sectional survey design was chosen as this would allow the researcher to collect large-scale data on a national level and thereby gain a snapshot of teachers' current conceptions of assessment.

Instrumentation

The abridged version of the Teachers' Conceptions of Assessment (TCoA-III) Inventory (Brown, 2006) was used to collect data in this study. This validated inventory is well recognised and has been used in many international studies. The instrument is a 27-item, nine-factor self-reported questionnaire in which teachers are asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements related to "four main purpose-defined conceptions of assessment" (Brown, 2004). The four main conceptions of assessment are Improvement, Student Accountability, School Accountability and Irrelevance. The improvement conception refers to assessment as a means of informing teaching and learning. Student Accountability is based on the view that "that assessment holds students individually accountable for their learning through giving of grades or scores, checking off performance against criteria, and reporting grades to parents, future employers, and other educators" (Brown, Lake & Matters, 2011). The School Accountability conception indicates that assessment can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers and schools. Finally, the premise of the irrelevance conception is that assessment is ultimately a negative process which has "no legitimate place

within teaching and learning” (Brown, 2008, p.25). The TCoA-III A model is hierarchical in nature in that the four main constructs are themselves a mixture of first order and second order factors. The two accountability constructs are first order factors containing 3 items each whereas Improvement and Irrelevance are second order factors. Improvement contains four sub-factors each with three items and Irrelevance has three sub-factors each with three items. The instrument allows for interpretation of mean scores for each of the four main constructs as well as more complex interpretation of the intercorrelations between them. The TCoA-III A uses a positively packed agreement-rating scale. Teachers choose from two negative options (mostly and strong disagree) and four positive options (slightly, moderately, mostly and strongly agree) (Brown, 2006). In addition to completing the TCoA-III A inventory, teachers were asked to provide some demographical information in order to aid data interpretation and thus gain a more nuanced insight into the sample of teachers in question. Details were requested from participants in relation to gender, years teaching experience, current role in education, school type, subjects taught and teaching qualifications.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited through two forms of volunteer sampling. Firstly, a list of contact details for all post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland was obtained through the Department of Education and Skills (DES) website. Every school on this list was contacted by email. In the email, the school authorities were provided with a link to an online version of the questionnaire and a request was made for the questionnaire link to be forwarded onto all staff members. Although every school was contacted directly, the researcher does acknowledge that this does not necessarily mean that every teacher in each school had equal access to the questionnaire. Gatekeeping issues were a key concern in this project. Access to

teachers through school contact was reliant on the co-operation of management and administrative staff. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) refer to this type of difficulty in their discussion around sampling in internet based surveys. They maintain that the sampling frame can be unclear as it is “difficult to know how many or what kind of people saw a particular survey on a website” (Cohen et al, 2011, p.286). In an effort to increase equality of access to the questionnaire and reach as high a proportion of the post-primary teaching population as possible, a second sampling technique was introduced. Another variation of volunteer sampling was implemented through contacting a range of national educational bodies such as the Teaching Council, teaching unions, subject associations, education centres and managerial bodies. Contact was made via email and twitter. These particular organisations were contacted due to their direct link to post-primary teachers. The researcher made a request to these organisations to disseminate the questionnaire to their members in whatever way they could and to encourage them to take part in the research.

Data Analysis

The data is currently being analysed using a mixture of descriptive statistics, t-tests and exploratory factor analysis.

Findings

Given that the researcher is currently conducting the data analysis for this study, only general descriptive information can be reported at this point. A total of 586 post-primary teachers completed the survey. This sample was subsequently reduced to 489 in order to meet the criteria of full data on all items. Analysis of all questionnaires not fully completed indicated no clear pattern in the point of dropout with the majority of dropouts occurring at the declaration of consent and demographic information stages. The gender breakdown in the final working sample of 489 participants was 68.5% female and 31.8% male. These figures closely reflect the most recently available statistics (2012) for gender breakdown in the post-primary teaching population where females accounted for 68.3% of teachers and males accounted for 31.7% of the population (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2014). The vast majority (71%) of the sample were classroom teachers and over half (60.5%) of the participants had more than 10 years teaching experience. Almost 80% of the sample held a higher diploma / postgraduate diploma in education and over half of the sample held a postgraduate qualification of another type. The participants in this study represented a broad range of school types, the most strongly represented being the voluntary sector which accounts for around 400 of the 735 post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland.

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