Predictability in high-stakes examinations: students' perspectives on a perennial assessment dilemma

Jannette Elwood[a], Therese Hopfenbeck[b] and Jo-Anne Baird[b]

[a]Queen's University Belfast;

[b]Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment

[a]School of Education, Queen's University Belfast, 69 University Street, Belfast BT7 1HL, Tel: 028 9097 5967; email: j.elwood@qub.ac.uk Corresponding author

[b]Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment, Department of Education, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY, Tel: 01865 284098, email: therese.hopefenbeck@education.ox.ac.uk; jo-anne.baird@education.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

Key debates within educational assessment continuously encourage us to reflect on the design, delivery and implementation of examination systems as well as their relevance to students. In more recent times, such reflections have also required a rethinking of who is authoritative about assessment issues and whose views we seek in order to better understand these perennial assessment dilemmas. This paper considers one such dilemma, predictability in high stakes assessment, and presents students' perspectives on this issue. The context is the Irish Leaving Certificate (LC) taken by upper secondary students (aged between 16 and 18) in order (mainly) to enter tertiary level education.   The data comes from 13 group interviews with 81 students across a range of schools in Ireland.   Listening to students about complex, high stakes examining problems has a limited history within the educational assessment literature. The findings from the study address this shortcoming and depict how students' insightful reflections can improve our understanding of these dilemmas. Further, students are more than able to reflect on their own situations with regard to high stakes examining contexts and have important contributions to make to our fuller understanding of those elements that will promote high quality and fair assessment.

Key words: predictability, assessment, examinations, high-stakes testing, students' perspectives

Word Count: 8,787

Introduction

A number of public examination dilemmas abound in academic, policy and media narratives internationally. Some of these dilemmas relate to well-formulated, technical issues such as reliability, validity, standards and fairness. Such long-standing assessment concepts are well-debated and defined within the field with often generally accepted common understandings of meaning and purpose. However, such concepts are also widely accepted as contentious in relation to differing underlying associated theoretical assumptions. These tend to prioritize varying interpretations of conceptual meanings and therefore the fundamental building blocks on which the assessment field is based (Elwood & Murphy 2015). They are also seen as dilemmas for the field of assessment in terms of the trade-offs that must be employed between these concepts as they are implemented and played out within national assessment practice. Concepts such as predictability, are less well defined or researched within the field of assessment, but they are no less contentious in terms of their consequential effects on assessment outcomes as well as their impact on the perceived validity of national examination systems (Baird et al 2014). As we outline below, predictability is a dilemma because assessment transparency has positive effects, but if an assessment is overly predictable, it can have negative consequences for learning.

This article considers data from a research programme conducted on the Leaving Certificate (LC) examinations in Ireland that considered predictability in high stakes examinations. While concerns regarding predictability within the Irish Leaving Certificate have been related in many media stories in Ireland over the past few years (Baird et al. 2014), such concerns have tended to reflect perceptions and opinions of this dilemma by a myriad of commentators, including academics, teachers, students and the general public. So predictability has been debated in the public and media

spheres, but the concept itself in association with the Irish Leaving Certificate has not been empirically researched. Thus in 2014, a study was commissioned by the State Examination Commission (SEC, the body responsible for the LC examinations) after the then Minister for Education announced that perceived levels of predictability within the Leaving Certificate were a national problem and should be investigated. This was alongside other key factors in the national set up that were felt to possibly impact directly on the quality and robustness of the examinations system overall.

The data presented in the paper were collected as part of the broader commissioned study and have a specific focus on students and their views and opinions about predictability in the LC examinations. Leaving Certificate examinations are usually taken by 17 or 18 year olds and denote the end of upper secondary schooling in Ireland. Students study a broad curriculum and usually take seven or eight LC examinations that are based on syllabuses aligned to the curriculum and which are taken after approximately two years of study. A minimum of five examinations must be taken to achieve the Leaving Certificate, but seven or eight are usually taken to meet higher education matriculation requirements, with points allocated to the best six grades. The Leaving Certificate is almost exclusively used for entry into higher education institutions. It operates within a unified, comprehensive education system in Ireland where there is a high retention in secondary schools up to age 18. The LC examination system caters for nearly 90% of the age cohort.

Much research has considered both the positive and negative consequences of the impact of high stakes tests (see Maudaus, Russell and Higgins (2009) and Phelps, (2012) for comprehensive reviews). Across this research, predictability has often been considered as problematical, as well as other associated issues such as teaching to the test, backwash on teaching and learning, motivation of students, fairness,

differential access and opportunity to acquire test-taking skills. However, the research detailed in this paper shows that predictability can have positive consequences for students such allowing for transparency of requirements and the acquiring skills of test-wiseness. The present paper also adds to these debates by investigating students' opinions and perceptions about predictability, adding to a growing body of studies that redress the importance of including students' voices in key areas of assessment debates (Elwood 2012; Elwood & Baird, 2013; Murphy et al 2012; Smyth & Banks 2012). The paper argues for the importance of listening to young people's views about perennial assessment dilemmas that affect them directly and who ultimately bear the brunt of problematical consequences (intended or unintended) that result through the design and implementation of high stakes examination systems.

We now turn to considerations and consequences of high-stakes testing on teaching, learning, and the curriculum being taught before returning to notions of predictability with its positive and negative aspects. Next, we consider the literature that has looked at students' views on various aspects of high-stakes tests, concluding that often these studies do not ask students specifically about assessment dilemmas but tend to focus on their reactions to high-stakes testing situations more generally. We further reflect on why considering students' voices has particular resonance for the understanding of these assessment dilemmas. The data presented in the paper reflect the opinions and views of students from across Ireland about predictability and show that while they suggest a degree of predictability is present in the LC examinations, this is not necessarily a bad thing, and that having a degree of test-wiseness creates a more level playing field in which students can succeed and attain their immediate post-school goals.

The Impact of High-stakes Tests

High-stakes tests have gained a considerably poor reputation for their impact upon students' educational experiences, as they have come to dominate teaching and learning in many settings (Madaus, Russell & Higgins, 2009). By 'high stakes test', we mean that there is a direct link between the tests and rewards and sanctions for students, their teachers or institutions (Madaus, 1988, 29). The impact of high-stakes testing has come to be known as the 'backwash' or 'washback' effect (Alderson and Wall, 1993). Problems identified with the backwash effect of examinations include teachers narrowing the curriculum to knowledge and content that they expect to find on the test, teachers adjusting their teaching to reflect the types of questions found on examinations, drilling of students on test content and question styles and students learning in a narrow, superficial manner in order to respond in particular ways (Au, 2007; Cheng, 2003; Daly et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond & Rustique-Forester, 2005). Such consequences, critics argue, do not produce long-term retention of knowledge or deep understandings that enable students to apply their knowledge, evaluate it or synthesise information across the curriculum. In other words, students' learning is constrained to being all about the test. Au's (2007) meta-synthesis of 49 studies on the impact of high-stakes testing found generally that examinations had restricted the curriculum taught, that knowledge was presented in more fragmented ways and that teacher-centred pedagogies were often favoured as a direct result of the introduction of a high-stakes test. While Au (2007, 263) concluded that high-stakes tests served to narrow the taught curriculum in general and have undue control over knowledge format and pedagogical choices, there were some instances where the opposite occurred. We have still some way to go to fully understand the range of features of

examinations that influence the pedagogical practices of teachers and the complexities that arise for teaching and learning from this. Moreover, these studies affirm that our knowledge about washback effects of high-stakes tests at the student level are also limited and that more research in this area would be welcomed.

Predictability: an assessment dilemma in high-stakes examinations

Allegations about overly predictable examinations abound across many different settings and systems, not just in the Irish context (Ofqual, 2008, Baird et al., 2014). Predictability becomes problematical if students and teachers can judge in advance what the examination requirements will be to the extent that an undesirable narrowing of the curriculum occurs, superficial rote learning ensues, and that teaching-to-the-test and failure to develop a broad and deep understanding of subjects is pervasive in the education system. Such consequences of predictability would not only show the classic negative signs of washback detailed above, but such an examination would be considered to lack systemic validity (Frederikson & Collins, 1989) by failing to asses the intended curriculum and only assessing narrow test preparation skills instead of specified assessment objectives.

An overly predictable examination might well produce the negative effects discussed above, but predictability is not entirely negative: some knowledge of assessment requirements can be positive and help acclimatise students to the demands of the examinations they encounter. Anastasi (1981) argued that a broad education alongside test-wiseness increased validity for students as promulgating test-wiseness increases students familiarity with the types of questions they will experience and is likely to decrease errors in students' responses due to unfamiliarity with question demands. Several studies conducted on the impact of test preparation, cramming or

test drilling found positive effects across a range of testing contexts (e.g. Bangert-Drowns, Kulik and Kulik,1983; Bunting & Mooney, 2001; Messick and Jungeblut 1981; Powers 1986; Sturman, 2003) but findings are inconsistent on this matter. Access to test preparation materials and time on task also appear to be important factors in student preparation for tests (Powers & Swinton, 1984), as well as students' ability (Griffin, Carless & Wilson, 2013). Many of these studies on test preparation, coaching, and extra tuition, were conducted in the US and are based on non-curriculum related examinations for which students are not expected to study a pre-defined curriculum. Thus, we must be cautious when generalising from these studies to the Irish context.

National examinations in many countries like Ireland, such as the UK, are curriculum-related and there is an expectation that teachers will prepare students for the examinations, and that students will study the associated subject curriculum to prepare for the tests. Therefore, the questions become not so much whether teaching and test preparation have an effect on the results; but rather to what extent are we happy with these effects and when are they too negative so that the quality and value of the examinations are compromised. We consider students' views on these questions with respect to the LC examinations and their experiences of test preparation for these high-stakes exams.

From the above, it should be evident that predictability means more than the same questions appearing on the examinations year-on-year. The situation is more complex because demands on questions also include how credit is given in the rubric or marking scheme and how students are prepared or supported to produce credit-worthy responses. Components of the assessment will also interact to produce an examination context that may be overly predictable. Therefore, we considered predictability in its

broadest sense, looking across the range of predictable and unpredictable elements of the concept that might present themselves in curriculum related and aligned examinations systems such as the Leaving Certificate in Ireland. These elements of predictability are detailed in Table 1 and are used as a frame with which to present our data.

[Table 1 about here]

Student Perspectives on High-Stakes Tests

There is an abundance of research documenting the impact of high-stakes tests on teaching, learning, curriculum coverage and teaching to the test (see Au 2007 for a comprehensive review). Some of this research has indicated the importance of knowing students' views on such matters, especially in those contexts that are significant to them for future success, i.e. 'high-stakes for students' (Smyth & Banks, 2012: 285). As discussed above, many of the studies into the impact of high-stakes testing and washback effects have tended to come from the US.

In the context of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001), the use and pervasiveness of high-stakes testing in schools has increased and the central role of testing in American schools is unmistakable (Cizek, 2005). Studies emerging from the US in the context of NCLB have tended to focus more on state mandatory tests and their impact on teachers, students, school districts and school or state accountability. With this dramatic expansion of large-scale testing emerged a recognition by some scholars that the voices being heard regarding the intended and

unintended consequences of these tests were predominately adult (teachers, parents, education managers, test developers) and that fewer studies investigated students' opinions directly (Triplett and Barskdale, 2005; Weiss, 2009).

In line with a growing movement in student voice more generally regarding aspects of school life and experience (Cook-Sather, 2006, Noguera, 2009), researchers have begun to detail students' experiences of large-scale, high-stakes tests and sought to gather their views regarding the unintended consequences of the impact of such tests on their educational experiences. For example, researchers considered students views on motivation and preparation factors (Hoffman and Nottis 2008) and students' achievement-related emotional beliefs in relation to formal testing programmes (Ryan, Ryan, Arbuthnot and Samuels 2007). Furthermore, others were interested specifically on how such testing regimes impacted differentially with low achieving groups (Roderick and Engel 2001), or with ethic minority students (Walpole et al 2005). With the rise in importance of testing and assessment generally within education policymaking world-wide, many more studies internationally have sought out students' perspectives to understand the impact of assessment regimes on them specifically: for example, students' conceptions of assessment and how these relate to academic outcomes (Brown and Hirschfeld, 2006); perceived importance, invested effort and test anxiety amongst students in national tests (Eklof and Nyroos, 2013); students' stress and its relationship to achievement on examinations and tests (Putwain, 2009); and views about testing and its impact on enjoyment of, and achievement in, particular subjects (Murphy et al, 2012).

In the Irish context, Smyth and Banks (2012) conducted a longitudinal and class analysis of students' responses to the impact of the Irish Leaving Certificate on their approaches to teaching and learning. As students got older (and especially those from

more middle class backgrounds), the high-stakes context of the examination led to more instrumental approaches to learning as well as more clear and articulated ways by students of 'playing the [examination] game' (Smyth & Banks, 2012, p. 293). Students from this study indicated that as demands increased with respect to imminent national examinations, so too did the stress they felt from pressure to succeed. A context of severe competition for high grades to obtain post-school goals (university courses, employment, etc.), raised the stakes for young people and increases their instrumentalist views towards teaching and learning; 'teaching to the test' signalled a good lesson and the use of past papers, preparing questions and frequent test-based assessments were seen as the most helpful ways to study for success.

Such studies give us welcome insights into students' views and perspectives on the impact of high-stakes testing that resonate with those studies that have focused on teachers' experiences of the same (Au, 2007). They have contributed a wider and richer story of the unintended consequences of backwash effects that enable better understandings of the powerful influences that testing regimes impart on test-takers. However, fewer studies have sought students' views on recurrent assessment dilemmas that assessment developers grapple with and which can contribute to the unintended consequences of examinations. Some research has considered the contribution that students' views can make to a fuller understanding of key assessment debates such as: measurement error and reliable marking (Chamberlain, 2012), rising examination results aligning with falling standards (Elwood, 2012) and implementing policy changes directly into 'live' examinations (Daly, Baird, Chamberlain and Meadows, 2012). However, research within the field of assessment does not have an established history of seeking students' views on such issues as a matter of course. Emerging positions in the field of assessment research are tending

to acknowledge students as authoritative about the issues under consideration and about assessment dilemmas more generally.

Why include students' perspectives?

Cook-Sather (2002) has argued for educationalists to attend more directly to the perspectives of those most immediately affected by, but least consulted about, educational issues – students. Her contention is that educational policy and practice (across a broad spectrum of areas) is premised on adults' notions of how education should be conceptualized and practiced:

> *There is something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve (op. cit. p. 3).*

Such a position demands that we recognise young people as having knowledge and influence to shape what counts as education. The benefits of seeking students' views and perspectives in ways that consider them as equal to those of adult contributors, have been argued to be significant (Sinclair, 2004; Tisdall, 2008) as they have re-focused attention onto students' insights on significant educational matters and increased opportunities for students to actively influence their own educational experiences, positioning them as equal stakeholders in the educational enterprise (Devine and Lutteral, 2013). However, such attendance to student voice in educational matters is complex and often problematic, not least in how students are facilitated to express their views and which students are chosen to do so.

Often those students who are deemed acceptable to contribute opinions and perspectives are only a small proportion of the total student group (Flemming 2012) and these particular 'voices' are then elevated beyond those of others from more

diverse backgrounds and positions (Cook-Sather, 2006). Concerns also arise about the glamorisation of student voice (Rudduck and Fielding 2006) within the evaluation of educational settings in order to meet particular institutional and national targets. Such practices, Cook-Sather (2007) has argued, have the possible detrimental effect of making 'student voice' impositional rather than innovative and constructive for change. While recognising the concerns of others about any lip-service paid to the inclusion of students' perspectives in educational research, we acknowledge that the take-up of such a stance is indeed challenging to present norms. It demands a re-thinking of our assumptions 'about who can and should be an authority on educational practice' (Cook-Sather, 2002, p9). Furthermore, it demands that we seek out 'other' views or perspectives of how practice should be carried out or validated. We are arguing that assessment policy and practice are areas where outsider perspectives (from those outside the assessment development arenas, i.e. students) are less rarely sought on matters of assessment structures, format and design. To seek student perspectives as a matter of course in areas of assessment policy and practice is a significant challenge, but one that this paper suggests we should not shy away from.

Methodology and Data

This research formed part of a multi-layered empirical study (Baird et al 2014), that considered the predictability of the higher-level Leaving Certificate Examination in its broadest sense: an evaluation of predictability within the LC system by expert examiners looking at syllabuses, question papers, and marking schemes across six subjects (biology, design and communication graphics, economics, English, French and geography); a review of Irish media perceptions of the examination; a national survey of over 1,000 students regarding their learning approaches and examination strategies; and interviews with teachers and students across a random sample of

schools to explore their perspectives on predictability. The main goal of the fieldwork in schools was to explore issues about the relative predictability of the LC examinations and how this interacts with the learning process in and outside of the classroom.

The data presented in this paper emerged from a series of 13 group interviews with 81 students from 12 schools across Ireland. The schools were randomly sampled from a list of 691 secondary schools in Ireland, after removing 18 institutions that either (i) did not have students sitting LC exams or (ii) in which all students study all subjects in Irish. From the initial sample of 12 schools seven agreed to participate, while five refused due to reasons such as workload and participating in other research activities. These were replaced with similar types of institution from the larger list. The final sample consisted of a range of schools that included: 7 secondary schools; 3 community schools and 2 vocational colleges. Four of the institutions were single-sex (3 all girls schools and 1 all boys' school).

A letter from SEC was distributed to the selected schools, explaining the purpose of the research study. Two researchers then contacted the schools by telephone and agreed the visits. Teachers in each school selected students for group interviews using the following criteria: six students in each group, equal number of boys and girls (in mixed schools) and, preferably, both high and low achievers. These criteria attempted to deal with those criticisms in the literature that only certain students are selected for such activities. All students selected would sit for the LC in June 2014, and they were aged between 16 and 18 years old. One group interview was conducted in 11 schools and two were conducted in one school, with participant numbers averaging 6 in each group and ranging between 5 and 8 overall.

The first school served as a pilot for the interviews. Changes were made to the interview schedules following the pilot to improve the clarity of the questions and to focus more upon the research questions. The interview schedules were shortened; for example, questions relating to students' experiences on the examinations more generally (as opening questions) were reduced. Data from this school were integrated with those from the other schools, as the changes to the schedules were minimal.

Fieldwork was carried out over six weeks between September and October 2013. Group interviews with students lasted approximately 40 minutes, were all conducted during the school day, and were audio recorded (with active informed consent) for full data capture, transcription and analysis at a later stage. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on the issues associated with the main study as well as emerging findings from the other phases of the research. Open-ended questions were used to allow the pursuit of topics pre-identified for consideration as well as explore new ideas emerging through the interview situation; such an approach seemed particularly suitable given the relative unfamiliar topic of predictability to students. Within the group interviews with students we used an adapted version of our working definition of predictability (shown in Figure 1). We worked with this adapted version to share with students notions of what predictability meant within particular contexts and what we meant by it, but also to capacity-build with them within the interview situation an understanding of the sorts of issues that we were interested in exploring. Interview questions were derived from the literature review on the effects of high stakes testing and predictability of examinations. Thus areas for discussion in group interviews were: views on the kinds of learning promoted by the examinations, whether the LC examinations were considered predicable, approaches to learning and examination preparation strategies, whether such approaches were

affected by issues of predictability, attitudes to the media coverage of examinations and suggestions for improvements.

[Figure 1 about here]

The interview data were transcribed and coded according to the principles of Miles and Huberman (1994) using NVivo software program. Initial codes were derived from the group interview questions, which were considered thematically as well as across subject areas as appropriate.. A coding scheme was constructed which defined the initial codes and gave illustrative examples. Four researchers conducted the coding having been made familiar with the coding scheme and the data.   Inter-rater reliability checks were conducted on 10% of the interviews. Minor adjustments were made to the codes and coding following discussion of the small number of disagreements. The initial codes were applied to the data to capture issues of predictability across subjects as well as students' attitudes to predictability. They were also used to consider emerging themes and key findings for this phase of the research project. This gave an indication of young people's views regarding the main issue of predictability and how it may affect how they act in order to prepare themselves for their examinations. The aim was to establish a rich and detailed picture of the complex concept of predictability as understood by students and how it specifically pertains to the Irish Leaving Certificate. The study did not quantify the qualitative data in any way but sought to identify, analyse and report patterns in the data from a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Quotes from the student data presented below were selected as illustrative of the themes elicited and not representative of the sample as a whole. For the purposes of reporting the data for

this paper, these first level codes have been collated under the elements of predictability presented in Table 1.

Predictability: assessment format, scoring and performance

Students were asked to reflect on the definition of predictability (see Figure 1) and discuss with us any issues that the definition raised for them in relation to their Leaving Certificate experience to date. Mixed responses emerged from these discussions, especially in relation to how students may or may not act in order to be successful. Participants suggested that there were elements of the LC examinations that seemed predictable to them but this very much depended on the subject being examined; there was a degree of predictability in all subjects but that some subjects were more predictable than others. So for example, more practical subjects, such as design and communication graphics (DCG) were considered less predictable because in such subjects the application of skills were the focus of the assessment, yet the contexts of questions used to assess these skills were not necessarily similar year on year. Those subjects that demanded the learning of a large amount of content such a biology, geography and economics were also seen as less predictable as students were never quite sure what topics might be presented in any given year. French and English were seen as more predictable. Topics for the oral examination as well as repeated genres for writing assessments in French were considered more knowable in advance and could be learnt by rote. In English, the poets that possibly might appear on the examination were always rehearsed as well as associated pre-prepared essays:

> … *sometimes in English there's like eight poets that you have to study, and*
> *it's just sort of known that there's always going to be a female poet, there's*

> *always going to be an Irish poet. So you kind of know and say if one came up*
>
> *last year you're kind of going to study the other one more*
>
> [Student Group Interview: School 2:Secondary, Co-Ed]

Students suggested that if examinations were predictable, this was not always a bad thing. They recognised that certain aspects of subject content and syllabus topics were core and had to be examined so it was not surprising that they came up every year. Having elements of predictability also helped focus their learning of the content and skills required across a broad variety of subjects studied. Most students take seven or eight LC examinations in one sitting, with more than half of these exams often being at the higher level. Therefore some level of predictability helped with getting to grips with the range of subject knowledge they were expected to know:

> *.. it's a good thing to have something that's predictable because we don't*
>
> *want everything to be a total mess. Like there's eight subjects, some*
>
> *schools are doing even more ... so a little bit of predictability is very good*
>
> *because we can study that [content/knowledge] and we can get the points*
>
> *for it.* [Student Group Interview: School 4:Vocational, Co-Ed]

Thus, a degree of predictability within the LC examinations was welcomed. It enabled students to focus on those aspects of the syllabus that were more than likely to appear in the examination, rather than, as they saw it, 'wasting time' on syllabus content and knowledge that would not appear. Furthermore, focusing on topics and associated questions gave students clear indications of key definitions and responses

sought by examiners. Students were keen to make sure they used words and phrases in their answers deemed acceptable by examiners in order to optimise (and not lose) marks and rehearsed answers by looking at the types of responses given good marks in the past. Participants also indicated that certain formats of questions were similar every year, even though the content of the question might vary. For example, the range of contexts used for the comprehensions in French might come from a vast choice of contemporary issues, but the genres of writing required in the responses were well rehearsed between students and teachers in advance. Therefore, a certain level of predictability about the format, scoring and performance required gave students some confidence about these high-stakes examinations:

I think that makes you more confident if you know what's coming up in your exam, it makes you feel like you're not going in blind...so I think predictability... benefits you sometimes. I think it's good.

[Student Group Interview: School 14:Community, Co-Ed]

Predictability: examination support materials and test conditions

Test conditions as well as examination preparation materials are seen as key elements of predictability (see Table 1). If students and teachers think that there is benefit in rehearsing and practising test conditions they will, as well as avail themselves of support materials that can reduce any novelty aspect of what is to come in the examination. Students discussed a number of examination preparation materials that they used either individually or with their teachers in classrooms.

Past papers and questions

Students indicated they used past papers and questions and thought that these were used in generally constructive ways, helping them to identify what was expected in their responses as well as familiarising them with question formats and structures. Students had mixed experiences of when teachers initially started to use past papers with them; some indicating that they used them more in their last year of the course with others reporting that they had started to use them from the beginning of their LC courses (at the age of 15/16). Respondents reported the use of past papers in all subjects, but the extent of use was very much down to individual teachers. However, there was general agreement that the use of past questions and papers intensifies towards their mock examinations early in the final year of their course and towards the end in final preparations for the examinations.

In order to deal with the large volumes of content and knowledge needed to be learnt for examinations, students suggested that they were inclined to learn a range of different types of responses 'off by heart'. These included essays, model answers, definitions and lists of key words. For example, the learning of poems and poets in English was mentioned repeatedly in this respect, as well as learning six or seven essays in Irish to respond to set questions. Lists of key words and phrases in subjects like biology and chemistry were also given as examples as the detailed exposition of these are clearly rewarded positively by examiners. Furthermore, in French, students learnt topics by rote for questions requiring responses in letter, note or diary form. Such strategies were considered normal in order to be well-prepared and to gain marks:

…[past] exam papers are really helpful because you can see … what's expected to come up…You get sample answers and you learn them … off by heart and reuse them, or you can take points if you're confident enough to make your own essay out of it.

[Student Group Interview: School 12:Vocational, Co-Ed]

However, as the quote above shows, students were also aware that they needed to use prepared answers wisely and that regurgitating pre-learnt answers back to examiners would not get the best marks possible. They would however, help students in knowing what is required and knowing all the 'bits of information you needed to get a good result'.

Marking schemes

Students indicated that marking schemes were also used and that familiarity with them was necessary to know exactly what was required for a good response and how questions were marked. This way, every student in the country knows what marks are available and what questions are worth. Marking schemes seemed to be used in a number of ways. First, not only to help students structure responses but also to help them understand how the question would be marked in a particular way and how this was done:

Sometimes you know it's marked in a certain way and you have to answer questions in that way. So like for Chemistry they have lists and you have to have something out of each list to answer the question.

[Student Group Interview: School 3:Secondary, Co-Ed]

Second, marking schemes also indicated how 'valuable' a question or section is in terms of marks available and its 'worth', not only in how much was needed to be written but also how much time a student should spend learning this material or revising this aspect of the course:

> *in English there'll be certain questions that you get 20 marks for … that sort of gives you an idea of how much you need to write… so for example you might write one page and a quarter for a 20 mark question, but if it was a 15 mark question you'd write about one page. So [the marking scheme] shows you how much emphasis you need to put on it or how much effort.*
>
> [Student Group Interview: School 2:Secondary, Co-Ed]

Third, marking schemes gave an indication how much time should be spent answering each question. Students suggested that they looked at the examination as a whole, worked out how much time they had to spend on each question and how this time then related to marks available and how they should spend their time wisely in order to optimise marks achieved. This notion of time was especially raised in relation to subjects like biology and geography, were students argued that there was too much to cover in one 3 hour examination:

> *[Marking schemes]… show you how to divide the time between the marks, so you're like making the most of the marks available… they give you a guideline, of how much time to spend … you'd maybe spend an hour on an*

> *essay [in English]. But if you spend much longer than that, you won't have*
>
> *enough time to do the rest,*

[Student Group Interview: School 3:Secondary, Co-Ed]

Thus marking schemes were seen as valuable materials to be used in conjunction with past questions and papers. Students considered the availability of marking schemes for, and the detailed knowledge of them by, all students to be a matter of fairness, so that the perceived demands of questions were transparent. It was clear by using marking schemes in these ways, as integrated preparation materials, students (and their teachers) had developed complex communities of understanding about what examiners saw as valuable responses and how attuning to these demands they would be successful.

Other support materials and activities

Students also mentioned a range of other examination support materials used and activities undertaken and in order to maximise success in their examinations. Participants repeatedly discussed 'the book' in each subject - these are published textbooks with chapters referring to sections of the syllabus. They reported that they used the chapters in these books to guide their own study by learning chapter summaries and doing the associated past examination questions. This specifically helped in focusing down on what content they felt had to be learnt. They indicated that these books were also used in class to structure end of topic tests and revision of units of work. However, these books did come in for some criticism, as students reflected there was extra work needed in condensing these textbooks, and at over 300

pages per book, this was no easy task. They were also deemed costly at over €30 each, and with one book needed for every subject being taken (up to eight or nine), such materials became very expensive indeed.

Students also discussed getting extra support for their studies through the use of extra tutors and attending privately run institutions specially set up to offer extra tuition and revision courses – these institutions are colloquially called 'grind schools' or 'grinds'. Extra tuition enabled students to have a one-to-one focus with a teacher, something they suggested did not happen often at school with teachers rushing through topics to get the course covered as well as having to deal with mixed-ability classrooms. Participants reported that in 'grinds', the tutors would teach directly to the examination and would emphasise exactly what had to be done to answer particular questions. Students inferred that in these settings, they were supplied with different perspectives as well as short-hand notes, revision materials and tips for getting extra marks:

> *I think they're really good… like teachers [in grinds] would teach to the exam more-so than they do in school. So it's way more exam focussed … It's also another opinion of a teacher and their outlook of the exam as well… different teachers teach different methods …a grinds teacher they can teach you the method that you need.*
>
> [Student Group Interview: School 10:Secondary Co-Ed]

Students were well aware, however, that attending 'grinds', having extra tuition and access to other support materials to maximise success on the LC was an expensive

business. They recognised too that not all their peers could afford to avail of this type of support and, furthermore, felt bad about asking their families for the financial support. There was a clear indication that seeking extra tuition as well as buying of textbooks and other materials to support revision and preparation for examinations, the LC course was really quite expensive for them and their families, which is an interesting issue to note in itself for an examination system supplied to all students by the State.

Predictability: curriculum coverage

Breadth of courses

The breadth of some of the courses in the LC was an issue raised repeatedly in the group interviews, with participants reporting that some courses included vast amounts of material, all of which had to be covered across a number of subjects in a relatively short timescale. However, this issue raised opposing attitudes to predictability from students. On the one had, some students suggested that courses were so broad that they could not predict the entire examination with any comfortable degree of certainty:

> *I think [biology] is too big a subject to be honest to be predictable. Like there's a lot in it, so many different chapters and stuff... it would be hard to predict because there's such a range of things that could come up.*
>
> [Student Group Interview: School 3:Secondary, Co-Ed]

Thus in subjects, such as biology and geography, students reported that they still needed to make sure they covered the whole course, both in school and through their

own study, to learn as much detail of the syllabus and core topics as they could because 'nothing is 100% fool-proof that it's not going to come up'. Students considered anyone trying to predict what content or questions would come up in this way was taking too much of a risk with their chances of success. Respondents suggested that they, and their peers, are very clear how serious the LC is to their life chances, so it is not in students' best interests to pick and choose what to learn for the examination.

On the other hand, however, this is what some students were actually doing; the breadth of subject content driving some students to engage with, and rely more on, those aspects of the examination that they gauged as annually predictable, namely similar examination questions and content. Reasons given for these practices were mainly time (or lack of it) which was of the essence when courses were only effectively 18 months in duration, as well as a realisation that the adoption of such practices were just the reality of doing Leaving Certificate examinations:

> *But you need to have predictability because the courses are too big...to learn it all, there's no time... I'd like to live in a world where I didn't have to predict my exams but, it's what I'm going to have to do.*
>
> [Student Group Interview: School 13:Secondary, Single-sex Girls]

Some respondents reported how their teachers discussed with them patterns of questions and topics appearing (or not) year-on-year and making predictions with them based on these analyses. Yet, students suggested that identifying patterns or

trends of syllabus content and the spotting of possible examination questions was not as easy to do as it might have been in previous years:

> *There used to be trends in some of the Leaving Cert papers, but our physics teacher has said it to us ... the days of predictions are kind of gone, ... you know you can't just trust predictions and it's just chancing you know.*
>
> [Student Group Interview: School 3:Secondary, Co-Ed]

Reasons given for less success in predicting patterns were related specifically to changes in syllabuses, changes in format and structure of questions, and multiple-item questions that assessed knowledge and skills drawn from a cross-section of the syllabus. Thus, students were keen to point out that if the LC was predicable, it was not so in any easy way that reduces the amount of work they have to do or the amount of course material they have to learn:

> *Like it's predictable in the way that you know certain topics are emphasised more than others, but that doesn't mean that it's still not hard to learn. It's still hard to retain all that information 'cos there is so much information to retain ... even though it's predictable, there's still so much you have to learn that it isn't easy ...*
>
> [Student Group Interview: School 8:Secondary, Single-sex Boys]

Impact upon students' approaches to learning

While published learning objectives within LC syllabuses and curriculum documents aspire to affect the types of learning the LC is intended to engender, students detailed approaches to learning that might be classed as narrow and focused solely on the test.

Thus not only did students report that their teachers might narrow the curriculum being taught in order to complete the course, students too narrowed the curriculum for themselves to learn what they thought was necessary for the examination. As such, students were agentive in terms of how and what they learn in order to be successful in the LC, reflecting the findings of Smyth and Banks (2012). Thus students were clear to emphasise that any learning strategies adopted, like the use of examination support materials, etc. outlined above, are done to maximise success.

Respondents discussed at length how they thought, for the most part, examinations were more a test of recall than of understanding and that approaches to learning that maximised recall were what was required. They acknowledged that for some subjects, and for some units within subjects, understanding was necessary and definitely needed for the top grades. However, there was a sense that students believed they could get through examinations in certain subjects without having to understand what they were writing about, at least not in a degree of depth that might be expected by examiners and their teachers:

> *Like there's a difference between memorising and understanding something, and being able to regurgitate something on the day without really even understanding what you're writing. And I think that's the key to what the Leaving Cert is at the moment.*
>
> [Student Group Interview: School 13:Secondary, Single-sex Girls]

Thus students painted a picture of learning approaches consisting of rote learning, learning material off by heart and 'cramming' material to be regurgitated on the day.

There was a degree of acknowledgement that some teachers were trying to help them 'learn for life', to expand what was in the syllabus and apply the content to wider debates and affairs, but students felt ultimately that their teachers were forced to teach in particular ways and they were forced to learn in a rote fashion:

> *The learning is adapted to the way that the exams are I think ... like the teachers have to teach like that, because it's the only way ... it's not the teachers' fault like…They'd obviously love to give us like a bit of craic or whatever, group discussion, but they can't because we have to get the points ...*
>
> [Student Group Interview: School 2:Secondary, Co-Ed]

Again, students suggested that the number of subjects, along with the points system, were probably the too most influential reasons why they learnt material specifically for the examinations and adopted the ways of preparing for the examinations as outlined above.

> *It's really the point system that's the flaw with the Leaving Cert. Like obviously the amount of subjects is ridiculous, but the points is what gets people, and that's why the Leaving Cert has become so much more pressurised, it's because it's not just an exam, it's like your future. Like you know it's the doorway to your future, so I think that needs to be addressed.*
>
> [Student Group Interview: School 13:Secondary, Single-sex Girls]

Students did, however, acknowledge that particular types of questions within some subjects did test their ability to have, and show, an opinion. They understood that such questions were trying to assess their skills of interpretation, analysis and evaluation and in doing so were seeking to test their 'intellectual ability and not just their memory'. Students were aware that to get good marks on those questions that attracted larger point tariffs, they also had to do well on these 'opinion' type questions:

> *I could go home and literally eat the page and learn it off and then regurgitate it in an exam …but that just doesn't really say much.*
>
> [Student Group Interview: School 7:Secondary, Single-sex Girls]
>
> *In Religion it's all about your opinion, how you interpret something, and the more critical analysis you can give in an essay, the higher you do. So you have to understand what you're doing.*
>
> [Student Group Interview: School 13:Secondary, Single-sex Girls]

Generally though, students' perspectives on the issues of how the LC impacted on learning and test-preparation strategies suggested that the 'tall order' of success demanded that they: cover large amounts of syllabus content in class; learn significant amounts of course material in a short space of time; be tested on applying the material learnt across various contexts and topics; and to do this across seven or eight subjects in the space of two weeks:

> *I can only speak for myself, but I'm more kind of learning how to get as many points as possible, not trying to learn to get knowledge out of the*

> *subject ... all I want to do is get as many points as I can to get to a college*
>
> *course.*

[Student Group Interview, School 8:Secondary, Single-sex Boys]

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has considered in detail the varied perspectives of students on the concept of predictability, as they understand it in the context of the Leaving Certificate examination across a range of schools in Ireland. From the data, it is clear that there is no definitive answer as to whether the Irish Leaving certificate is predictable or not; the notion is too complex and the question perhaps not nuanced enough to understand the processes and practices that dominate teaching, learning and classroom experiences for young people in these contexts. The initial research brief emerged from a policy and public dialogue that focused on concerns about students rote learning for examinations as well as associate demands not being what they should at this level; examinations being too easy and that students can train for higher grades. However, the empirical data indicated a more multifaceted reality of students' experiences of these examinations and their associated behaviours in getting to grips with the requirements and the demands of these assessments. The elements of predictability (detailed in Table 1) were evident in students' discussions as concrete aspects of examination experiences.

Thus they suggested that some level of predictability was essential for building a degree of confidence in what they were doing and how they might perform in the examination situation; it is not helpful to 'go in blind' and not to be prepared to some degree in what to expect. Having 'test-wiseness', as Anastasi (1981) argued, was

seen as a positive thing, and can add to the validity and fairness of the examination. All students, irrespective of context, had access to past questions, papers, and marking schemes and reflected that they benefitted from familiarity with these examination materials. Yet there is a degree of difference between test-wiseness and the public narrative of rote learning; students were very clear that the latter is all well and good for some aspects of the examinations but this alone will not bring high-level success. Furthermore, the overwhelming experience of the LC for students demands the 'tall order of success' outlined above; covering large amounts of content, learning significant amounts of course material, being tested on these across a range of topics and doing this across a number of subjects (usually seven or eight) in the space of two weeks. This is how students experience the dilemma of predictability. They know what the problem of predictability is and how it is mediated across contexts and across subjects. In this respect, their understandings of this assessment dilemma are based on the extensive range of demands that each subject makes of them in order that they achieve high standards in each. The tensions created by 'across subjects' notions of predictability are what make this dilemma relevant to students in terms of affecting what they do.

The public dialogues and debates about too much rote learning and easy papers, seems to students to belie their experiences of the amount of hard work and preparation that they commit to these examinations. They know that if they are not actively selective about the content and knowledge they revise and learn as well as making sure they produce the higher level responses required that they will not get the higher grades and associated points to enter the most prestigious courses and universities. Ultimately, then, for students the notion of 'predictability' as it plays out in the public dialogues was not one that they seemed to 'own'; they could see why

perhaps policy-makers, politicians, media commentators might define it in the negative way that they do, but such definitions were not of immediate importance to them; in their every day experiences a degree of predictability was a positive aspect of examinations and one that is not, in all cases for all students, necessarily problematical. Whilst many of the studies on the impact of high-stakes tests suggest that some teachers narrow the curriculum for their students (Madaus, Russell and Higgins 2009; Greatorex and Malacova, 2006), this study shows that students narrow the curriculum for themselves. They are agentive in adjusting their learning behaviours and practices accordingly in order to both cope with the demands of high-stakes examinations but also to do well. Therefore, the demands of the succeeding in seven or eight LC examinations, aligned with a highly competitive points and tertiary education admissions system cause students to narrow the curriculum for themselves and for 'learning-to-the-test' to flourish.

Such reflections lead us to conclude that predictability is not necessarily a technical dilemma within assessment. Instead it is what Filer (2000) has termed, a social product of the assessment enterprise, with the social aspects of assessment being as powerful as the technical, especially in terms of how assessment plays out in the real lives of students and their teachers. What continues to occur is that technical solutions are generally sought to perennial assessment dilemmas while evidence from 'others' (such as students) is less often canvassed. However, this study has shown that other voices can provide us with additional and, at times, richer understandings of these constructs in action. In particular it allows us to see that students are more than able to reflect on their own situations with regard to high-stakes examining contexts and have important contributions to make to our fuller understanding of those

elements that will promote high quality learning as well as fair assessment. The significant social impact of the LC system on young people in Ireland cannot be underestimated. While the aims and objectives of the system are to engender positive learning outcomes and prepare young people for the world outside of school, the reality is that young people are consumed with optimising their performance on these examinations and see this as the main goal of their schooling. They do not see this as necessarily their fault, only that they are reacting in the best ways they know how to what they see as the demands of the examinations system, their teachers, parents, and themselves, aligned with the demands of the points system. This paper argues that neglecting to include students' reflections on these perennial assessment dilemmas fails to see them in their totality and means we miss valuable insight into how assessment problems play out in reality for test-takers. Knowledge about what students think may provide better understandings of how we deal with these assessment quandaries and ultimately improve the systems we deliver.

As Cook-Sather (2002) advises, if educational systems are ostensibly designed to serve students, then it would be generally beneficial to listen to them and to re-evaluate our choices of whose views we seek to help us refine and improve the education systems we want. This would seem especially so in examinations systems where the stakes are high and the impact on young people the most considerable. In the areas of assessment dilemmas, we must start to count students among those who have the knowledge and the position to shape what counts as high-quality and fair assessment and not to leave perennial assessment dilemmas only to be debated and tussled over by adults.

References

Anastasi, A. 1981. Coaching, test sophistication and developed abilities. *American Psychologist*, 36, no.10: 1086 - 1093.

Alderson, J. C., and Wall, D. 1993. Does Washback Exist? *Applied Linguistics*, *14*, no. 2: 115–129.

Au W. 2007. High-Stakes Testing and Curricular Control: A Qualitative Metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher,* 36, no. 5: 258-267.

Baird, J., Hopfenbeck, T., Elwood J., Caro, D. and Ahmed, A. 2014. Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate. Oxford: University of Oxford.

Bangert-Drowns, R. L., Kulik, J. A. and Kulik, C-L. C. 1983. Effects of coaching programs on achievement test performance. *Review of Educational Research*, 53, no. 4: 571 - 585.

Brown, G. and Hirschfeld, G. 2008. Students' conceptions of assessment: Links to outcomes. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 15, no.1: 3-17.

Braun, V. and Clarke V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, no.2: 77-101.

Bunting, B. P. and Mooney, E. 2001. The effects of practice and coaching on test results for educational selection at eleven years of age. *Educational Psychology*, 21, no. 3: 243 - 253.

Chamberlain, S. 2012. 'Maybe I'm not as good as I think I am.' How qualification users interpret their examination results. *Educational Research*, 54, no.1: 39-49,

Cheng, L. 2003. Looking at the impact of a Public Examination Change on Secondary Classroom Teaching: A Hong Kong Case Study. *Journal of Classroom Interaction*, *38*, no.1:

Cizek, G. J. (2005) High-Stakes Testing: Contexts, Characteristics, Crtiques and Consequences. In. *Defending Standardized Testing, ed.* R. Phelps, 23-54, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Cook-Sather A. 2002. Authorizing Studnets'Perspectives: Toewards trust, Dialogue and Change in Education. *Educational Researcher*, 3, no. 4: 3-14.

Cook-Sather, A. 2006. Sound, Presence and Power: 'Student Voice' in educational Research and Reform. *Curriculum Enquiry*, 36, no. 4: 359-390.

Cook-Sather, A. 2007. Resisiting the Impostitional Potential of Student Voice Work: Lessons for liberatory educational research from poststructuralist femininst crtiques of critical pedagogy. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultiural Politics of Education*, 28no. 3: 389-403.

Daly, A. L., Baird, J.-A., Chamberlain, S., & Meadows, M. 2012. Assessment reform: students' and teachers' responses to the introduction of stretch and challenge at A-level. *Curriculum Journal*, *23* no. 2: 139–155.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Rustique-Forrester, E. 2005. The Consequences of Student Testing for Teaching and Teacher Quality. In *The Uses and Misuses of Data in Accountability Testing. The 104th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II* eds. J. Herman & E. Haertel, 289–319, Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Devine, D. and Luttrell, W. 2013. Children and Value - Education in Neo-liberal Times. *Children & Society*, 27: 241–244.

Elwood J. 2012. Qualifications, examinations and assessment: views and perspectives of students in the 14–19 phase on policy and practice. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 42, no.4: 497-512.

Elwood, J. & Baird, J. 2013. Students: researching voice, aspirations and perspectives in the context of educational policy change in the 14–19 phase, *London Review of*

Education, 11 no.2: 91-96

Elwood, J. & Murphy, P. 2015. Assessment systems as cultural scripts: a sociocultural theoretical lens on assessment practice and products, Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice, 22 no.2: 182-192.

Eklof H. and Nyroos, E. 2013. Pupil perceptions of national tests in science: perceived importance, invested effort, and test anxiety. *European Journal of Psychology of Education,* 28 no. 2: 497-510

Fleming, J. 2013. Young people's participation – where next? *Children and Society*, 27: 484-495.

Filer, A. 2000. Ed. *Assessment: Social Practice and Social Product*. London: Routledge.

Frederiksen J. & Collins A. 1989. A systems approach to educational testing. *Educational Researcher*, 18 no. 9: 27-32.

Greatorex, J. and Malacova, E. 2006. Can different teaching strategies or methods of preparing pupils lead to greater improvements from GCSE to A level performance?, *Research Papers in Education*, 21, no. 3: 255-294.

Griffin, B., Carless S. & Wilson, I. 2013. The undergraduate medical and health sciences admissions test: what is it measuring? *Medical Teacher*, 35: 727-730.

Hoffman, L. & Nottis, K. 2008. Middle School Students' Perceptions of Effective Motivation and Preparation Factors for High Stakes Tests. *NASSP Bulletin*, 92 no. 3: 209-223.

Madaus, G. 1988. The influence of testing on the curriculum. In *Critical issues in curriculum: eighty-seventh yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (Part 1) ed.* L. Tanner , Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Madaus, G. F., Russell, M. K., & Higgins, J. 2009. *The Paradoxes of High Stakes Testing: how they affect students, their parents, teachers, principals, schools and society.* Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing Inc.

Messick, S. and Jungeblut, A. (1981). Time and method in coaching for the SAT. *Psychological Bulletin*, 89, no.2: 191 - 216.

Miles and Huberman (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis.* London: SAGE.

Murphy, C., Lundy, L., Emerson, L. and Kerr, K. (2013) Children's perceptions of primary science assessment in England and Wales. *British Educational Research Journal*, 39, no.3: 585-606.

Noguera, P. 2009. *The Trouble with Balck Boys: ... And other refelctions on race, equity and the future of public education.* San Francisico: Jossey-Bass.

Ofqual. 2008. *Predictability Studies Report on GCSE and GCE level examinations.* Coventry: Office for Qualifications England.

Phelps, R. 2012. The Effect of Testing on Student Achievement, 1910 – 2010. *International Journal of Testing*, *12*: 21–43.

Powers, D. E. 1986. Relations of test item characteristics to test preparation/test practice effects: a quantitative summary. *Psychological Bulletin*, 100, no. 1: 67 - 77.

Powers, D. E. and Swinton S. S. 1984 Effects of self-study for coachable test item types. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76, no. 2: 266-278.

Putwain, D. 2009. Assessment and examination stress in Key Stage 4. *British Educational Research Journal*, 35, no.3: 391-411.

Roderick, M. & Engel, M. 2001. The Grasshopper and the Ant: Motivational Responses of Low-Achieving Students to High-Stakes Testing. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 23: 197-227.

Rudduck, J. and Fielding, M. 2006. Student voice and the perils of popularity, *Educational Review*, 58, no.2: 219-231.

Ryan, K. E., Ryan, A. M., Arbuthnot, K. & Samuels, S. 2007. Students' Motivation for Standardized Math Exams, *Educational Researcher* 36: 5-13.

Sinclair, R. 2004. Participation in practice: making it meaningful, effective and sustainable, *Children and Society*, 18:106-118.

Smyth E. and Banks J. 2012. High stakes testing and student perspectives on teaching and learning in the Republic of Ireland. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*. 24: 283-306.

Sturman, L. 2003. Teaching to the Test: Science or Intuition? *Educational Research*, *45*, no. 3: 261–273.

Tisdall K. 2008. Is the honeymoon over? Children and young people's participation in public decision making. *International Journal of Children's Rights* 16, no. 3: 419–429.

Triplett, C. F. & Barskdale, M. A. 2005. Thrird Through Sixth Graders' Perceptions of High-Stakes Testing. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 37: 237-260.

Walpole, M., McDonough, P. M., Bauer, C. J., Gibson, C., Kanyi, K. & Toliver, R. 2005. This Test is Unfair: Urban African American and Latino High School Students' Perceptions of Standardized College Admission Tests. *Urban Education*, 40: 321-349.

Weiss, M. 2009. *Student Perceptions of High Stakes Testing: How have students changed their attitudes and behaviours as a result of a state testing programme.* VDM Verlag Dr. Muller.

Table 1 Elements of examination predictability

Feature		Predictable	Unpredictable
Assessment format	Description	• Nature of assessment (eg written, oral, practical) is known in advance • Weighting of assessment components is known • A set format for questions, perhaps even related to specific topic areas and question choice, is known in advance	• Nature of the assessment may vary • Weightings given to different components may change • Novel question styles are used frequently
	Possible impacts	• The phrasing and structure of questions can be explained to students in advance and they can be taught test-wiseness	• Teachers can prepare students to think about what is required to respond to different question styles • What is being assessed changes
Scoring	Description	• How performances are credited is known openly (eg transparent marking schemes published) • Detail is known regarding scoring	• Information on rubrics is not available • Credit given to responses may vary
	Possible impacts	• Students may learn the scoring criteria rather than the syllabus materials in an extreme case	• Students may not know how to gain credit for their work
Performance format	Description	• How students will be required to respond is known in advance	• Changes are made to the ways in which students' knowledge and skills are demonstrated
	Possible impacts	• Teachers can school students on how to produce the kinds of performances required	• Match between performance required and student skills will affect results • What is being assessed changes

Feature		Predictable	Unpredictable
Examination support materials	Description	- Past papers available publicly - Model answers accessible - Advisory materials from the examination board, such as examiners' reports, available - Textbooks closely aligned with examination questions - Other publicly available information, such as newspaper examination guides and advice, teacher publications etc.	- Little information publicly available relating to the examination questions - Examination materials may be kept secure
	Possible impacts	- Too much focus upon the assessment rather than the syllabus content - Students may gain marks from superficial approaches to learning	- Examiners can advise students about examination preparation far better than those not involved with the examinations - Students may not know how to gain credit in the examinations
Test conditions	Description	Known in advance	- Not known in advance - May be variable
	Possible impacts	Test performances can be practised	Students' capacity to adapt is part of the assessment
Curriculum coverage	Description	Know the topics that will be assessed	Topics to be assessed not known in advance
	Possible impacts	- May not need to study the breadth of material intended - Teachers may narrow the taught curriculum	- Do not know how to prepare for the exam - Performance based upon luck of studied curriculum/exam match - Teachers must judge which aspects of the syllabus to teach

Figure 1: Adapted Definition of Predictability for Students

Some people say that examinations (like the Leaving certificate exams) are too predictable and so they have a negative impact on students' learning. When an exam is seen as predictable in a bad way, it usually means that students and teachers are able to predict the types of examination questions and topics that will come up each year, as well as the kinds of answers that will be given good marks. This can mean that teachers teach to the exam and students are able to rote learn the subject specific material that they are taught. So, in this kind of exam students do not have to learn the entire curriculum or have a deep understanding of a subject to be able to answer questions and do well. This can also mean that every year the exam paper assesses the same knowledge and skills and doesn't measure the appropriate knowledge and skills that give students a better understanding of the subjects they learn.