REACH: Journal of Inclusive Education in Ireland, Vol. 37.1 (2024), ??-??.

Standardised Testing among Children learning English as an Additional Language (EAL) in Ireland: Normative and Exclusionary Practices

Standardised testing has become an increasingly prominent feature in education policy. In Ireland, standardised tests in literacy and numeracy are compulsory for all pupils, with few exceptions, in second, fourth and sixth classes and results of the tests are employed in increasingly powerful ways by the Department of Education. In addition to deleterious effects such as narrowing the curriculum and teaching to the test, there is an increasing body of literature concerned with the impact of standardised tests on pupils. This is particularly acute for children from minoritised ethnic backgrounds and those learning English as an Additional Language. This critical quantitative inquiry examined the standardised testing of five cohorts of children learning English as an Additional Language (EAL) as they progressed through a junior and senior primary school in Ireland. Data are drawn from standardised tests scores of literacy, numeracy, verbal and non-verbal intelligence. Findings include that the performance of the EAL children was lower on all tests of verbal intelligence compared to the non-EAL groups. This difference remained consistent as they progressed from junior to senior primary school. No pattern of difference was identifiable between the groups on 'non-verbal' reasoning tests. These findings have important implications for educational professionals and policy makers including that these tests may be inappropriate for EAL children and that the interpretation and reporting of results needs to be qualified.

Keywords Standardised Testing, English as an Additional Language, Educational Equity, Linguistic Diversity, Achievement Gap

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INTRODUCTION

Reflective of broader Irish society, the linguistic and ethnic profile of learners in Irish classrooms is becoming increasingly diverse (Ní Dhuinn & Keane, 2023). Such developments present schools with many opportunities, in addition to the more well-documented challenges (Devine, 2011). Teaching is an increasingly complex profession, demanding a command across a range of instructional and pastoral roles. Within this increased complexity, assessment is one of the key competencies expected of teachers (Murchan & Shiel, 2017). In 2011, as part of a range of measures designed to improve and monitor standards in Irish primary schools, the Irish government introduced mandatory standardised testing, taking place annually in 2nd, 4th and 6th class. Children with a score below a STen of four on standardised tests of literacy and numeracy are identified as children who "may require some degree of additional teaching support" (DE, 2024). In line with this policy directive, most schools use data from standardised tests to identify children in need of additional support (O'Leary et al., 2019).

Considerations of the role of standardised testing in the scholastic lives of minoritised children features strongly in the literature (MacRuairc, 2009; Nayir et al., 2019). Difficulties generating valid and reliable assessment information on linguistically diverse student populations is one of the primary obstacles to these students achieving to their full potential (Menken 2008). Underperformance on standardised tests can have direct consequences for learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL), as shown by Darmody, McGinnity and Russell (2022). Furthermore, researchers in the field of language acquisition and testing,

such as De Angelis (2014), have raised concerns about the use of "monolingual norms with bilinguals and second-language learners" (p.15).

Research suggests that monolingual standardised assessments are inappropriate for use with bi- and multilingual children due to issues such as content bias, linguistic bias, and the disproportionately small representation of these children in normative samples (De Angelis, 2021; Shohamy, 2022). A focus on test results and numerical data from testing alone is therefore viewed as an oversimplification of the testing experience that can lead educators and teachers away from pedagogical discourse regarding alternative interpretations resulting in misrepresentation and misrecognition of bi- and multilingual children's abilities (De Angelis, 2014). The issues arising from these observations are myriad and include the over identification (and under-identification) of EAL children as those in need of additional support (Cummins, 2001; Kearns, 2011).

The project upon which this paper is based examined the standardised testing of five EAL and non-EAL cohorts as they progressed through a junior and senior primary school in Fingal County, Dublin, Ireland. Data are drawn from standardised tests scores of literacy, Mary Immaculate College Reading Attainment Tests (MICRA-T; Wall and Burke, 1987), numeracy, Standardised Irish Graded Mathematics Attainment Tests (SIGMA-T; Wall and Burke, 1991) verbal intelligence (Non Reading Intelligence Test (NRIT) (Young, 1989), re-standardised and re-named as the *New*-Non Reading Intelligence Test ((N)NRIT) (Young & McCarthy, 2012)) and non-verbal reasoning tests (GL Assessment, 2017). Findings include that the performance of EAL groups was lower on all tests of verbal intelligence compared to the non-EAL groups. This difference remained consistent as they progressed from junior to senior primary school. No pattern of difference was identifiable between the groups on 'non-verbal' reasoning tests. This paper explores the implications of these results for education staff and highlights areas for further research.

Standardised Testing in Irish Primary Schools

While there is substantial variation in relation to the purpose, design, implementation and use of results, the term standardised test usually refers to tests that are externally designed and that aim to create conditions, scoring procedures and interpretations of scores that are consistent across schools (Morris, 2011). Standardised tests in literacy and numeracy were made compulsory in Irish primary schools in 2007. When initially introduced in 2007, the results of standardised tests were used for purposes associated with the identification of children with additional educational needs and to assist in communication with parents (NCCA, 2007). Since then,

however, education policy developments have ensured an increasingly enhanced profile for standardised tests in Irish schools (O' Leary et al., 2019). In 2011, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011a) expanded this original role through reforms designed to raise standards in Irish primary schools. In 2017, the DES further expanded the role of standardised tests with the assertion that data from standardised testing provide a broad and objective basis by which to measure differences between schools in levels of overall relative student achievement (DES, 2017). Data from standardised tests now inform decisions on the allocation of Special Education Teaching (SET) resources.

Education policy in Ireland recommends that children who have significant special educational needs, such as those with mild or transient educational needs including those associated with speech and language difficulties, social or emotional problems, or co-ordination or attention control difficulties should be considered for additional teaching support, as well as, students who have specific learning disabilities, and those in need of support due to having EAL (DES, 2017, p.16). As outlined above, children with a score below a STen of four on a standardised test of literacy or numeracy may also require some degree of additional teaching support with those scoring a STen of one or two (below the tenth percentile) identified as in need of intensive support.

The underlying assumption of using standardised tests to identify children in need of support is that test results will determine where students stand relative to others, and that this information will be used to improve student outcomes in the interests of inclusion and equity in education (Douglas et al., 2016). If the information gathered for this purpose is not used to identify inequalities, to target interventions, and to monitor the effectiveness of the interventions to ensure the elimination of inequalities, then the validity of using tests for this purpose may be challenged (Douglas et al, 2016). Many researchers have identified the disaggregation of data as a key factor in ensuring inclusion and equity in education. Without disaggregated data, inequalities between social groups are often obscured, thereby creating an illusion of equity for children from traditionally marginalised groups (Au and Knoester, 2017; Bradbury, 2019; Creagh, 2014; Demie, 2018).

Standardised Testing and Children Learning English as an Additional Language

Children learning EAL are recognised as "at risk" of underperformance on standardised tests. Negative consequences include these learners being labelled as 'low achievers' or a 'low-ability student'. These labels can lead to internalisation of low expectations and the development of poorer self-image as learners (Alford,

2014). Furthermore, this can lead to loss of motivation for, and interest in, education (Nusche, 2009), which risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Theories in relation to second language acquisition suggest that it can take up to 10 years for Minority Language (ML) children to acquire the levels of language proficiency necessary for them to have equal opportunity for success on a standardised test in the dominant language (Collier and Thomas, 1989; Cummins, 2001). Part of the explanation for this is that they are catching up with a moving target as their non-EAL peers progressively increase their literacy skills (Lou, 2020). Academic language proficiency is defined as including "knowledge of less frequent vocabulary" in the language of instruction, as well as the "ability to interpret and produce increasingly complex written and oral language" (Cummins, 2001, p. 66). As students advance through the grades, their proficiency in academic language correspondingly increases. Students "encounter more low frequency words" "complex syntax" and "abstract expressions that are virtually unheard of in everyday conversation" (Cummins, 2001, p. 66). ML children may be perceived to have, and 'appear' to have, good conversational skills but they may not have the academic language proficiency required for verbal IQ tests or tests that require complex manipulation of language in cognitively demanding situations such as those presented by the testing situation. In misunderstanding conversational fluency as a valid index of overall linguistic proficiency, teachers run the risk of attributing a lower score to a 'learning disability' or 'deficiencies' in the child themselves or, conversely, poor academic performance may be attributed to lack of proficiency in the language of instruction resulting in a failure to recognise a learning difficulty (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju & Roberts, 2014). While very little work has been undertaken in this area in Ireland, Cuba and Tefera (2024) argue that this is "one of the most complex and systemic challenges" facing public schools in the United States of America (USA) (p. 29).

Based on these criticisms of the implications of standardised testing on self-identity of EAL children and associated impact of identification of need, the study upon which this paper is based sought to answer the following two research questions:

1. Are there statistically significant differences between the performances of EAL and the Non-EAL groups on standardised tests?

2. Is there evidence to suggest that the EAL groups were disadvantaged by their levels of academic language proficiency in the tests?

METHODOLOGY

This study was a Critical Quantitative Inquiry (Stage & Wells, 2014) into the comparative performance of EAL and Non-EAL children on standardised tests in one Irish primary school to ascertain any statistically significant differences between the performances of both groups of children on those tests. The study involved the collation, organisation and statistical analysis of large amounts of raw data in the form of standardised test results. As such, a quantitative approach was required in the study. However, the intention of this study was not merely to give a statistical account of the performance of each group of children on the tests but to make a critical inquiry into the comparative performance of the groups with the intention of examining the issue of equality within the assessment regime. This research was, therefore, deeply rooted in critical educational research, the aim of which is to challenge discrimination if it is shown to exist from an examination of the data. As a research paradigm, Critical Quantitative Inquiry focuses on equity concerns that can be highlighted through analysis of large data sets and by examining differences by, for example, language, ethnicity, class, and gender (Stage & Wells, 2014.). Procedural ethical issues included the solicitation of permission to proceed with the study from the Principals of both Junior and Senior Schools. Data protection issues were addressed by redacting the names and personal details of all children in the sample before entering them into the Excel file.

Site and Sample

The site for this study was a connected junior primary and senior primary school who share a campus in the electoral area of Fingal County in Dublin, Ireland. Children attend the Junior School for the first four years of formal schooling and then transfer to the Senior School for the remaining four years. Results of standardised tests in 2nd class are passed to the Senior School to inform decisions around 'regrouping' or 'splitting' of classes to form new 'mixed ability' classes. Almost sixteen percent of the population of Fingal County self-identify as migrant or minority ethnic (CSO, 2017). This statistic was reflected in the schools' populations at the time of the study.

The study involved the statistical examination of the standard test scores of five cohorts of children (N= 130-161) as they progressed through the school, from 1st to 6th class, on standardised tests of literacy, numeracy, verbal and non-verbal intelligence (N= 9079), see Table 1. Empty cells indicate data were unavailable for the particular occasion upon which that test was administered.

Table 1: Sample sizes (n) by cohort, EAL status and test.

Cohort	GRP.	1st NRIT	2nd NRIT	NVRT	Lit 1st	Lit 2nd	Lit 3rd	Lit 4th	Lit 5th	Lit 6th	Num1st	Num2nd	Num3rd	Num4th	Num5th	Num6th
2006	EAL	N=(37)	N=(37)	N=(37)	N=(39)	N=(40)	____	N=(38)	N=(35)	N=(29)	N=(39)	N=(40)	____	N=(37)	N=(35)	N=(30)
	Non-EAL	N=(93)	N=(90)	N=(88)	N=(91)	N=(82)	____	N=(82)	N=(93)	N=(93)	N=(89)	N=(82)	____	N=(85)	N=(93)	N=(93)
2007	EAL	N=(33)	N=(29)	N=(29)	N=(33)	N=(34)	N=(29)	N=(29)	N=(26)	N=(24)	N=(33)	N=(34)	N=(30)	N=(28)	N=(26)	N=(24)
	Non-EAL	N=(102)	N=(106)	N=(106)	N=(101)	N=(102)	N=(100)	N=(100)	N=(101)	N=(105)	N=(104)	N=(103)	N=(99)	N=(99)	N=(102)	N=(106)
2008	EAL	N=(51)	N=(49)	N=(49)	N=(52)	N=(53)	N=(49)	N=(43)	N=(37)	N=(34)	N=(50)	N=(53)	N=(49)	N=(45)	N=(38)	N=(34)
	Non-EAL	N=(108)	N=(112)	N=(112)	N=(107)	N=(107)	N=(102)	N=(102)	N=(101)	N=(103)	N=(105)	N=(108)	N=(101)	N=(101)	N=(101)	N=(102)
2009	EAL	N=(42)	N=(38)	N=(37)	N=(42)	N=(42)	N=(33)	N=(33)	N=(33)	____	N=(42)	N=(40)	N=(33)	N=(33)	N=(33)	____
	Non-EAL	N=(94)	N=(95)	N=(95)	N=(90)	N=(91)	N=(92)	N=(95)	N=(95)	____	N=(90)	N=(91)	N=(92)	N=(95)	N=(95)	____
2010	EAL	N=(42)	N=(35)	N=(36)	N=(41)	N=(39)	N=(31)	N=(34)	____	____	N=(41)	N=(39)	N=(35)	N=(35)	____	____
	Non-EAL	N=(93)	N=(102)	N=(115)	N=(96)	N=(102)	N=(104)	N=(103)	____	____	N=(95)	N=(103)	N=(103)	N=(102)	____	____

Each cohort was divided into two groups, EAL and Non-EAL. The EAL groups consisted of those children who were identified by their parents at the time of their enrolment in the school as children who spoke a language other than English at home as a first language and who were provided with access to English language support during their first four years at school (N = 24 - 53). Length of time of EAL support varied among the EAL groups from one to four years and was determined variously by Department of Education and Science (DES) language support policies, proficiency levels in English as measured on The Primary School Assessment Kit (PSAK) (NCCA 2006), and length of attendance in the school. The Non-EAL groups consisted of children who spoke English as a first language and included all children who enrolled in the Senior School after third class (N = 82 - 115).

Each EAL group, in each cohort of the sample, refers to the same children initially identified as EAL candidates in the Junior School. No new EAL children were included in these EAL groups once they left the Junior School. This was to ensure that the EAL children, initially identified as children who were in need of EAL support, were fully tracked throughout their school years from enrolment in the Junior School up until they left the Senior School in sixth class. Potential variables such as socio-economic status and ethnicity were not consistently available throughout the duration of the study so are not considered.

The data were the test results of the sample, described in the research as the 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 Cohorts, according to the year of enrolment in Junior Infants, on standardised tests of verbal intelligence, (NRIT, Young, 1989; NNRIT, Young and McCarthy, 2012); standardised tests of non-verbal reasoning, (NVRT, GL Assessment, 2017), standardised tests in literacy (Micra-T), and standardised tests in numeracy (Sigma-T). The NRIT and NNRIT are referred to collectively as the (N)NRIT in this paper. The data extend from those collected in May 2009, at 1st class with the 2006 Cohort, to May 2016. At this cut-off point, data were unavailable for 6th class for the 2009 Cohort and for 5th and 6th class for the 2010 Cohort.

Data Analysis

Raw data, in the form of individual scores, were input to an Excel spreadsheet and were then imported into SPSS. Individual scores were aggregated and using the T-test (Group Statistics) to generate descriptive statistics (N, Mean, Standard Deviation and Standard Error Mean) and the T-test (Independent Samples Test) to generate inferential statistics (values of t, the degrees of freedom (df), and the associated statistical significance (Sig. [2-tailed]), the performances on the standardised tests of the groups were compared for difference (t). This paper presents an analysis of the data from the verbal intelligence tests (Non Reading Intelligence Test (NRIT) (Young, 1989), re-standardised and re-named as the New-Non Reading Intelligence Test ((N)NRIT) (Young & McCarthy, 2012)), non-verbal reasoning tests (NVRT) and literacy tests (Micra-T).

FINDINGS

(New) Non-Reading Intelligence Test

The t-test for independent samples indicated that the mean scores of the EAL groups on the (N)NRIT were statistically significantly lower nine times out of the ten occasions examined than the mean scores of the non-EAL groups. These data are presented in Figures 1 and 2, with the relevant mean scores for each cohort included. Figure 1 presents the data from the first occasion of testing, in 1st class, while Figure 2 presents the data from the second occasion of testing, in 5th class for cohort 1, in 4th class for cohort 2 and in 3rd class for cohorts 3,4 and 5.

Figure 1: Comparisions of mean scores of EAL & Non-EAL groups on (N) NRIT, Occasion 1 in 1st class.

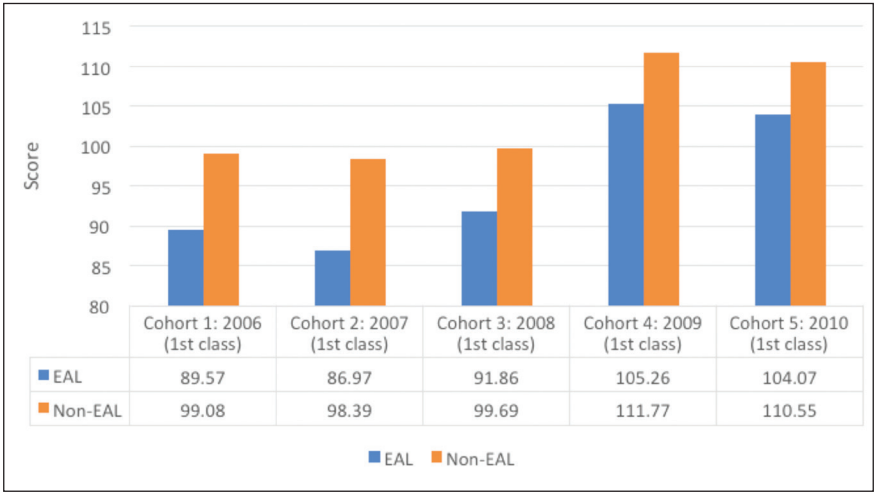
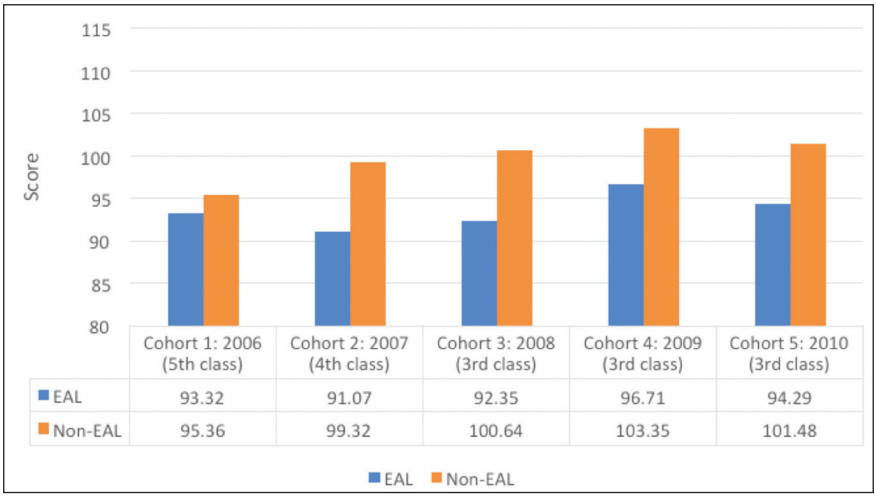


Figure 2: Comparision of Mean scores of EAL & Non-EAL groups on (N) NRIT Occasion 2 in 5th, 4th or 3rd class.



The achievement gap between the groups also remained consistent on the (N) NRIT as the groups progressed through the school. The consistent nature of the achievement gap between EAL and Non-EAL groups on this test of intelligence can be viewed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Mean EAL and Non-EAL Scores on (N)NRIT, NVRT, Literacy & Numeracy

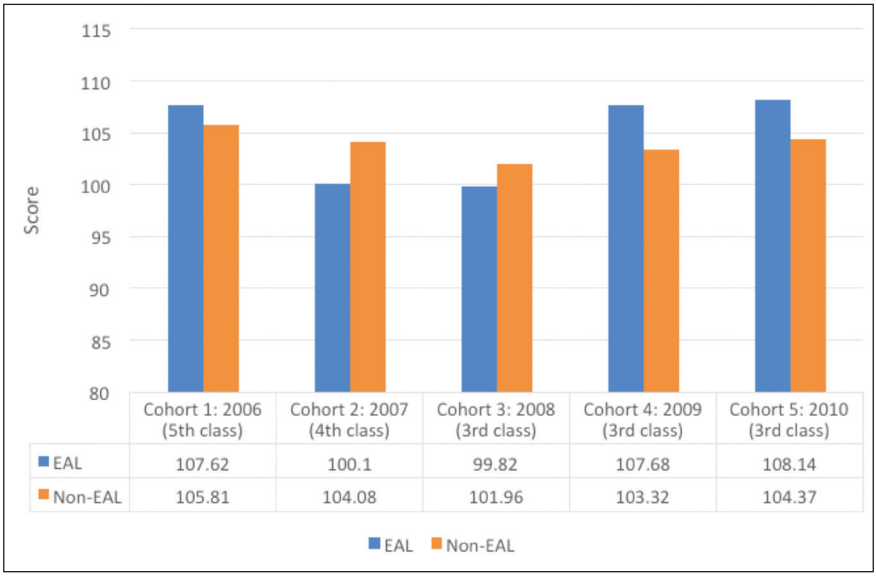
COHORT	GRP.	NRIT 1	NRIT 2	NVRT	LIT 1	LIT 2	LIT 3	LIT 4	LIT 5	LIT 6	MATH 1	MATH 2	MATH 3	MATH 4	MATH 5	MATH 6
2006	EAL	89.57 1st	93.32 5th	107.62	102.10	97.90	____	94.61	93.06	96.10	95.56	95.98	____	100.41	103.37	102.33
	NON-EAL	99.08 1st	95.36 5th	105.81	104.88	104.76	____	103.52	100.68	103.11	99.98	100.34	____	105.45	108.34	106.24
2007	EAL	86.97 1st	91.07 4th	100.10	98.79	97.12	98.48	92.34	90.15	97.42	87.27	91.88	98.60	100.29	101.81	106.33
	NON-EAL	98.39 1st	99.32 4th	104.08	104.99	106.75	106.16	104.11	102.44	104.49	96.89	100.75	104.05	107.14	105.13	105.30
2008	EAL	91.86 1st	92.35 3rd	99.82	100.12	99.81	98.69	95.88	96.22	97.59	95.64	98.45	101.65	101.98	103.26	103.29
	NON-EAL	99.69 1st	100.64 3rd	101.96	103.82	106.73	105.48	107.87	103.89	108.02	102.51	105.13	104.06	106.93	104.14	107.06
2009	EAL	105.26 1st	96.71 3rd	107.68	109.24	106.52	105.42	100.09	97.97	____	104.86	110.63	108.85	110.94	108.27	____
	NON-EAL	111.77 1st	103.35 3rd	103.32	108.32	109.27	108.34	105.20	103.92	____	106.59	110.63	106.80	106.43	105.34	____
2010	EAL	104.07 1st	94.29 3rd	108.14	111.07	106.18	107.23	101.71	____	____	105.59	107.13	109.49	110.29	____	____
	NON-EAL	110.55 1st	101.48 3rd	104.37	109.82	109.75	107.56	105.83	____	____	106.91	107.45	106.76	107.56	____	____

Note: Statistically Significantly Lower Mean Scores for EAL groups on (N)NRIT Highlighted in Red

Non-Verbal Reasoning Test

In terms of the NVRT, there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the EAL and the Non-EAL group on four of the five occasions. As shown in Figure 3 below, there was only one occasion where there was a statistically significant difference. This occurred with the 2009 cohort when the mean score of the EAL group (M = 107.68, SD = 10.84) was statistically significantly higher ($t(130) = 2.07$, $p = .041$) than the mean score of the Non-EAL group (M = 103.32, SD 10.90).

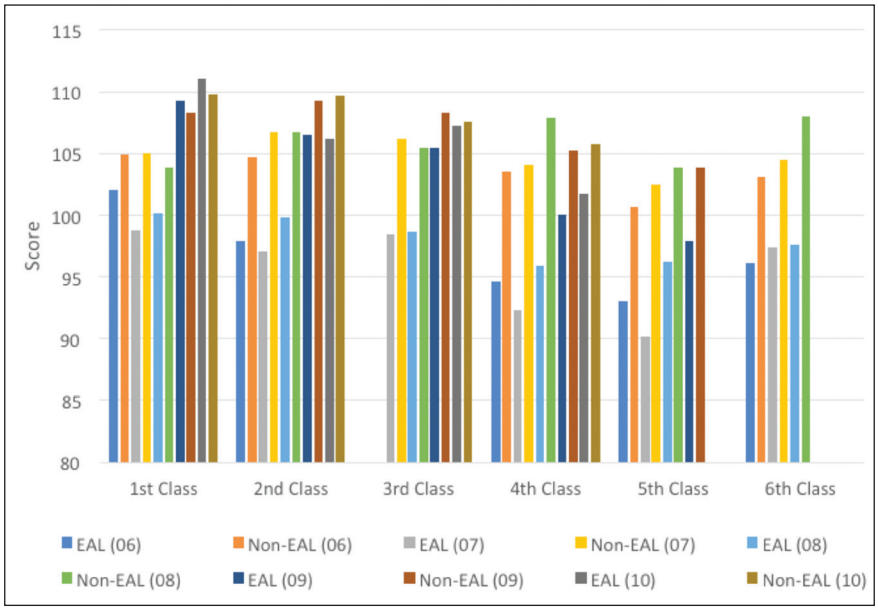
Figure 3: Comparisons of Mean Scores of EAL & Non-EAL groups on NVRT



Literacy Tests

The analysis of the Literacy Test data revealed that there was a significant difference between the test groups. The EAL groups scored statistically significantly lower on 16 of 26 occasions, and lower on seven other occasions. The achievement gap in literacy remains significant in 2006, 2007 and 2008 Cohorts as they progress from 1st to 6th class. In 2009 and 2010 Cohorts, the gap grows steadily from 2nd class onwards. This becomes significant in 5th class in 2009 Cohort.

Figure 4: Comparison of mean EAL scores and Non-EAL scores on reading tests from 1st to 6th class for all cohorts



DISCUSSION

This study examined the comparative performance of five cohorts of EAL and non-EAL children on a range of standardised tests on ten different occasions as they progressed through primary school in Ireland. Though limited to this single-site, the findings provide statistically significant results that demonstrate the underperformance of EAL children on the (N)NRIT. Two clear findings were identified in support of this. The first was that EAL groups of children performed statistically significantly lower on nine of the ten occasions and lower on the 10th occasion examined. The second was that the achievement gap between the EAL and the Non-EAL groups remained consistent on the (N)NRIT as the groups progressed through the school. The persistent nature of this achievement gap was clearly identifiable in the 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 cohorts. The extent of the gap remains quite similar from when they were initially tested in 1st class to when they were subsequently tested in 3rd or 4th class.

The persistent nature of this achievement gap can be explained by the fact that Non-EAL children are not 'standing still' while waiting for EAL children to catch

up (Lou, 2020). On one occasion, in this study, a narrowing of the gap between the two groups was observed. This was when the (N)NRIT was carried out for the second time in 5th class, with the 2006 cohort. By 5th class, the EAL children had been learning English for six years and one explanation for the narrowing of the gap could be that the language proficiency levels of the EAL group were approaching grade norms after six years (see Table 2). The EAL mean on this occasion (M= 93.32) however, does not compare favourably with any of the other Non-EAL mean scores in the study, indicating that they still had a considerable distance to go in order to 'catch up' with the overall average Non-EAL performance, even after six years learning English.

It could be suggested that the reason for consistently significant underperformance by the EAL groups on the (N)NRIT was simply because the EAL groups were of lower academic ability. Evidence from the NVRT results examined in this study can be used to refute any explanation for these differences on the basis of lower academic ability among the EAL groups. There were no statistically significant differences between the EAL and the Non-EAL groups on four out of the five occasions on which the results of the NVRT were examined. On the one occasion where there was a statistically significant difference between the groups, the EAL group scored statistically significantly higher than the Non-EAL group. On the other four occasions that the NVRT was examined, each group scored higher/lower on two occasions each, with no evidence of statistically significant difference. In contrast to the (N)NRIT, no pattern of difference was identifiable between the groups on this 'non-verbal' reasoning test (see Figure 3). Given the resounding evidence on the impact of test scores on the educational trajectories for many children learning EAL, including the issue of "disproportionate representation" in SEN, these findings are deeply troubling.

IMPLICATIONS

This study highlights the recurring underperformance of EAL children in an Irish primary school on standardised tests of verbal intelligence when compared to their non-EAL peers. School leaders, teachers, psychologists and other para-educational professionals, parents and care-givers, and children themselves, should be made aware that these tests may be inappropriate for EAL children and that the interpretation and reporting of results needs to be qualified. In recognition of the profound influence that assessment can have on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils, educators of EAL children must be sophisticated in their understanding of the ad-

ministration, interpretation and communication of test results to children, their families and other education professionals. A comprehensive understanding of the nature of second language acquisition would help to ensure that the abilities and achievements of children learning EAL are recognised and represented accurately and appropriately. This would help to limit the "disproportionate representation" (Zhang et al., 2014) of children learning EAL in SEN.

At school level, teachers should be enabled to make professional and ethical decisions in relation to the suitability of tests for particular groups of children in light of this analysis, and to interpret, record and report results informed by such analysis. Availability of targeted CPD in this area would be of benefit to all professionals involved. Inclusion of more detailed information on the language profile of each child being tested would ensure that the child's future teachers and others who may have access to these records are aware of the context in which the tests were undertaken. This would support a more sophisticated interpretation of these results, as professionals are supported to interpret the results in light of the language profile of the students involved.

It is also evident that this area requires considerable increased attention from the research community in Ireland. In addition to an analysis of the impact of language on test scores and subsequent funnelling into SEN, further research work might also take an intersectional approach so that the impact of multidimensional identities within the population learning EAL are considered. This work might also take into consideration the voices of the children and families most affected by these decisions.

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