

Assessment in the Primary School

Discussion Document and
Proceedings of the Consultative
Conference on Education 2008

Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Vere Foster House
35 Parnell Square
Dublin 1

Telephone: 01 804 7700
Fax: 01 872 2462
Email: info@into.ie
Web: www.into.ie
General Secretary: John Carr

Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann
Áras Vere Foster
35 Cearnóg Pharnell
Baile Átha Cliath 1

Guthán: 01 804 7700
Fax: 01 872 2462
Ríomhphost: info@into.ie
Gréasán: www.into.ie
Ard Rúnaí: John Carr

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Acknowledgements

Guest Presenters

Ita Kelly, Scoil Pío Naofa
Anne Looney, NCCA
Siobhán McGovern, St Patrick's College
Liz Dunphy, St Patrick's College
Joan Keating, Scoil Cholmcille BNS, Trim
Pat Naughton, Scoil Barra, Corcaigh

Education Committee

Mary Cawley, Cathaoirleach
Milo Walsh, LeasChathaoirleach
Patrick Dorrian
Charles Glenn
Michael Weed
Mary Cawley
Rosena Jordan
Siobhán Lynskey
Róisín Nic Tighearnáin
Frank Roche
Nuala Uí Dhrisceoil
Aidan Gaughran
Ger Stack
Gerry O'Sullivan
Dympna Mulkerrins
Pat Scanlan
Alice O'Connell

INTO Education Team

Claire Garvey
Ann McConnell

Compilation and Editing

Deirbhile Nic Craith

Foreword

The INTO has considered the topic of assessment on a number occasions and considers it timely to revisit the topic of assessment in the context of the plethora of policy developments concerning assessment in recent years. The place of assessment and the understandings of the various facets of assessment have evolved significantly since the introduction of the 1971 primary school curriculum. The context in which assessment takes place has changed. Assessment today is considered an integral part of teaching and learning. Assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning have shaped the discourse on assessment in schools in recent years.

The guidelines on assessment recently published by the NCCA have been welcomed by teachers. However, it is disappointing that professional development on a whole school basis, focusing on **all** aspects of assessment has not yet been available to teachers. Supporting the practice of assessment in schools is essential if pupil learning is to be enhanced.

Teachers have used standardised tests as part of their assessment practice since the Drumcondra, Micra-T and Sygma-T tests were first developed in the 1970s. School policies in relation to administering such tests vary with some schools testing all classes, with the exception of infant classes, every year and others testing less frequently or in fewer classes. Teachers have found such tests useful in deciding what children need learning support and to inform their teaching. However, since 2007 schools are obliged to administer standardised tests in reading and in mathematics at two stages of the child's career in primary school. However, it is a matter for schools to decide which tests to administer and when to administer the tests, within the guidelines outlined in DES Circular 0138/06. The INTO welcomes current developments concerning the development of standardised tests in Irish.

The INTO has always been supportive of the Programme of National Monitoring where tests in English reading and mathematics are administered to pupils in a random sample of schools. Prior to 2009, such national assessments took place in fifth class in English reading and in fourth class for mathematics. From 2009 the tests will be administered to pupils in second and sixth class. The findings from such assessments inform national policy on reading and mathematics in primary schools and are particularly useful in planning for teacher professional development and initial teacher education. They also form an important dimension of system evaluation.

The INTO Education Committee are to be congratulated for retaining assessment as a key issue on the Organisation's agenda. There is much international evidence to show that the mis-use of testing, which is only one aspect of assessment, can be very damaging to teaching and learning in schools. The INTO has been to the fore in ensuring that assessment policy in Ireland remains true to its core function of supporting and enhancing teaching and learning. This report includes the findings of a survey on assessment practices in schools, which was circulated to a random selection of schools. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the staff representatives who completed the questionnaires on behalf of their schools.

As always, the contribution of practising teachers is vital to INTO educational research.

The INTO hopes that this publication will contribute further to the debate on the role of assessment in primary education.



John Carr, MA (Ed)
General Secretary

February 2010

Part I

Assessment in the Primary School

Discussion Document



Introduction

The INTO previously addressed the issue of assessment at its Consultative Conferences on Education in 1986 and 1997. Since then the revised primary school curriculum has been completed and implemented, the NCCA have published assessment guidelines for schools and the Minister for Education has introduced mandatory standardised testing of pupils at two stages of a primary pupil's career.

Assessment practices prior to the introduction of the revised curriculum were based more on informal than formal assessment and varied greatly from school to school. Standardised tests were used, mainly for screening purposes, and learning-support teachers used diagnostic tests to assist in identifying learning needs of pupils. While informal assessment remains the principal and most effective form of assessment for teachers, formal assessment is now more frequently used and there is a much greater homogeneity of practice amongst schools. There has also been a large increase in both the recording and communicating of assessment results in recent years (INTO Curriculum Survey, 2006). Assessment has become a more central feature of teaching and learning in schools in the last decade. This paper seeks to provide an overview of the current situation in schools regarding assessment.

Developments in primary school assessment

The economic recession of the 1980s led to cutbacks in the public service. The government sought to reduce teacher numbers by increasing the pupil/teacher ratio (Circular 20/87). This was vigorously opposed by teachers and parents and was modified after negotiations. It was also agreed that there should be a general review of primary education and of the primary curriculum. Two separate bodies were set up and both reported in 1990.

The Report of the Primary Curriculum Review Body described assessment as an integral process of primary education and characterised the relationship between assessment and the curriculum as a circular one: assessment procedures are contingent on the relationship between the curriculum and the child's interaction with it in the learning process. In this context, assessment facilitates the modification of teaching strategies and can lead to curricular revision. This report identified the following characteristics of pupil assessment:

- the results of assessment should provide a basis for decisions about pupils' future learning needs;
- assessment should provide information about pupils' potential ability and about how they are performing in relation to the aims of the curriculum;

- assessment should be comprehensive enough to take account of the full range of abilities across all the subjects of the curriculum;
- the system of assessment should be related to and reflect the content and objectives of the curriculum;
- assessment procedures should allow for the effective communication of relevant information to parents, teachers, the Department of Education and other agencies;
- there should be continuity between classes and schools (primary and post-primary) in relation to such procedures;
- there is a need for a moderating component in any system of assessment.

The NCCA was established to implement the recommendations of the Review Body and this led to the revised curriculum. In 1993, the NCCA published: *Curriculum and Assessment Policy: Towards the New Century* reflecting the principles of the Review Body noted above. In the section 'Purposes of assessment' it refers to:

- assessment as an integral part of the teaching and learning process;
- assessment to facilitate pupil performance by providing information;
- the skilled and judicious use for a variety of assessment techniques which can have a positive effect on classroom practice;
- assessment as a formative and diagnostic process;
- the teacher as professional with a central role in the assessment of pupils at primary level.

The White Paper on Education *Charting Our Education Future* (1995) incorporated many of the elements of the NCCA policy document and was generally welcomed. However, proposals relating to the assessment of pupils by their teachers at the end of first and fifth class, which surfaced for the first time in the Green Paper *Education for a Changing World* (1992), were regarded by many as a form of institutionalised testing which could devalue the teaching process. In spite of much debate and opposition, mandatory standardised testing of maths and reading at two stages of a pupil's career was introduced in 2007.

The Primary School Curriculum 1999

The Primary School Curriculum 1999 reiterates the centrality of assessment to teaching and learning. It outlines the role of assessment in building a comprehensive picture of the short-term and long-term learning needs of the child so that the curriculum can be planned to meet the child's needs. Assessment information is seen as useful in reporting on children's

progress to their parents and in ensuring quality in education. The curriculum advocates the use of a range of assessment tools, both formal and informal, with teachers selecting the most appropriate for the purposes in mind at a particular time (Government of Ireland, 1999, pp. 18-19).

The introduction and implementation of the revised curriculum has led to new emphases and practices of assessment in primary schools. Each subject area contained its own recommendations for assessment and many have been adopted by teachers in their implementation of the curriculum. The INTO Curriculum Survey of 2005 (INTO, 2008) showed large increases in both formal and informal use of assessment, as well as increases in recording and maintaining results and communicating with parents.

On the other hand, the NCCA's review of the primary school curriculum, phase one, indicated that teachers need to increase their knowledge of and competencies in assessment of student progress (NCCA, 2005). Following this review, the NCCA recommended that an overarching statement on assessment in primary schools and guide to using a range of assessment tools in the Primary School Curriculum be prepared for teachers. They also recommended that targeted advice on using assessment in specific curriculum subjects be developed. In their second Primary Curriculum Review Report (2008) time to carry out assessment was found to be one of the major challenges for teachers in relation to assessment. The difficulties in assessing SPHE and Science were noted as was the lack of standardised tests in Gaelge.

Evaluation of assessment policy and practices

The Department's evaluation of the first phase of curriculum implementation which focused on English, maths and the visual arts (DES, 2005a) noted some weaknesses in assessment policies and practices in more than half the schools. One of the most significant omissions in whole school policies, according to the Department was the lack of reference to a systematic and coherent approach to the assessment of pupils in the visual arts. In maths and English, shortcomings included a restrictive range of assessment strategies, insufficient monitoring of pupils' progress and ineffective use of the outcomes of assessment to inform planning, teaching or learning. The Department also noted that little use was made of standardised test results to inform teaching and learning. In some cases assessment was isolated from teaching and learning but there were also many examples of good practice in assessment. The Department recommended that teachers should be provided with practical guidance on the use of portfolios as a strategy for formative assessment and that the various support services including SDPS, PCSP together with the DES, the NCCA, and relevant agencies should provide guidance to schools in relation to formative assessment strategies that can affect pupils' learning and achievement. The Department also suggested that further supports be provided to schools to enable them to engage further with assessment issues, clarify what should be assessed and specify the assessment tools that can be used.

Assessing pupils' work and administering teacher-made tests were by far the most frequently used methods for assessing pupils' progress in English, according to the report *Succeeding in Reading?* (DES, 2005b). Standardised tests were administered generally once a year by approximately 95% of teachers in English (DES, 2005b). In *Counting on Success* (DES, 2006) the DES recommended that in-career development should provide support to teachers in addressing issues in the area of classroom assessment, the interpretation of standardised results and identifying learning difficulties in mathematics.

The LANDS report (Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools: Challenges for Teachers and Learners, DES, 2005c) stated that most of the evaluative statements made by inspectors suggest that assessment policy and practice are aspects of provision that require significant attention and improvement. The report states that most schools use a variety of assessment tools, but that the analysis and use of data gathered are limited. Most schools do not use assessment data to inform the development of suitable teaching programmes, either at whole-school or individual classroom level, nor do they use such data as a means of evaluating the effectiveness of teaching approaches (DES, 2005c, p. 62).

The LANDS Report stated that all schools provided feedback to parents regarding their children's progress. However, a practice of in-school reporting in relation to assessment outcomes, which would support schools in their move to align curriculum objectives, implement teaching and learning programmes and employ effective assessment approaches, had not yet been developed. The LANDS Report recommended that the DES, the NCCA and the support agencies should provide more co-ordinated guidance to schools in relation to strategies that can impact on pupils' learning and achievement. It was recommended that schools needed more support in areas such as classroom-based assessment, the interpretation of standardised test results and the identification of learning difficulties.

The Department made further recommendations in relation to assessment in its report on Irish in the Primary School (DES, 2007) when it suggested that guidelines on methodologies of assessing pupils' progress in Irish as a second language should be provided to schools and that standardised tests should be available to assess pupils in Irish to support teachers in monitoring pupils' progress.

Guidelines on assessment to accompany the Primary School Curriculum were not published until 2007 and were circulated to schools early in 2008. The guidelines were developed by the NCCA to support teachers' knowledge and understanding of assessment. However, professional development for teachers in relation to these guidelines has not yet taken place.

NCCA guidelines on assessment

The NCCA guidelines produced for schools: *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum* (2007) place an emphasis on the differences and uses of both 'assessment for learning' and 'assessment of learning' which build

on the four forms of assessment (Formative, Summative, Evaluative and Diagnostic) outlined in the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) –:

- assessment **for** learning is defined as gathering, interpreting and using information on an ongoing basis to make learning relevant and meaningful for children and to review teaching methodologies and strategies and curriculum planning;
- assessment **of** learning involves periodically recording and reporting information on children’s progress to parents, teachers and relevant bodies and for future planning.

The NCCA assessment guidelines focus on both assessment in the classroom and assessment at school level. They show what assessment can look like in classrooms of different sizes, in different class groupings of different abilities and when focusing on different subjects. Assessment in the classroom includes self-assessment, conferencing, portfolios, concept-mapping, questioning, standardised testing, teacher-designed tasks, tests and observation. It is presented in a continuum from “*Child leads the assessment*” through to “*Teacher leads the assessment*” and includes a number of sample activities, useful to teachers, on the different forms of assessment.

There is a legislative requirement for schools to have an assessment policy and the guidelines set out the relevant implications for recording and reporting about children’s progress and achievement. The implications of the Education Act (1998), Data Protection (Amendment) Act (2003), the Equal Status Act (2000), Education (Welfare) Act (2000), the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) and the Freedom of Information Acts (1997 & 2003) are outlined.

The guidelines also include some useful information on the roles of the *National Education Psychological Service (NEPS)*, the *National Council for Special Education (NCSE)* and the *National Education Welfare Board (NEWB)* in supporting children’s learning.

Teachers were provided with a comprehensive programme of professional development to accompany the introduction of the Primary School Curriculum. However, to date, professional development in relation to assessment, other than limited professional development in relation to standardised assessments, has not been comprehensively available to teachers. It is possible, therefore, that the guidelines remain underused.

The introduction of mandatory standardised testing

In July 2004, the Minister for Education and Science announced his intention to make standardised testing a requirement for pupils at three stages during their compulsory schooling, including 1st and 6th class, with effect from 2006 - 2007. The Minister stated that there was a need to have aggregated assessment data for decision-making, identifying progress and the allocation of resources. The Minister requested the NCCA to identify the key issues relating to introducing and implementing this requirement and to provide him with corresponding advice.

The INTO objected to the lack of consultation on the issue but stated that teachers were not opposed to assessment, or to the use of standardised tests, but totally opposed to proposals to introduce national testing of pupils at 7 and 11 as proposed by the Minister. The INTO further pointed out the failure of national testing in other countries and the damage it can cause to the teaching and learning process by narrowing the focus of curriculum and distorting the purpose of assessment.

The NCCA advices were completed in March 2005 and forwarded to the then Minister for Education. These advices reflected many of the concerns of the INTO on standardised testing and its place in the overall teaching and learning process and represented a significant shift from the original proposals of Minister Dempsey. NCCA recommended:

- that standardised tests should be part of the wider developments in assessment in schools;
- that primary pupils be tested at the end of 1st / beginning of 2nd class and at the end of 4th or beginning of 5th so that schools can monitor pupil progress, flag potential difficulty and provide information for teachers and parents and for school planning;
- that tests normed on the Irish population be used and that resources be provided for the purchase of same;
- that tests be developed for use where Irish is the medium of instruction;
- that professional development be provided for teachers.

The Department of Education and Science issued a circular to primary schools in December 2006 (Circular 0138/2006). In broad terms the Minister accepted the advice of the NCCA. It is mandatory in all schools, since 2007, to carry out standardised assessments at two stages of a pupil's career in primary school as outlined in the circular. However, many schools carry out standardised testing in a number of classes. The results of standardised tests are to be made available to parents and to other relevant personnel, such as the inspector, but the results are to remain in the school. However, rather than providing comprehensive professional development on assessment to all teachers, two seminar days focusing on standardised assessment were offered in Spring 2007. The seminars were intended for the teachers involved in the classes obliged to carry out standardised testing and were provided by the Primary Curriculum Support Service.

Reporting to parents

The NCCA has prepared templates for reporting to parents for the Minister for Education and Science. A total of nine different templates has been designed. Schools may select the template most appropriate to their needs. The use of the templates is not yet mandatory, but the Department intends issuing a circular on the matter in the future. Departmental Circular 0138/2006 referred to the reporting of standardised test results on report

cards which had not yet at that time been prepared by the NCCA. The templates are currently available on the NCCA website.

Concluding comment

A number of developments pertaining to assessment have taken place since 1997 when the INTO published its discussion document *Teaching & Learning – Issues in Assessment*. These include the Education Act (1998), The revised Primary School Curriculum (1999), the publication of evaluation reports by the Department of Education & Science (DES, 2005, 2008), the introduction of mandatory standardised testing at two stages during a pupil’s career in primary education and the provision of Report Card Templates for reporting to parents. It is timely, therefore, to reconsider assessment policy and practice in primary schools in Ireland.

2

Purposes of Assessment

Introduction

The curriculum describes assessment as having four functions – formative, summative, evaluative and diagnostic. In re-envisioning assessment in the primary school the NCCA’s guidelines on assessment build on these functions and focus on two principal approaches to assessment – assessment **for** learning and assessment **of** learning. The renewed focus on assessment recognizes the growing confidence “that assessment can be used as a means of increasing student achievement and not simply as a means of measuring it” (O’Leary, 2006).

Assessment and the learning process

Assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. As outlined in the Primary School Curriculum (1999) it is through assessment that the teacher constructs a comprehensive picture of the short-term and long-term needs of the child and plans future work accordingly (Primary School Curriculum, 1999, p.17). The primary purpose of assessment is to assist teachers in enhancing their pupils’ learning by providing information about their knowledge, their understanding of concepts and their mastery of skills, with a view to planning learning programmes for each pupil (INTO, 1997, p.67). According to the NCCA guidelines, assessment is that part of the learning process where the learner and the teacher can evaluate progress or achievement in the development of a particular skill, or in the understanding of a particular area of knowledge” (NCCA, 2007). As such, it is an integral part of teaching and learning in all areas of the Primary School Curriculum. It is about the gathering of information on the learning process of each child, over time, by the teacher, and the using of that information to shape future planning of work. As stated in the guidelines, “Assessment is the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using and reporting information about a child’s progress and achievement in developing knowledge skills and attitudes” and it is about “building a picture over time of a child’s progress and /or achievement in learning across the Primary School Curriculum” (NCCA, 2007, p.7). This view is supported by O’Leary in his definition of educational assessment “as the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using and communicating information about all aspects of a learner’s development (social, emotional, physical, cognitive) to aid decision making” (O’Leary, 2006).

The term ‘assessment’ refers to all those activities undertaken by teachers and by their students in assessing themselves, and which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes ‘formative assessment’ when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet the learning needs of pupils (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p.2).

Despite the consensus of opinion on the centrality of assessment in the teaching- learning process, the issues surrounding the functions of assessment have become an area of some dispute and complexity in recent years. Besides the mechanics of where and when and how assessment takes place, it is timely to address its broad functions.

Monitoring pupil progress

One of the primary and basic functions of assessment is to monitor pupil progress. For all pupils at all stages of their education, it is important for the teacher to have a clear picture of where pupils stand in reference to their potential, to their class, and to external standardised norms. Should difficulties be apparent, assessment will help to clarify the situation, enabling teachers to identify pupils' difficulties with a view to helping them overcome them. Teachers need to know about their pupils' progress and difficulties with learning so that they can adapt their work to meet their needs (Black & Wiliam, 1998). The assessment process provides the teacher with the information needed "in order to make important decisions about the teaching and learning process – selecting curriculum objectives, identifying appropriate teaching methodologies, designing learning activities, choosing suitable resources, differentiating learning, and giving feedback to children on how well they are doing" (NCCA, 2007, p.7).

Assessment involves many overlapping and simultaneous activities (NCCA, 2007, p.7). Teachers monitor the progress of their pupils through their own observation of pupils' work, through the use of teacher-designed tests or checklists and through the use of standardised tests. The NCCA guidelines have also reiterated the centrality of teacher observation in the monitoring process where teachers observe pupils engaged in a task, and engage in questioning and listening.

The use of standardised norm-referenced tests enables teachers to compare their pupils' performance with national norms and is a useful point of reference. These norms provide an essential framework for judging the achievement of pupils and for deciding which children have learning difficulties and which children do not (INTO, 1997, p.7).

The emerging distinction between assessment for learning and assessment of learning is beginning to influence teachers' practice. A strong case is being made for assessment approaches that would be used to understand prior knowledge, be used to support learning, be integrated with instruction, involve learning processes as well as learning outcomes and involve pupils in self-assessment (Shepard, 2000, cited in O'Leary, 2006). There are a number of approaches to assessment which can provide information on pupils' progress in learning, and these are described below.

Formative assessment

Formative assessment, or Assessment for Learning, when undertaken on a regular and structured basis is an essential part of the classroom teacher's approach, enabling modification of either curriculum content or teaching methodologies. It enables detailed information-gathering explicitly linked to the curriculum being taught, which is then used by the teacher to make

informed decisions regarding planning, organizational strategies and teaching methodologies (NCCA, 2007, p.9). Formative assessment, in particular, can contribute to lesson planning by both class teachers and learning-support teachers.

Formative assessment or assessment for learning is child centered. It takes place during the process of learning and involves teacher observation. It focuses on the real and immediate learning activities of students where the teacher and student work together in setting goals and achieving them. It focuses on where the child is now in his or her own learning, where he/she is going and how he/she will get to the next point in learning. It enables the teacher to plan and adapt schemes of work and programmes, as it emerges how the learner is interacting with the curriculum. Providing children with feedback helps them to celebrate their achievement and to identify further challenges. This level of involvement by children in their own learning enhances their self-esteem and encourages further learning.

On the area of self assessment, O’Leary makes the point that “pupils are the most important users of assessment information, that pupils make crucially important decisions about themselves as learners and these decisions are more important in terms of day-to-day learning than the decisions made by policy makers, politicians and others” (O’Leary, 2006). The NCCA Guidelines put self assessment firmly at the core of the assessment process, stating “Children are involved in self-assessment when they look at their own work in a reflective way, identify aspects of it that are good and that could be improved, and then set personal learning targets for themselves” (NCCA, 2007, p.14). Self assessment involves metacognition – the process of being aware of and reflecting on one’s own learning (NCCA, 2007, p.14).

In essence, formative assessment occurs when the teacher together with the pupil, reflect in a formal or informal way, either by observation and dialogue, or through the structured medium of teacher-designed tasks and tests, on what has been taught and learned, and revisit the teaching – learning process in the light of the information gathered. As O’Leary (2006) stated; “Good assessment is about getting the best possible information to make the best possible decisions”.

Summative assessment

Summative assessment focuses on medium and long-term assessment at the end of a given period of time after teaching and learning have taken place. It can comprise teacher-designed tasks and tests and standardised tests. It is arguable that entrance/transition tests fall under this category, as does the Junior and Leaving Certificates. In essence, these tests sum up what has been learned over a given period of instruction. There can be little or no opportunity for the teacher-learner dialogue to be enriched by the process. It can however be a useful tool for determining how the pupil progresses to the next level, but can suffer from lack of continuity of the teacher-learner dynamic. It can often occur at the end of a cycle, where a change or handover of teacher is occurring. While it has major impact on how the learner progresses through the learning continuum, one of its little-acknowledged limitations is that it can be a snapshot of where the learner is at the time of the testing.

Diagnostic assessment

Assessment has an important pedagogic function, enabling teachers to decide to what extent they have or have not achieved their goals. It can also establish the range of ability and attainment within a class, and enable the teacher to plan accordingly. A pupil's strengths and weaknesses can be identified through the use of assessment, whether summative or formative. Learning support, in particular, can be tailored to the pupil's individual needs. Formal assessment can identify children who are experiencing learning difficulties, and indicate the extent of these difficulties. Pupils in need of learning support can be initially identified, and their subsequent progress monitored. This has an **administrative** function for the school's allocation of resources, as it comprises the twin functions of **screening** and **placement**.

Providing feedback to teachers, parents and pupils

The recently-published NCCA guidelines identify conferencing as one of the eight assessment methods mentioned. Conferencing in the context of assessment is defined as those concerned with the child's learning sharing their knowledge and understanding of the child's work (NCCA, 2007, p.24). Assessment information is shared at parent/teacher meetings. The NCCA Guidelines include an explanation of STEN scores for parents. This is contrary to the direct and unambiguous statement in the Teacher Manual accompanying the standardised Micra-T, where it is advised that scores of standardised tests be given to parents in a face to face setting (Teacher Manual 2004). It also goes against years of good practice. Providing results of standardised tests to parents in a face-to-face setting allows for constructive and positive dialogue to occur. A numerically-based system of assessment is often associated with labeling of children.

“In essence, assessment is about getting information to make decisions” (O’Leary, 2006). The use of assessment information to make decisions is complicated by the fact that key individuals or stakeholders in the educational system need to make different types of decisions. For example, the day-to-day decisions a teacher needs to make will require a different type of assessment information than that which might inform the public about national reading standards (O’Leary, 2006). O’Leary makes a distinction between classroom assessment and official assessment. Classroom assessments involve all pupil-teacher interactions during the teaching-learning process and official assessment is that used by teachers, schools, inspectors, policy makers and others to meet bureaucratic requirements such as reporting to parents, maintaining school records, selection for entry to third level and evaluating standards of achievement (O’Leary, 2006). According to O’Leary, parents need “a clear statement of strengths and weaknesses at the end of a school year and as part of the process of choosing a school for their child they need access to assessment information that will help them to evaluate the extent to which the school is likely to meet the social, emotional and cognitive development needs of their child” (O’Leary, 2006).

Testing for accountability purposes

There has been a huge growth in interest and in debate about assessment over a long period of time. The demand for assessment information to be made available to a range of interested parties to gauge how schools, teachers and the whole education system are performing is increasing. Often, the intention is to create pressure on schools to improve performance and thereby raise education standards. The difficulty is that many assessment systems across the world are designed primarily to provide adult decision-makers with information and are not designed primarily to cater for the information and decision-making needs of learners (O'Leary, 2006). It is important, as O'Leary argues, that there is a balance between classroom assessment and official assessments, and that priorities are identified for both.

Where assessment is increasingly thrust into an accountability role the results are expected to reach a wider audience than the teacher who administered the assessment. Therefore, assessment becomes more and more high stakes. This means more is at stake than simply finding out how well the child is progressing. High-stakes testing occurs where serious consequences attach to the outcomes of testing: teachers' professional reputation, prestige, promotional prospects, enrolment levels or even the future viability of a school may depend upon securing good results (INTO, 1997, p.18). The emphasis on testing in the UK led Rothblatt (1995) to comment that "the construction of evaluation and assessment strategies is almost a national hysteria, nearly incomprehensible to an offshore observer". O'Leary, also commenting on the UK system, stated that "while teacher assessments continued to be a part of the assessment system, the need to provide standardised information across schools (for the purposes of compiling school league tables) dominated the agenda and relegated assessment for learning to a distant second place" (O'Leary, 2006).

A similar situation pertains in the US where assessment in all fifty states is dominated by test results and in many cases results of assessments are used to hold schools accountable for student performance" (Furham, 2003, cited in O'Leary, 2006). The epidemic of testing associated with the US has led to an immense over-emphasis on standardised testing to the detriment of teaching. As in the UK, the rise in testing and assessment in the US was driven by administrators and policy-makers. Assessment was seen as a prime tool in the move to reform education and not just as a method of measuring achievement. The rise in a culture of accountability to administrations, to parents and to the public led to mandatory standardised testing in all states. As a result, both official and unofficial league tables have evolved. The net result has led to increases in standards but only in the curricular areas tested and to the detriment of other areas. This has also been the experience in other countries that have embraced the 'test it if it moves' syndrome.

However, holding schools accountable for the achievement of their pupils is problematic, given the number of variables that impact on pupil learning. There are also sound educational reasons for not publishing test results in that valid conclusions about the effectiveness of schools cannot

be drawn from test scores. Even the World Bank, which supports accountability testing, recognizes this difficulty, and advises caution:

Holding schools fully accountable for the results of their students can be difficult as statistically valid distinctions among schools cannot always be made : comparisons of schools may not be correct for differences in student intake, in terms of socioeconomic status, or the social and physical conditions under which schools operate ; school rankings can vary according to the particular outcome measure that is used, and the publication of results can lead to schools that are perceived to be doing well attracting students of high ability while those that are perceived to be doing badly, but may in fact be doing well for the intake and conditions that they have, may be avoided by such students.

(World Bank, 1995, p.101)

When there are consequences for the school in the results of a test, it makes the test high stakes, and it becomes imperative that pupils achieve as well as possible. The system then has a vested interest in ensuring that the pupils achieve a high score. This can lead to “teaching to the test” methodology, either consciously or unconsciously. The ongoing debate on “teaching to the test” which is taking place in England may be one which the Irish education system would do well to follow closely. As outlined in *Managing Schools Today* (2008, Issues 17.4), the chairman of the Commons Schools, Children and Families Committee, Barry Sherman, recently stated that in an effort to drive up national standards, too much emphasis has been placed on a single set of tests and this has been to the detriment of some aspects of the curriculum and some students. He also stated that their monitoring data shows that teachers spend large amounts of the ‘teaching time’ which is accrued by English and mathematics in various stages of ‘test preparation’ as they know that in the current political climate it is in their school’s accountability interests to spend time producing ‘test-wise’ pupils who will perform and achieve the Government standards¹.

Ireland has so far escaped this helter-skelter by making results of mandatory standardised tests in primary schools available only to schools, parents and the DES. This enlightened decision has provided schools with the opportunity to concentrate on making instructional and placement decisions about pupils rather than focusing on narrow areas of the curriculum. The international experience has been the growth of ‘test pollution’, where the curriculum contracts to reflect the assessment. Teachers place much greater emphasis on those subjects that form part of the testing. As a result, a great deal of time is devoted to preparing for assessment, and overall educational quality suffers. A real or perceived emphasis on accountability testing inevitably leads to test pollution. Teachers feel pressurised to achieve higher and higher test results and only achieve inflated scores that no longer reflect a child’s ability but rather his/her success in a particular and isolated test. The only result here is that the tests are not just diagnostically useless but also educationally void.

¹ http://www.teachingtimes.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=275&Itemid=58

At second level in Ireland, high-stakes testing has led to the growth of grind schools, for those who can afford them, to help boost Leaving Certificate points. It is to be hoped that such practices will not be introduced at primary level here. In Asia, even infants must endure almost another full day at grind school after they have finished their period in their local primary school!

The lessons from other countries show the harmful effects of ideologically-inspired remedies to problems rather than educational ones. The experience of accountability testing in the US is best summed up by Shavelson et al (1992):

In the final analysis, we suspect that this nation may be placing far too much emphasis on accountability to achieve its reform agenda. Judging from past experience, those states with the strongest and most technically sound accountability systems have not achieved their desired reforms. Perhaps what is needed is far less account taking and far greater consideration and resources given to teaching and learning...’.

On balance, it must be acknowledged that there are system needs with respect to assessment which must be identified and addressed. At policy level, high-quality assessment information is required to inform decisions about achievement standards and about targeting resources where they are most needed. O’Leary (2006) argued that “a common format (standardised or semi-standardised system) for recording summative assessment information for all pupils should be agreed among the stakeholders”. Schools need to have a recording system which should be the basis for providing official assessment information to parents, other schools and the inspectorate. However, assessment practices in schools, where the primary purpose is to inform the teaching and learning process, should not be distorted or abused in order to meet the system’s needs for information.

In Ireland, standards in the system are monitored through a national monitoring programme. This programme involves periodically assessing pupils of second and sixth classes² in a random selection of primary schools in reading and mathematics, for the purposes of informing policy and practice. Schools’ accountability to pupils, parents, the Department of Education and the public is also evident through the whole school evaluation process (WSE), where schools are evaluated periodically on a whole school basis. School reports, which outline a school’s strengths, in addition to areas for development, are published on the Department’s website following evaluation. Schools engage in their own planning and self-review, prioritizing areas for development through the school development planning (SDP) process.

² Prior to 2009 national assessments took place in 4th class for Mathematics and 5th class for Reading.

Concluding comment

There are three main purposes associated with assessment. In the first place assessment in schools and classrooms supports the process of teaching and learning. Secondly, assessment information is used to report on pupils' progress to teachers, parents and to the pupils themselves. Thirdly, assessment can be used for accountability purposes. All three purposes are valid. The purpose of assessment will determine the type of assessments to be used. The final word on the function of assessment is best left to Michael O'Leary, when he states that "assessment must serve the needs of our students first and foremost. The assessment needs of others then must be tackled" (O'Leary, 2006).

3

Assessment Practice in Primary Schools in Ireland

Introduction

This section outlines general practice in relation to assessment policy and practice in primary schools in Ireland.

Assessment at infant level

Assessment in the early years is usually based on the day-to-day observations of experienced infant teachers. Teachers also have access to *The Infant Reading Tests*, (Brimer and Raban, 1979) which consist of 3 pre-reading and 3 reading tests for 4-7 year olds. Diagnostic tests for young children who may be experiencing difficulties include *The Belfield Infant Assessment Profile (BIAP)* and *The Middle Infant Screening Test (MIST)* and *Quest*. These tests are usually administered by SEN teachers to screen and/or diagnose for special educational needs.

Assessment for special needs

Children in junior, middle and senior classes may be administered standardised tests to screen them for special educational needs. *The Drumcondra Tests – Primary Mathematics and Primary Reading*, and *The Micra-T and Sigma-T* are the most commonly used. SEN teachers have a wide range of diagnostic tests available to them. *The Marino and Schonell Graded Word Reading Tests*, *The Spar Reading Test*, *the RAIN Sentence Test*, *The Neale Analysis of Reading Ability*, *The Diagnostic Spelling Test* and *The Schonell Graded Spelling Test* are in use along with other commercially produced tests. In maths, *The Spar Maths Test* and *The Bristol, Nottingham and Staffordshire Number Tests* are among the most common in use.

Assessment throughout the school

Teachers in the classroom acquire an abundance of information about pupils, their aptitudes and abilities, the degree to which they are learning and their attitudes, interests and motivation in their daily interactions. Most of this is gained informally by observation and by pupil engagement, but also by regular teacher-testing. The INTO Curriculum Survey of 2005 (INTO, 2008) showed that teachers cited observation (97%), teacher-designed tests (86%), diagnostic tests (59%) and samples of work (60%) as assessment tools to complement their everyday teaching. They also administer standardised tests (90%) and over 80% reported the regular updating of all test and observational results.

Schools are more and more developing whole-school assessment policies and showing a marked increase in the use of regular standardised testing throughout the school. Recording of test results and reporting these to parents are all part of school policies and have been almost universally adopted in primary schools.

Assessment at the end of primary schools

Since the abolition of the Primary Certificate examination in 1967, there has been no compulsory end-of primary-school assessment for pupils. However, most schools conduct their own tests, whether self-designed or standardised, and many pupils also partake in grading / assessment / entrance exams organised by second-level schools. These latter tests are problematic because they usually take place before the end of the school year. Indeed, occasionally tests may take place in fifth class. Some doubt must be cast on the results of end-of-year tests taken before the completion of the primary school programme. There can also be a wide degree of local and regional variance of test items which can place great pressure on teachers of sixth class, who must balance the primary school programme with pupil and parent concerns about placement in second-level schools.

Assessment for teaching English as an additional language (TEAL)

The initial assessment for children requiring additional support in English is based on teacher observation of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Ongoing assessment in these four skills is based on English Language Proficiency Benchmarks identified by the IILT. These benchmarks are not standardised and are open to teacher interpretation. A Primary School Assessment Kit is now available to all schools which is a more objective use of the Benchmarks to assess language ability. However, the application of this set of tests can be very time consuming and time will tell how successful it will be.

Standardised assessment

Compulsory assessment of reading and mathematics was introduced for primary schools in 2008. Schools must administer, record and report on standardised tests twice during a pupil's time in primary education. Schools have the option of choosing the end of first or beginning of second class and the end of fourth or beginning of fifth class for these mandatory tests.

This has not proved to be a great hardship for schools since 90% of teachers previously reported using standardised tests regularly according to the INTO Curriculum Survey carried out in 2005 (INTO, 2008). The DES has provided a grant to affray the cost of tests for these classes, although many schools carry out standardised tests in other class groups, also.

Tests are administered by class teachers, although in some (often larger) schools they may be assisted by SEN teachers. Results are recorded and stored by the schools, although there is some confusion about what, and for how long, records must be retained.

Results are reported to parents. It is recommended in the guidelines to the Drumcondra Tests, the Micra-T and the Sigma-T that these results should be given and explained at parent-teacher meetings only. However, since the publication of Circular 0138/2006 schools are obliged to provide parents with the results of standardised tests on report cards, the templates for which have been prepared by the NCCA. The NCCA has also prepared guidelines for parents in understanding the results of standardised tests.

System evaluation

The Educational Research Centre (ERC) periodically conducts national assessments in English reading and mathematics at the request of the Department of Education and Science. National Reading Assessments were carried in a random selection of schools involving fifth class pupils in 1988, 1993, 1998 and 2004. In 2004, pupils in first class also participated in the national assessment. National assessments in mathematics were carried out in a random selection of schools in 1999 and 2004, involving fourth-class pupils. The results of these national tests are aggregated and made available to the Department of Education. The ERC publishes a comprehensive report outlining the findings, and produces a summary form which is circulated to all schools. The findings of such national surveys, which were carried out approximately every four years, are used to inform policy in relation to the teaching of English reading and mathematics.

The next national assessments in English reading and mathematics are scheduled to take place in May 2009 in a random selection of schools. However, the Department decided to change the class levels involved. National assessments in English reading and mathematics will involve pupils in second class and sixth class in future. The rationale for this decision is to reflect the end of the two cycles in primary education. One of the disadvantages arising from this decision is that it will not be possible to make comparisons with previous national assessments. However, assuming national assessments in 2nd and 6th classes will continue periodically every four years, comparisons will be possible in the future. The ERC is currently developing standardised tests in Irish and it is proposed to organise these tests in May 2009 in the Irish-medium schools.

The INTO has supported the current policy of system evaluation through carrying out national assessments periodically in a random selection of schools. The fact that schools are selected at random and that the results are only published in aggregate form, with participating schools not identified, means that the tests do not become high-stakes and yet they provide valuable information to the system, both at policy level and at school level. Schools also receive their own results which they can use for the purposes of planning for English reading and mathematics within their own schools.

In addition to national assessments of English reading and mathematics the Department of Education regularly evaluates aspects of the curriculum in schools through the evaluation process involving the inspectorate. In recent times the Department has published reports on the implementation of the English, Mathematics and Visual Arts Curriculum (DES, 2005), School Planning (DES, 2006), ICT (DES, 2008) and the Teaching of Irish in the Primary School (DES, 2008) amongst others. These reports are also useful in identifying successes and challenges, and in informing policy-makers, teacher educators and practitioners on issues pertaining to ongoing curriculum review and development and the needs for professional development of teachers.

A summary of the main findings from some of these reports is outlined in Appendix I.

DEIS

The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Programme has introduced a new dimension to testing and measuring of achievement in schools designated disadvantaged. DEIS is an action plan for educational inclusion for children from three to eighteen years of age, rolled out over the years 2005-2010. Assessment is a major component of the Action Plan. In announcing the scheme, the Social Inclusion Unit of the DES stated DEIS would include:

measurement of progress and outcomes to ensure that the increased investment is matched by an improvement in educational outcomes for the children and young people concerned

(Social Inclusion Unit, DES, March 2007).

Schools were expected to develop three-year plans, and were assisted in this process by the PCSP and SDPI (now the PPDS). The three year action plans are an attempt to pull many strands together to assist the educationally disadvantaged pupil. Schools are expected to set targets, continuously monitor their plan and to regularly review and evaluate them. The elements required in the action plan were:

- a literacy action plan
- a numeracy action plan
- an attendance and retention plan
- a parent and community partnership plan and
- a plan for partnership between schools and other agencies.

Schools carried out standardised tests to assess their current achievement levels and to identify the children with the lowest scores so that they could be offered intensive support during the period of the three-year plan. The Educational Research Centre (ERC) was also commissioned by the DES to conduct an independent evaluation of the DEIS initiative. According to the DES:

“A vital element of the DEIS initiative is the commitment to develop and implement an in-depth programme of research and evaluation to inform policy formation and to facilitate a better understanding of the role which interventions have to play in the achievement of better outcomes for children targeted by the DEIS action plan”

(DES letter to schools, 14 March, 2007)

The ERC carried out baseline tests in some participating schools in English reading and mathematics. The baseline tests were based on the Drumcondra tests. The tests were conducted with third and sixth classes. It is intended to repeat the exercise in 2010. The Rural Coordinators were involved in some schools in administering the tests, but the results were returned to the ERC for collation and analysis. The baseline assessments included personal information on children collected by the schools and questionnaires completed by the children in 3rd and 6th classes, eliciting information about their attitude to reading, learning, television viewing and school in general. It was a matter for schools to decide whether to exempt children from the test. The results of the tests were communicated to the schools in the first term of the school year 2007/2008, and are not generally available.

Irish-medium schools could choose to administer the baseline test in mathematics in either Irish or English. However, many teachers who administered the tests in Irish claimed that tests that were already difficult were made more difficult for the children concerned by the style and terminology of the Gaeilge used in the tests.

The ERC will assess the impact of DEIS on pupils, schools, families and communities, and will also try to assess the extent of the progress schools make in their DEIS three-year action plans.

The idea of setting targets in relation to attainment is new for most teachers. Some schools expressed concerns that if targets were attained that they might lose their DEIS status, which brought extra resources and funding with it. Reviewing, monitoring and evaluating their three-year plan are also new challenges for schools. However, it needs to be borne in mind, that the programmes recommended to improve literacy and numeracy levels, such as Reading Recovery and First Steps, require the investment of time, resources and training in order to be implemented effectively. Schools participating in DEIS had to agree to participate in all the initiatives of the DEIS programme in order to qualify for funding.

4

INTO ASSESSMENT SURVEY ANALYSIS

Introduction

In order to ascertain current practice in schools in relation to assessment, the Education Committee decided to issue a questionnaire to a random sample of school staff representatives. A total of 301 questionnaires were distributed and of these 187 were returned – a response rate of 63%. The decision to circulate the questionnaire to a random sample of all schools led to a high representation of small schools among respondents as a large proportion of schools in Ireland have fewer than five teachers. The percentages have been rounded to the nearest full percentage in most of the narrative descriptions.

Profile of respondents

There was a broad representation of schools of various sizes among the 187 respondent schools. The greatest number of participating schools was small, with five teachers or fewer (38%) and only 14% of respondent schools had more than 21 teachers. See Table 1 below

Table 1 **Size of school by number of teachers**

No of Teachers	No of Responses	%
<= 5	71	38.0
6 - 10	44	23.5
11 – 20	45	24.1
21+	27	14.4
Total	187	100.0

In terms of the number of pupils represented by the respondent schools, just over two fifths of schools (42%) had fewer than 100 pupils. Only 10% of schools had more than 400 pupils. See Table 2.

Table 2 Size of school by number of pupils

No of Pupils	No of Schools	%
<= 100	79	42.2
101 - 200	41	21.9
201 - 300	37	19.8
301 - 400	12	6.4
401+	18	9.7
Total	187	100.0
Missing System	2	
Total	189	

The majority of schools were rural, though there was a broad representation across locations – 15 (8%) were city schools, 28 (15%) suburban, 36 (20%) town schools and 105 (57%) rural schools. Almost 90% of schools were mixed, 8 (4%) schools were boys' schools and 12 (6%) were girls' schools; of which 3 had mixed classes at junior infant level. Of the participating schools, 91% were full stream from infants to 6th class, 5 (3%) were infants/junior schools and 12 (6%) were middle/senior schools. There were 8 DEIS Urban Band 1 schools, 10 DEIS Urban Band 2 schools, 32 rural DEIS schools and eight were ex-disadvantaged. Almost 11% of the schools taught the curriculum through Irish, of which seven were Gaeltacht schools and 15 were gaelscoileanna.

Policy on assessment

A large majority of schools (77%) had a written policy on assessment, though a sizeable minority of 42 schools (23%) did not. Respondents were requested to indicate whether their policies addressed a number of different topics. Of those who had policies, almost all (99%) addressed the issue of standardised testing, diagnostic testing and screening. Fewer schools, though still a significant majority, addressed assessment of learning (91%) and assessment for learning (83%). Over half of the respondents (52%) addressed the area of peer/self-assessment. See Table 3 below.

Table 3 School assessment policy

If School has a Policy on Assessment, does it address the following?	YES	NO
	Valid %	Valid %
Assessment for learning	82.9	17.1
Assessment of learning	91.0	9.0
Standardised assessment	99.3	0.7
Diagnostic testing and screening	98.6	1.4
Peer/Self-assessment	52.3	47.7

Additional information provided by nine respondents indicated that policies also included informal verbal communication between teachers, teacher observation, prevention strategies, recording, and teacher tests. Two respondents stated that their assessment policy was included as part of their learning support policy.

Almost all schools (98%) had received the NCCA guidelines on assessment with only 3 schools saying they hadn't. Most schools (91%) reported that the guidelines were useful. Some comments included: "we found them useful for writing our policy"; "useful particularly in terms of child-centred assessment and peer-led assessment", and "very useful from a learning support and resource point of view". There were, however, 13 schools that did not find them useful and the negative comments included; "no time to read them"; "hard to follow"; and "we have not yet had an opportunity to study the guidelines".

Circular 0138/2006 introduced standardised testing on a mandatory basis at two stages in a pupil's career in primary schools. Many schools found that Circular 0138/2006 had had a positive impact on their policies on assessment – "it gave us guidelines", "enabled us to focus on areas of assessment we were not good at", "informative" and "it made us more aware of focussing on assessment for learning as well as assessment of learning". Many schools reported that the circular supported their existing assessment practice whilst many more reported that the circular had little impact because standardised testing and assessment were already in place.

In relation to when schools decided to carry out the mandatory standardised tests, schools were over four times more likely to carry out the obligatory Reading and maths standardised tests at the end of 1st class rather than at the start of 2nd class. Very few respondents gave information in relation to the second point at which mandatory testing should take place. Perhaps the way the question was framed was unclear³. Only five schools indicated that they have yet to decide. See Table 4 below.

Table 4 **Classes in which obligatory standardised tests are carried out**

	Freq	%
End of 1st class	118	72.8
Beginning of 2nd class	29	17.9

A total of 98% of schools had a policy of administering standardised tests in English literacy in other classes, ranging from 13% of respondents who carried out such tests in junior infants, to 88% of schools who carried out such tests in 5th class. A similar number of schools (95%) had a policy in relation to maths, ranging from 5% in junior infants to 88% in 5th class.

³ During the Consultative Conference on Education, delegates were invited to give information in relation to their school policy on which classes the mandatory standardised assessments were administered. Delegates stated that 74% of them administered the standardised tests at the end of 1st class and 26% administered them at the beginning of 2nd class. In relation to the second mandatory period, 72% of delegates stated that their schools administered the tests at the end of 4th class and 28% stated that the tests were administered at the beginning of 5th class.

These percentages are quite high, as some schools did not have all class levels. See Table 5 below.

Table 5 Classes in which standardised tests are carried out

	English Yes	% of total (n=189)	Maths Yes	% of total (n=189)
Junior Infants	24	12.7	9	4.8
Senior Infants	103	54.5	21	11.1
1 st Class	150	79.4	148	78.3
2 nd Class	162	85.7	161	85.2
3 rd Class	169	89.4	167	88.4
4 th Class	159	84.1	160	84.7
5 th Class	167	88.4	167	88.4
6 th Class	162	85.7	157	83.1

Over 90% of schools carried out standardised tests once a year; 15 schools (8%) reported that they did so twice a year. The tests generally were carried out either at the start or end of the school year. The MIST test was most frequently administered in the second term of senior infants. The results of the standardised tests were used by teachers/schools for a variety of purposes – from informing other teachers, informing parents, identifying pupils’ strengths and weaknesses to monitoring the school’s progress from year to year. These are best illustrated in the Table 6 below. Six respondents offered additional purposes which included planning, planning for intervention and learning support, identifying gaps in knowledge and tracking pupils’ progress over the years.

Table 6 Purpose of standardised test

	Yes Freq	% of total (n=189)
To inform other teachers about pupils’ progress	182	96.3
To inform parents about their child’s progress	167	88.4
To group pupils for instructional purposes	125	66.1
To identify pupils who have learning difficulties	183	96.8
To identify pupils’ strengths and weaknesses	166	87.8
To compare the school to national performance	86	45.5
To monitor the school’s progress from year to year	125	66.1
To identify aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved	145	76.7

It would appear that schools were generally not in favour of using standardised tests in other curricular areas. About one fifth of schools would like to see standardised tests available for Irish. Only a handful of respondents mentioned the need for standardised tests in P.E., SESE, history and geography. See Appendix IV for additional information.

Types of assessment used

Sigma-T (78%) and Micra-T (76%) were the most commonly used standardised tests. Drumcondra English Test was used by 55% of schools and Drumcondra Maths by 40% of schools. The MIST test was used by 86% of schools, although designed for the English system. It was generally conducted in the second term of senior infants. Teacher observation (95%) and teacher designed tests (90%) were also widely used forms of assessment and there were a whole range of other tests in existence in our schools. The most frequently used assessments are outlined in Table 7 below. Additional information is included in Appendix IV.

Table 7 Tests/forms of assessment currently used in schools

	Yes Freq	% of total (n=189)
1. Teacher observation	180	95
2. Teacher designed tests	170	90
3. MIST	162	86
4. Sigma T	147	78
5. Micra T	143	76
6. Basic number tests	125	66
7. Schonell or other spelling tests	112	59
8. NEALE analysis	105	56
9. Drumcondra English	104	55
10. Pupil profiles	93	49

Other forms of assessment used which were not directly included in the survey, but mentioned by respondents, included Drumcondra Spelling, Jackson Phonics, Quest, Suffolk Reading scale, Bury Infant Screening Test, LARR and Macmillan Diagnostic Test.

Half the schools surveyed screened in order to plan work schemes. This was generally done either at the start of the school year or at the end of the year in order to plan for the next year's schemes. In most cases screening tests were conducted by the SEN teachers – sometimes in conjunction with the class teachers. Schools also screen to allocate pupils to learning support. Timing varied between the beginning of the school year, the end of the school year, after standardised testing to 'when necessary'.

Pupils are referred for psychological assessment in most cases following consultation between the class teacher, learning support teacher, principal teacher and parents. This follows consideration of teacher observation, standardised test results, diagnostic test results and behavioural issues. Not all schools have access to NEPS.

The results of standardised tests were generally stored centrally (93%). Diagnostic tests results were also stored centrally in 84% of schools whilst results of class tests were generally stored in the classroom (84%). The results of standardised tests were kept in schools for quite a long time - from one year up to 20 years. Other schools reported keeping them until the pupils were aged 18, 21, or 23. One school reported keeping them “ad infinitum” while another said that they were never destroyed. The results were similar for the diagnostic tests. Class test results were kept for a year in 50% of cases but schools also retained these for periods ranging from 2 – 5 years but up to 20 years in one instance. See Appendix IV for additional information.

Reporting to parents

The results of standardised tests were reported to parents in 80% of the responding schools. This percentage could however be higher as 20% of respondents did not answer the question. Almost 96% of these surveyed reported they gave progress reports on pupils’ progress to parents. These percentages decreased to 60% in relation to the results of diagnostic tests and to 50% in relation to screening tests. See Table 8 below.

Table 8 Reporting to parents

	Freq	%
Pupils’ Progress	181	95.8
Standardised Tests	150	79.4
Diagnostic Tests	115	60.8
Screening Tests	94	49.7

Written reports of pupils’ progress to parents were provided by 92.5% of schools. However, it was remarkable that 14 schools (7.5%) reported that they never provided written reports. A total of 16 schools (8.6%) provided written reports twice a year with just one school reporting that they provided written reports more often than this. Written reports were generally given at the end of the year with only a handful giving reports at Christmas, or at parent-teacher meetings. Written reports are distributed to parents by post at the school’s expense in 53% of cases, by post at the parents’ expense in 20% of cases and are brought home by the child in 27% of cases.

In relation to sharing the results of tests with parents, more than half the respondents stated that results were given to parents verbally only. Over a third reported that results were given both verbally and in written form. Only 5% gave results in written form only. See Table 9 below.

Table 9 **Distribution of written reports**

	Freq	%
Written only	9	5.0
Oral only	100	55.6
Both	71	39.4
Total	180	100.0

Parent-teacher meetings were held by 95% of schools on a formal basis once a year. Nine schools had twice yearly parent-teacher meetings. One school stated it held parent-teacher meetings more often than this. There was no standard time for these parent-teacher meetings. November was the most popular time for parent-teacher meetings followed by January/February, but they could occur throughout the year.

Professional development

In 88% of cases teachers from the responding schools attended the seminars on standardised assessment organised by the PCSP. Reasons given for non-attendance included not getting notification, not being aware of it and unsuitable timing of seminar. In some cases the learning support teachers attended the seminars, sometimes with the class teachers and at other times instead of the class teachers.

In over 50% of cases two teachers attended the seminars. In most other cases one teacher attended the seminar although there were instances where 10 and even 14 teachers attended. Just over 40% found the seminars very useful, 53% found them somewhat useful, and 6% did not find them useful. In their comments, teachers expressed the view that the seminars should have been open to all teachers to attend. Some teachers were of the view that practices were already in place in schools while others stated that they learnt a lot. The following are examples of some of the comments:

Every teacher in school should have been invited to attend.

More training is required for all teachers in a school. School principals, all class teachers and learning support / resource teachers need to attend as part of a whole school approach.

Need further clarification on mandatory reporting to parents and procedures to be carried out

This school had been giving the children standardised tests for years so there was really nothing new to be learned

It (seminar) highlighted the importance of assessment & the various ways of implementing it and of reporting the results to parents

Very useful and informative

Concluding comments

In general, teachers are very positive about the role of assessment in teaching and learning. Assessment is useful in planning for teaching and learning, for providing feedback to pupils and in identifying pupils needing learning support, in particular. Assessment for learning is considered more important than standardised testing. Teachers, however, felt that assessment should not become a bureaucratic exercise; they felt that the UK practice of allowing assessment to dominate the curriculum was undesirable.

The following comments summarise teachers' views on assessment in primary schools. They refer to the central role of assessment in teaching and learning, the fear of bureaucratization of assessment processes, and the potential for misuse of assessment, the limitations of assessment and the particular challenges in multi-grade classrooms.

The importance of assessment for learning

Too much emphasis/importance paid to standardised testing. Informal teacher assessment much more important but not always acknowledged.

In-house assessment provides very useful information regarding standards, progress, identification of problems or areas of potential difficulty. Used for planning and monitoring.

Assessment is a major contributor to raising standards in schools in terms of teaching, learning and student achievement. We assess for ourselves as teachers to ensure that our students are making the most of the learning process....

I strongly feel that all classes should be around 20. Class teacher can then give constants support to children with difficulties.

Cautioning against bureaucracy and misuse of assessment

There is much good work being done in Ireland but focussing unduly on assessment may cause to lose the natural ability to teach and force us to spend more time than is necessary filling out forms.

Please don't destroy the whole of assessment through overemphasis on writing down everything

Assessments are the private business of schools and parents. Attempts by media interests to access results for the purposes of comparisons have to be strongly resisted.

Time will have to be given for all this recording, otherwise children will be the losers.

Challenges for Multigrade

It would be helpful if teachers with multi-classes could get help from LS teachers to administer tests.

I agree that assessment is a useful tool but recording is, in many situations, not practical i.e. multi-grade

Limitations of Assessment

We would hate to see assessment become the master of the curriculum. Where it feeds into planning and problem solving it is a wonderful tool.

All assessments are for academic subjects. Assessment for behaviour would be useful.

It (assessment) is only a tool and does not tell the whole story.

Assessment results are merely indicators rather than finite labelling. The weaker children may be making good progress based on teacher observation...yet many of the children do not score well at standardised tests

Teachers are willing to embrace assessment in their classrooms. They are also of the view that the results of assessment should be reported to parents. They are wary of the potential misuse of assessment results and of the inordinate amount of time the recording of assessment could take. Teachers reiterated their call for in-service to be provided to all teachers in relation to the holistic nature of assessment. On the whole teachers demonstrated positive views in relation to assessment in the learning process.

5

International Context

Introduction

This section provides an overview of assessment practices in a number of other countries⁴. Broadly speaking, assessment can be considered under three general headings:

- School entry assessment
- Assessment during primary schooling
- Assessment at the end of primary schooling – transition assessment

This section describes policies and practices under these three general headings. In addition a brief description of the use of assessment for accountability purposes in the case of the UK and the US is included.

Assessment at school entry level

Some countries have come to consider it useful to have a basic idea of children's potential strengths and weaknesses before they enter compulsory education.

In **England**, all children admitted to compulsory education undergo a baseline assessment within seven weeks of starting school. It sums up each child's progress and learning needs in relation to early learning goals at the end of the foundation stage, and provides a starting point from which a child's progress through Key Stage 1 can be measured.

In **Germany**, commencement of compulsory education for six year olds is conditional on the child having attained an adequate level of development. A medical examination and an enrolment test may be carried out to determine whether the child has the physical and mental maturity for school attendance.

In **New Zealand**, individual student needs are identified by school-based assessment or individual assessment by specialists - usually with parental involvement. The purposes of this assessment are to provide reliable information for teachers about an individual child's skills and understandings, to help schools decide how best to support their entrant children and evaluate their programmes in the light of children's needs. Assessment of individual children's progress is essentially diagnostic. Its purpose is to improve teaching and learning by diagnosing strengths and

⁴ Information contained in this section with the exception of the NI section is based on information contained at <http://www.inca.org.uk/>

weaknesses, measuring children's progress against the defined achievement objectives and reviewing the effectiveness of teaching programmes. The information which teachers record from these assessments enables clear profiles of individual student achievement to be built. These profiles are the first nationally standardised procedures available for the collection of information on the skills, knowledge and understanding of new entrants to schools (aged five).

In **France**, while there is no official national system of assessment before the pupil enters compulsory education, the teacher must recommend that the child should move up to the 'école élémentaire' or be kept back. His/her opinion is formed by attentive informal observation of the child. The government in France has stressed, that nursery education should lay the foundation for oral skills and a progressive introduction to writing, but that the marking and grading of pre-compulsory infants' work would be premature and harmful.

In **Hungary**, a kindergarten certificate is required for admission to the general school. This is granted following observation and assessment.

In **Sweden**, there is no formal national system of assessment for pre-school education, but continuous monitoring and observation take place.

In the **USA**, one third of the states insist on pre-kindergarten standardised testing, and it is widely practiced in others. The result is often used to make decisions on kindergarten entry. For example, in Maryland, children's readiness to proceed from the kindergarten year (age 5-6) to Grade 1 (6+) is assessed using the Maryland Model for School Readiness.

In **Japan**, the schooling system does not require children to have academic ability - the curriculum in year 1 is designed for children who have no academic experience. The entrance examinations for private "escalator" elementary schools take place just prior to commencement of the school year when the student is six years old. As children are not expected to read or write before they start compulsory school at six, this entrance exam relies on testing other abilities, such as memory, oral communication, logical thought and concentration.

Assessment during primary education

Assessment practice during the primary school years in a number of countries is described in this section.

England

In **England**, statutory assessments for the curriculum are carried out in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. They include both teacher assessment and national tests. National tests and tasks aim to complement teachers' own assessment and schools' internal tests and examinations. They are designed to enable each pupil's progress to be measured against national standards. Teacher assessments are based on

observation of practical and oral work in the classroom and written work completed over the course of the key stage⁵.

In Key Stage 1 Statutory assessment is undertaken in English, mathematics and science, which combines written tests and tasks in reading comprehension, spelling and mathematics, with continuous teacher assessment. A teacher assessment of each student's achievements in relation to the National Curriculum level descriptions for each attainment target in English, mathematics and science is based on observations of practical and oral work in the classroom and written work completed in class over the course of the stage. Standard written tests and/or practical and oral tasks are administered to each student in English and mathematics, between January and May. Tests from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority are delivered to the schools in April, but can only be opened up to 24 hours prior to their planned administration. In 2002/03, changes were implemented which increased the emphasis on teacher assessment. Reporting to parents is now based on overall teacher assessment - combining the statutory test results with their own overall assessment of a child's progress. At the end of Key Stage 1 (age 7) pupils take statutory practical classroom-based tasks and written tests in English and mathematics. The tests are set by an external agency, but marked by the class teacher. There are written tests in reading, writing, spelling and mathematics which can be taken at any time from January onwards. Pupils are also assessed by teacher assessment against the attainment targets in English, mathematics and science.

In Key Stage 2 Optional National Curriculum Tests for 8, 9 and 10 year olds were intended to provide schools with a clear indication of whether students were on target to do well in the statutory tests at the end of Key Stage 2 and, though optional, most schools use them. Students take five tests in English (reading, writing, spelling) and mathematics (written and mental test based on a tape). These are taken under test conditions and are timed. Schools use them for reporting to parents and evaluating progress made by children since the end of the previous year. They are also used to diagnose both strengths and weaknesses across a class and of individuals, and can assist in setting targets.

At the end of Key Stage 2 (age 11) pupils take statutory written tests in English, mathematics and science. Pupils are also assessed by teacher assessment in relation to the attainment targets in English, mathematics and science. The National Curriculum tests at the end of Key Stage 2 must be administered according to a set timetable, and usually take place during an allocated week in May. It is usually required that all children taking the end of Key Stage 2 tests in any one school do so at the same time. Schools may choose the appropriate start time for each test within the identified day. The tests are set and marked by an external agency which is appointed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). Performance data / results at the end of Key Stage 2 accompany students as they leave primary and enter lower secondary school.

⁵ Key stages are the periods in each pupil's education to which the elements of the National Curriculum apply. There are four key stages, normally related to the age of the majority of children in a teaching group: ages 5-7, 7-11, 11-14, and 14-16 (the end of compulsory education)

National tests at the end of Key Stage 2 are not used to assess the ability or aptitude of pupils for the purpose of selection for secondary school. Grammar schools set their own tests for this purpose, and these are usually administered earlier in the school year than the Key Stage 2 tests.

France

In **France**, assessment is seen as a fundamental part of work in cycles. Mass diagnostic testing of pupils takes place at ages 8, 11 and 15. The tests are closely related to the curriculum, and take the form of a formal written national test in French and mathematics at the beginning of the academic year. It is criterion referenced, according to competences determined by the bodies which set the tests – the inspectorate, the schools' directorates and the directorate of assessment and planning. They work on the principle that *competences de base* is the level which is required for all students to benefit from the educational process to follow in the cycle they are about to enter.

Assessment of student learning has traditionally been seen to be frequent and formal. Students are assessed at regular intervals during each of the teaching cycles by their teacher/teachers to test their knowledge and retention. Attainment targets are set for each cycle rather than for each year, and the amount of time spent by each child in each cycle can be extended or reduced by a year to suit the learning rhythms of each child. Students may repeat a year only once. Teachers are expected to record whether specific attainment targets have not been acquired, are in the process of being acquired, or have been acquired. Continuous teacher assessment and periodic end-of-year sampling are compulsory for all students. Regular, usually weekly, tests are made up and conducted by the teacher. The results are recorded in students' report books. Teachers also make written comments concerning students' work, behaviour in school, conscientiousness and attitude to work. Each child has a report book which is shown regularly to parents. It indicates the results of periodic assessment and provides information on the skills acquired by the student. Teachers are instructed to record individual children's progress in relation to specific curriculum objectives, both in terms of comments and a criterion-referenced system of grading competence. The report book also informs parents of proposals by the Teachers' Council of the cycle concerning the child's promotion to a higher class or cycle and records the final decision.

End-of-year tests of selected samples of students are carried out from time to time for use in the course of national or international surveys. The National Ministry of Education advises head teachers that mass testing will take place in certain forms or that some classes are part of a national sample. Testing takes place during normal class time and central government provides all instructions to principal teachers and class teachers. Every school is required to produce a performance chart for each student and each class, while at the national level the Ministry of Education provides a comprehensive analysis of a representative sample of students' performance. This analysis is widely disseminated via the Ministry of Education EDUTEL system. This freedom of information aims to ensure that everyone within the system is in a position to make informed choices at the appropriate level.

Although the main role of these assessments is to provide formative information for teachers and to encourage and equip them to be better classroom assessors themselves, the programme also has an important summative dimension in that aggregated results are published nationally so that parents and teachers can compare their results against national norms.

Teachers have found that the results of mass diagnostic testing at ages 8 and 11 serve as a useful starting point for discussions with parents, for deciding on any remedial action which need to be taken, and for encouraging parents to involve themselves with their child's learning. Teachers feel the tests provide a baseline which is very useful from year to year.

Germany

In **Germany**, assessment is a common feature of education. Although there is no national system of assessment in German compulsory education, continuous monitoring throughout the school year is compulsory for all students in all types of compulsory schools at all levels. Performance in all school years is assessed on the basis of ongoing observation of learning processes and applying oral, written and subject based learning checks. Assessment covers all the work performed by the student. Written work and written tests are set at regular intervals throughout the school year and the level and content correspond to the appropriate syllabuses and criteria. Assessment also includes homework in the form of written or oral work. Summaries of achievement are provided in mid-year and year-end reports. The teachers in a school are responsible for the setting of written assessments and their distribution over a school year. Generally students must achieve a mark of "adequate" (grade 4) in the national six-point marking scale in each subject relevant to promotion before they can proceed from one class to the next.

In years 1 and 2 (6 to 8 years) the focus of assessment is on direct observation of students. In year 3 (8 years+), children begin to be familiarized with written class tests in certain subjects – especially German, mathematics and sachunterricht – an interdisciplinary subject which includes aspects of social studies, history, geography, science and technology. In all years, student performance must be commented on either by the teacher's oral comments or by simple written comments. Once introduced, written tests take place regularly throughout the year. Students are warned of them in advance. The marks are subsequently discussed with the child, and children are encouraged to take their tests home to show their parents.

Homework is regarded as important and every piece of homework completed should be monitored and commented on by the teacher. It should be based on the work currently being done in class and should encourage students to work on their own. It should be regularly corrected and assessed.

The results of the various written assessment assignments provide teachers with feedback on the success of their teaching and a basis for proceeding further. Primary school head teachers generally keep track of

students in various classes by sitting in on lessons and inspecting written work, so as to ensure uniform marking standards.

The process of reporting formal assessment usually commences at the end of year 2 (age 8). Students' progress, strengths and weaknesses in each subject area are reported in detail and they begin to receive certificates with marks which allow their performance to be measured against the class average.

Students are asked to repeat a year if their level of attainment is not judged adequate. If students are in danger of not being promoted to the next class at the end of a given school year, their mid-year report must state this.

New Zealand

In **New Zealand**, school-based assessment is an integral part of the curriculum. There is a strong national focus on formative assessment or assessment for learning and on improving the quality of the feedback and interactions that occur between teachers and learners. The New Zealand Curriculum builds on the close relationship between learning and assessment. It provides clear learning outcomes and a progression of desirable standards for learning throughout the years of schooling against which student's progress can be measured. The primary purpose of school-based assessment is to improve students' learning and the quality of teaching programmes. Other purposes include providing feedback to parents and students, awarding qualifications at senior secondary school level and monitoring overall national educational standards. Assessment also identifies learning needs so that resources can be effectively targeted.

In the primary sector, standardised Progressive Achievement Tests in the areas of mathematics, reading and study skills are administered and used to chart students' progress. The tests are not mandatory, but many schools choose to use them. There is also a "Six-year net" which is administered to all students after about one year at school. This assesses the students' reading ability and is used to determine whether the student needs additional support in the form of a programme called "Reading Recovery".

Assessment Resource Banks, Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning and National Exemplars are all intended to provide externally-referenced assessment information to assist teachers to make valid, reliable and nationally consistent judgments about the work and progress of their students. These tools enable teachers to diagnose how their students are performing, give feedback to them about progress, and enable students and teachers to set goals for learning.

School-based assessment is carried out in all primary schools with all children. It is an integral and continuous part of the teaching process. Assessments are mainly written, but include oral work and practical work. Apart from written reports, often made two or three times a year, information about students' achievements is conveyed to parents through interviews, parental involvement in the school and in the classroom, home visits, parent education sessions, open days, homework diaries, curriculum

outlines, and newsletters. It is considered important to use formal means to convey information.

The primary schools records system is based on the assessment of an individual student's level of achievement rather than comparison between students. Students' progress is assessed against the sets of learning objectives in national curriculum statements, which identify broad levels of achievement in knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes. The records maintained within the school provide some of the evidence to inform decisions made by each school's board of trustees.

The USA

In the **USA**, assessment is undertaken at state and local levels. All states have some state-wide testing policies in place to measure student progress, along with some form of official curriculum documents and specific centralized learning standards. Most states have mandatory promotion or graduation tests. Periodic large-scale national assessments, which enable student performance to be measured against external norms, are also undertaken on a voluntary basis. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assesses representative national samples of students. The goal of NAEP assessments is to identify any serious discrepancies in achievement. It is used to monitor student performance nationally and to produce and analyse long-term trends.

Under the **No Child Left Behind** (NCLB) Education Act of 2001, all states in the USA are expected to have in place standards identifying what a child should know and learn for all Grades for Mathematics and reading. Since 2006 standards for science have been developed. States must demonstrate their compliance with NCLB to receive federal funding. Schools are expected to administer tests in reading and mathematics in three grade spans – grades 3-5, grades 6-9 and grades 10-12. Since 2006 schools are expected to administer tests each year in all of Grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8. For example, the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) was set up in **Kentucky** in 1999 and includes a comprehensive test of basic skills (CTBS), core-content tests, writing portfolios and writing prompts. In **Maryland**, the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) is a student-performance evaluation programme taken by all students in years 3 to 8 (aged 8/9 to 13/14). The **Massachusetts** Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) measures student performance based on the Massachusetts curriculum framework learning standards. The **Wisconsin** Student Assessment Programme (WSAS) is a comprehensive state-wide accountability programme designed to provide information about what students know in core academic areas.

Multiple-choice standardised tests are almost universally used at elementary school level to determine grade promotion. Placement in remedial programmes can also follow. Multiple-choice standardised tests are used in continuous classroom assessment from kindergarten to university. Regular (day-to-day) classroom assessment and testing of students often take the form of tests at the end of a unit of study.

In many states the practice of “social promotion” – moving students on regardless of their ability-does take place. Children progress through the

grades by putting in time, or because of pressure from parents who don't want their child to have the stigma of staying back a year, or from principals who don't want the school to look bad. About 15-20% of pupils are held back in any given year. In urban districts more than 50% of students will be held back at least once. In **New York**, any students aged over nine who have not reached the required standard, have been required to attend summer school until they meet the minimum academic standard. A certificate or diploma or other written evidence issued by a school board showing that a student has successfully completed the course of study in elementary school is usually a condition of admission to high school in **Wisconsin**. To enter high school, students need to complete elementary school and the vast majority of those aged 14 to 17/18 enroll.

Assessment at the end of primary schooling – transition

This section contains information on assessments carried out at the end of the primary education cycle and at transition time to second level.

In **France**, there is no national examination at the end of elementary school to determine whether a student may be promoted to lower secondary education. All progress is as of right. Education is compulsory until age 16.

In **Poland**, students undertake a standardised test set by the Regional Examinations Commission at the end of Grade 6. On passing, they are awarded a certificate of completion which is required for admission to lower secondary school.

In **Hungary**, student performance and achievement in the general school determine the type of secondary school a student will go on to attend. The highest-attaining academic students tend to progress to the secondary grammar school, others proceed to some form of secondary vocational school. Students whose achievements are not judged adequate for attendance at either are usually placed in vocational training schools that offer one to three year courses generally preparing students for the job market.

New Zealand operates a system of social promotion, where children normally progress from one class to the next and from one phase to the next without restriction or selection. The children generally do not repeat any part of their education, nor are they excluded from continuing their education.

In **Japan**, elementary school education and junior high school education are both compulsory. The vast majority of students attends elementary school and proceeds directly to their neighborhood junior high on completion. There are individual entrance exams (the fourteen plus exam) for entrance to post-compulsory upper secondary. Schools set their own entrance exams.

In the **USA**, some high schools require students to take a standardised entrance exam in order to be accepted – SSAT – Secondary School Admission Test.

High-school graduation, for which requirements vary between and within states, depends on the satisfactory completion of a specified number of courses, designated on each diploma. Test scores, high-school records and recommendations from teachers form the basis for college acceptance.

School accountability – some international perspectives

Accountability is, in essence, a process of making a system or person responsible for an event or outcome. Accountability in education is seen as “a policy of holding schools and teachers accountable for students’ academic progress by linking such progress with funding for salaries, maintenance etc” (Dictionary.com). Education systems worldwide are showing an increasing tendency to favour a model of accountability, and are moving in the direction of trying to define and set one up. This section will give a brief outline of how assessment is used for accountability purposes in the USA and in the UK.

The USA

In the **USA**, school accountability is based on measuring each school’s success in educating all of its students. The primary measure is progress toward the academic standards assessed on state assessments. The No Child Left (NCLB) accountability system is defined in terms of **Adequate Yearly Progress** (AYP), a way to measure the improvement in achieving standards for all students each year. Schools and states are held accountable for improvements on an annual basis by public reporting (as well as individualized reporting to parents), and ultimately through consequences if adequate results are not achieved.

In defining what counts as adequate yearly progress, states identify the regular incremental improvement required from year to year to result in all students reaching “proficient” status (as defined by the state) within 12 years, by the 2013-2014 school year. Each state’s definition of AYP should be available on the state education department’s website and in print documents that the state has available for the public. Assessment results that are entered into calculations of AYP for every school must be publicly reported, and schools that repeatedly do not make adequate progress must be identified as in need of improvement.

Some performance indicator systems in the United States routinely trigger a response to a school's low performance in specified respects, by means of a planned improvement programme. For example, in New York State, performance by an individual student which falls below a state reference point in competency tests will result in the provision of appropriate remedial support. In South Carolina, at school or district level, provision can be declared 'seriously impaired'; the state then provides a programme of support aimed at achieving improvements which, in turn, are themselves measured by the indicator system. Many US states use performance indicator systems to identify the level of performance being achieved. High performance might result in some rewards. Low performance, particularly at the school level, is usually followed by remedial action.

The State Board of Education establishes regulations that define a process and criteria to determine whether a school or school district has chronically failed to improve the educational programme provided to students served by the school district or an individual school. Whatever other considerations the Board of Education chooses to include in its regulations, the law requires that the Board consider student assessment results in determining whether or not a school district is underperforming.

Reporting to parents

Schools are required to report to and consult with parents extensively. Students generally receive report cards at least twice a year (in some school districts, up to six times), which indicate the grades received in each of the subjects studied. These grades (usually on an A-F scale, where A is excellent and F, failing) are based on assessment of performance in tests given at intervals throughout the school year, participation in class discussions and completion of written and oral assignments. Many US states issue 'report cards' which rank schools' performance in state-wide testing. However, only some of these states release such information publicly; fewer still currently require such report cards to be sent home. No Child Left Behind (*NCLB*) makes the official publication of state/school report cards statutory. Reports on individual schools are part of the annual district report cards, also known as local report cards. Each school district must prepare and disseminate annual local report cards that include information on how students in the district and in each school performed on state assessments. The report cards must state student performance in terms of three levels: basic, proficient and advanced. States and districts may also distribute this information to the media for publicising, post it on the Internet, or provide it to other public agencies for dissemination. Local school districts must notify parents if their child's school has been identified as needing improvement, corrective action or restructuring.

The UK context

Primary school performance tables have been published since March 1997. Every year the Department for Education and Skills publishes information on the achievement and attainment of pupils in all schools. These tables provide a guide to how well a school is doing. They list National Curriculum test results for all schools in England and show how they compare with each other. Tables are published for Key Stage 2, showing the test results for all state primary schools in England, and for Key Stage 3 showing test results for all state secondary schools in England. The National Curriculum end-of-key-stage tests – in contradiction to the intention of the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (DES, 1988b), which devised the system of progressive performance levels - became high-stakes when aggregated results were used to set targets which schools are held accountable for meeting (Boyle, 2008).

The tables list, in alphabetical order, primary and middle schools with students on roll eligible for assessment under the Key Stage 2 guidelines. For each school, the tables list the percentage of eligible students achieving level 4 and level 5 of the National Curriculum eight-level scale and the percentage of eligible students who were absent or disapplied. Percentages are shown for the test results and for teacher assessment for each subject (English, mathematics and science). The tables are intended to enable

parents to make objective comparisons of local primary schools based on how successful their students have been in English, Mathematics and Science at age 11, in tests and teacher assessment. They are intended to enable parents to choose the best and most appropriate school for their children.

The school governing body is required to keep educational records for all registered students and to provide copies of records on request. Schools are, for example, required to:

- Keep, and update at least once a year, curricular records on students, covering their academic achievements, other skills and abilities and progress in school. Other material, such as details of students' school attendance or family background, may be recorded, but that is not a mandatory requirement. The curricular record and other material form the educational record. There are no set regulations of content.
- Transfer a student's educational record to any school or other educational or training establishment to which the student transfers, on request.

Reporting to parents

Schools must send parents at least one written report every school year. During the course of the year, parents must be sent a required minimum of information about students' progress in all National Curriculum subjects studied, along with a general attendance and progress record. They also must contain the student's National Curriculum assessment results and details of how these compare with results of students of the same age in the school, and also national comparative information about students of the same age. Arrangements are also made to discuss the report with the school.

Use of results to measure value-added and improve school performance/target-setting

The results of National Curriculum assessments may be used as a resource to help schools raise standards and help their students reach their full potential. School governing bodies have been responsible, since the start of the 1998 academic year, for setting and publishing targets. Since September 2000 they have also been required to publish their school's performance against these targets. Schools with already high levels of achievement are expected to set targets for further improvement. Targets for student performance are expected to be set and published based on the percentage of students who will achieve level 4 and level 5 of the National Curriculum eight-level scale, in the National Curriculum (end-of-Key Stage 2) tests in English, mathematics and science.

Use of end of Key Stage 2 results to inform secondary teaching staff

Performance data in the form of end of Key Stage 2 test results accompany students as they leave primary education and enter lower secondary school. As well as providing the basic framework of levels (from the National Curriculum eight-level scale), the Qualifications and Curriculum

Authority (*QCA*) has now extended the information which can be derived from the tests to include: age standardised scores for the tests in reading, spelling, mathematics and mental arithmetic; and separate level thresholds for reading and writing. Software has also been developed by the *QCA* for the electronic transfer of data (for example, test results) between schools and for the diagnostic analysis of children's responses in the end of Key Stage 2 tests. In this way it is intended that the results inform the teaching staff responsible for new secondary school entrants and so ease the transition from primary to secondary education.

High stakes and consequences

Three studies published as part of Cambridge's Primary Review⁶ suggest that reforms have had a limited – and at times harmful – impact on young children. In one report, Prof Wynne Harlen, of Bristol University, said the consequences of children not hitting national targets "can be severe", with schools being placed in special measures or even closed. As a result "teachers place emphasis on making sure that pupils' test results are maximised". To pass tests, lessons are often restricted to a narrow memorising of facts which excludes things that cannot be easily marked "correct or incorrect". She said there was an "unavoidable conclusion that the current assessment system in England is inadequate both in what is assessed and how it is being assessed". Peter Tymms and Christine Merrell, from Durham University, said the narrow nature of exams and the amount of teaching to the test produced "seriously misleading" results. The scope of tests are so limited that "as many as one third of pupils may be given the wrong level", it is claimed.

Ofsted is also critical of the impact of a testing culture on schools. A study published in September 2008 on the teaching of mathematics in 192 primary and secondary schools found that children were being drilled to pass exams. The report stated that there was evidence to suggest that strategies to improve test and examination performance, including 'booster' lessons, revision classes and extensive intervention, coupled with a heavy emphasis on 'teaching to the test', were successful in preparing pupils to gain the qualifications but were not equipping them well enough for their futures (Ofsted, 2008). The report found the emphasis on routine exercises, and a 'teaching to the test' style that's common in many schools, particularly secondary schools, leave pupils ill-equipped for further study because they lack understanding of the subject. According to Ofsted, this style of teaching was also less effective in promoting the understanding required to apply mathematics to new situations, solve problems and communicate solutions. Ofsted blames the Government's testing regime for narrowing children's understanding, and say that it leaves some pupils unable to explain mathematical theory because they are too used to answering narrow questions in tests. However, the Government's use of national tests as part of the process of assessing progress for pupils, schools and the education system is strongly defended by the Government. According to the Schools' Minister Jim Knight:

⁶ www.primaryreview.org.uk

Along with teachers' own judgments and Ofsted reports, tests are a tool which help pupils and their parents to understand how well they are doing, help parents and teachers to understand how well their school is doing, and help the public to scrutinize the performance of the schools system. That's why they are here to stay. Parents don't want to go back to a world where the achievements of schools are hidden from them.

(Managing Schools Today, 2008)

During the summer of 2008 there was much media coverage in Britain regarding the amount of time spent on tests and questioning the benefits of the testing process. It was reported that children aged 11 spend almost three weeks practising and sitting tests in their final year of primary school in England – while teachers spend five weeks preparing exams. Under the Labour Government, the testing regime gathered pace as performance targets were set for individual pupils and schools. An analysis of test results show that, in general, the majority of pupils achieve the expected levels in English and mathematics. However, it was reported in The Sunday Telegraph (15/07/08) that a crackdown will apply to low scoring primary schools where fewer than 65% of children reach the expected level in English and maths. As quoted in the Telegraph: "They will be told to improve or face being closed down, merged, or in effect taken over by other schools". Official figures reveal that 1,484 primaries failed to get 65% of pupils to the benchmark in English last year, while 2,026 missed the target in maths. There lies the difficulty. In the UK, the system is looking for a way to make accountability part of the fabric of the teaching-learning process and is looking for a way to measure performance. But the more high-stakes an assessment is the more damaging the consequences for teaching and learning. The debate continues.

Assessment in Northern Ireland (NI)

Upon the adoption of the Northern Ireland Curriculum in 1989 the full English-style testing regime was avoided. Instead a ten point scale of *levels of progression* based on *level descriptors* was instituted. This scale was to be assigned to pupils on the basis of teacher professional judgement backed up by a battery of tasks known as Assessment Units and externally validated by a rather cumbersome system of moderation portfolios run by Northern Ireland's Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.

In addition, the management of Northern Ireland primary schools, without consultation with teachers, began to use a range of assessment instruments published by the National Council for Educational Research (NFER) despite the fact that these tested some elements of the English Curriculum not taught in NI schools. The NFER tests were and are used primarily for summative assessment at the end of the school year and although they have a formative or diagnostic element, the timing considerably reduces the effectiveness of this. Whatever the weaknesses of the NFER tests, they have at least the virtue of being standardised on UK children. The *levels of progression* on the other hand have very little credibility. The majority of Primary 4 pupils (7 to 8 years old) are expected to have reached Level 2 which is in fact a very modest level of attainment. Meanwhile, partly under the influence of the "11+", test the target for Primary 7 pupils (10 to 11 years old) has become Level 5 which is in fact attainable in Literacy by only a few exceptional pupils.

The percentage of children attaining each level has to be reported to CCEA. The results cause considerable anxiety and it is suggested that as a result the rigour with which standards are applied varies greatly. The obvious flaws in this process figured greatly in the *rationale* informing the recent revision of the NI Curriculum so it is all the more surprising therefore to find the retention of *levels of progression* in tandem with the completion of the curriculum revision process, albeit with the promise of modification. This suggests that the purpose of gathering such flawed data is primarily political and bureaucratic rather than educational.

Elsewhere, however, we do find the revised curriculum spurring innovative assessment methodology. The use of a system of computer-aided assessment, known as INCAS, was piloted last year and is underway again with comparatively few and relatively minor difficulties being reported. The process works as follows; each pupil has a unique password which gives him/her access to time limited tests in maths and English on the computer. The software brings the test to a conclusion when the pupil is no longer making significant progress. The test is “marked” by the software and while the pupil receives no feedback as to their scores during the activity, the school and teacher receive a range of scores indicating the children’s attainment in juxtaposition to their chronological age. It is then a legal requirement under the Education Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 for the teacher to meet with the parents before the end of the autumn term and supply them with the *General Maths* and *Reading* scores. The test also supplies some more detailed scores in aspects of the subjects but these are meant to be used for formative and diagnostic purposes and are not required to be furnished to the parents. This procedure is still in its early stages. Children appear to have regard the tests as routine and non-threatening. This could lead to complacency resulting in reduced effort and under performance and while underachievement due to test stress does not seem to be a factor, these tests remain a ‘snapshot’ of a child’s total school experience.

Changes in assessment in Northern Ireland would seem to reflect yet another stage in the development of the dichotomy between those who believe that the primary purpose of assessment is to form and inform a child’s development and those who believe that its purpose is to function as an instrument of socio-political policy, but it remains to be seen which view will have gained most ground from this process.

6

Discussion and Recommendations

Introduction

Assessment is integral to teaching and learning. A preoccupation with standardised tests, summative assessment or assessment for accountability purposes is not healthy. Teachers need to be supported in developing assessment policies and practices that reflect the Primary School Curriculum and meet the needs of the system in Ireland. A broad understanding of assessment and its different purposes and functions should be reflected in both official and school policies on assessment. The misuse of assessment, as has happened in other countries, must not happen here in Ireland.

Primary teachers have always engaged in a process of assessment within their classrooms and have willingly participated in system evaluation tests such as the National Assessments of English Reading and the National Assessments of Mathematical Achievement. With professional development support and guidelines, teachers will continue to develop their knowledge and practice of assessment in teaching and learning. The INTO will also continue to encourage teachers to participate in the National Assessments for the purposes of system evaluation. Assessment in education in Ireland must have as its central core the enhancement of pupils learning.

This section outlines the main challenges for teachers regarding assessment policy and practice in schools.

Planning for assessment

With the advent of the revised curriculum in 1999 assessment has become more formalized. Each subject area has a section on assessment. While teachers have always assessed their pupils through observation and teacher-designed tasks and tests the use of portfolios, projects as a form of assessment, self-assessment and curriculum profiles would have been new to many of them. Teachers are experimenting with the different forms of assessment and need to find which ones suit them and the class they are teaching and which are most appropriate to each subject area. It is a time-consuming process and teachers need to be allowed time to develop the most appropriate policy for their school. The Guidelines on Assessment published by the NCCA have been most welcome in this regard. However, no professional development in relation to these guidelines has yet been made available.

The INTO recommends:

- That all schools be allocated time for planning for assessment.

Standardised testing

Schools have a long tradition of administering standardised tests in English Reading and mathematics. School policies varied in terms of whether standardised tests were administered to all classes or administered every year. However, mandatory testing was introduced in schools in 2008. Pupils are now tested twice during their time in primary school: at the end of 1st class or the beginning of 2nd class and again at the end of 4th class or the beginning of 5th class. In-service in relation to standardised testing was only provided for teachers of those classes who would be administering the tests at the end of the school year 2007 or beginning of the school year 2007/08. There are teachers who will be administering tests this year who have not had any in-service. This is unacceptable as all teachers should be provided with in-service in the area of standardised testing, as the majority of teachers administer such tests to their pupils even though it's not mandatory beyond the two specific stages of pupils' education in primary school.

Reporting to parents

There was no obligation on teachers to report to parents on the results of any standardised tests administered to pupils until the introduction of mandatory testing. In general, teachers reported the results of standardised tests verbally to parents at parent teacher meetings. It is possible that results were not always reported to parents and were only used to plan for teaching and learning. Since the introduction of Circular 0138/2006, however, parents must be informed of the results of those classes taking mandatory tests. The circular states that the results should be reported to parents in respect of their own children "in accordance with the reporting template being piloted at present in a number of selected schools by the NCCA". These templates have since been finalized and are available on the NCCA website.

However, reporting the results of standardised test to parents in written form is problematic. To assist teachers and parents the NCCA has prepared information leaflets on understanding the results of standardised tests which are available on their website. It is unclear how these results should be reported. The newly designed NCCA Report Cards have included a space for recording the results. The teacher manuals accompanying the original Drumcondra tests clearly stated that reporting to parents should be done "verbally". The only reference to reporting to parents in the teacher's manual accompanying the revised Drumcondra tests is where it is stated that STEN scores may be useful when reporting to parents. There is no direction given as to whether this should be done verbally and/or in writing. The manual accompanying the Micra-T unambiguously stated that:

The results are best presented to parents in a context, such as at a parent-teacher meeting, where there is an opportunity to review the child's overall progress and also to discuss any educational implications that are suggested by the results. Results are best conveyed to the

parent(s)/guardian(s) **in person**, enabling the teacher to interpret their meaning and their significance in relation to the child's progress. Therefore it is advised that, wherever possible, results should not simply be sent home to parents/guardians in report card manner – even where accompanied by a glossary explaining terms such as standard score, percentile, etc.

(Micra-T Test Manual pp. 21-22).

Most schools have policies on assessment, which include a policy on standardised testing. In general, standardised tests are used to inform teaching and learning through the identification of pupils' strengths and weaknesses. They are also used to determine whether pupils need learning support. There are limitations to standardised tests. They provide a snapshot of achievement at a particular point in time. They also assess a narrow range of skills in the context of the overall curriculum. It is important that these limitations are explained to parents and that standardised tests form only a part of the overall assessment of a child. Care must be taken that they are administered correctly, as laid down in the manuals. There is no evidence that coaching prior to the administration of tests or teaching to the test occurs in Irish classrooms, but such practices should be avoided at all times. Schools have different policies on who administers the tests, whether it is the class teacher or the learning support teacher. Administering, correcting and collating the results are all time-consuming and this needs to be acknowledged. An excessive use of testing can lead to significantly less time for teaching as has occurred to some extent in the UK.

Records

There does not seem to be any clear guidance on for how long the results and, indeed, the test sheets themselves, should be kept on file. As evident in the INTO survey, the length of time assessment information is retained by schools varies. Schools need clarification on where, what, and for how long test sheets and results should be stored. Circular 0138/2006 states that for pupils in the selected classes, the results of the tests should be maintained carefully by the school and should be available for inspection by Department officials. The general practice in schools is to make such results available for inspection by the school's inspector and during WSE. However, the results remain in the school. Inspectors do not make references to test data in their reports that might facilitate school comparisons or the compilation of league tables. The use of test results for the purposes of creating league tables is anti-educational. The INTO welcomes the statement in the Department of Education's Circular 0138/2006 that this practice will not be introduced in primary schools in Ireland.

Standardised tests in Irish

At present there is no standardised testing instrument to assess literacy levels in Irish. This is an issue in the Irish-medium schools, in particular. The Educational Research Centre (ERC) is currently drafting a standardised test in Irish, which is currently being piloted. However, standardised tests in Irish, suitable for schools teaching through the

medium of English also need to be made available to enable all teachers to assess the achievement of pupils in Irish.

The INTO recommends:

- That all teachers be provided with an opportunity for professional development in relation to standardised testing as part of an overall comprehensive professional development programme on assessment;
- That reporting the results of standardised tests to parents be given in person before being written on report cards;
- That schools be given firm guidelines in relation to the length of time that assessment results, school reports and assessment books should be kept;
- That standardised tests to assess achievement in Irish in all schools be developed without delay.

System evaluation / national monitoring

The INTO supports the current process of system evaluation where achievements of pupils in literacy and numeracy are assessed periodically – currently every four years – in order to provide information for policy-makers, teacher-educators, teachers and other stakeholders. These assessments are carried out by the Educational Research Centre (ERC). The policy of selecting a number of schools (approximately 400 schools) and pupils randomly, is sufficient for the purposes of system evaluation. The aggregated results are widely disseminated and participating schools are not identified. The Department of Education views this approach to national monitoring as complementing the process of standardised testing at school level. As envisaged in Circular 0138/2006, the programme of national monitoring will include assessments in reading and mathematics targeted, on a cyclical basis, at:

- A nationally representative sample of schools
- A representative sample of schools in the School Support Programme of DEIS
- A representative sample of Irish-medium schools

The purpose of a programme of national monitoring is to identify changes in national trends over time for particular categories of school and to inform ongoing policy development (Circular 0138/2006). It is planned to over sample the Irish-medium schools (scoileanna Gaeltachta and scoileanna lánGhaeilge) during the next national assessments, scheduled to take place in May 2009. At present, there is insufficient information available regarding achievement levels in literacy, both Irish and English, and mathematics, in this sector.

The INTO recommends:

- That the proposal to over-sample Irish-medium schools for the National Assessments scheduled to take place in May 2009 be implemented;
- That a general programme of national monitoring in relation to reading and mathematics continue to take place on a cyclical basis in a random selection of schools for the purposes of informing policy;
- That assessment in DEIS schools continue to be monitored.

Assessment and special needs

Teachers regularly carry out assessments in order to identify pupils with special needs. Such assessments are generally based on teacher observation and standardised tests. Once a child has been identified as having a difficulty, diagnostic tests may be administered to ascertain the exact nature of the difficulty. The PPDS has made a range of diagnostic tests available to the Education Centres which teachers can access. A staged approach to providing support to children with special needs in mainstream schools is recommended. All schools have an allocation of special education teachers to provide learning support and resource teaching to pupils needing same. It is important, however, not to label children as failures, based on their results in assessments.

The INTO recommends:

- That when children have been assessed as educationally disadvantaged or as having SEN needs for the first time early intervention should follow from all agencies involved;
- That cutbacks in education arising because of the economic downturn should not affect the children who have SEN needs or are educationally disadvantaged.

Professional development

Teachers were provided with a comprehensive programme of professional development following the introduction of the Primary School Curriculum in 1999. As stated earlier, the curriculum contained a reference to assessment in relation to each curricular area. However, the professional development programme did not address assessment in any way comprehensively. The NCCA had commenced a process of preparing guidelines on assessment for teachers following the publication of the Primary School Curriculum, but these guidelines were not published until 2007. They were circulated to schools in early 2008 but professional development in relation to these guidelines has yet to be offered.

In the context that the NCCA Guidelines on Assessment were not made available to schools until 2008 and that comprehensive whole school professional development on assessment has not yet taken place, it would appear unfair to criticise schools for not having adequate policies on assessment and teachers for not making sufficient use of assessment in their teaching. The Department of Education and Science commented on the lack of assessment policies in schools and on teachers' insufficient use of assessment in many of their evaluation reports since 1999 (DES, 2005a, b, c).

The publication of the NCCA Guidelines will be of great assistance to teachers in devising school policy and in implementing a range of assessment approaches in their classrooms. However, professional development on a whole-school basis is essential. The proposal in Circular 0138/2006 to provide a national professional development programme in assessment for learning for teachers on a rolling basis over a number of years, has not yet commenced. It was envisaged that this programme would aim to support teachers in placing assessment at the heart of the teaching and learning process, supporting children's cognitive, creative, affective, physical and social development. A comprehensive professional development programme needs to address topics such as:

- Different forms of assessment
- Keeping profiles up to date
- Becoming familiar with a broad range of tests available
- Diagnostic testing and screening
- Assessing standardised tests undertaken by pupils for overall strengths and weaknesses in the class with a view to planning
- Storing results of mandatory standardised tests

The INTO recommends:

- That a comprehensive professional development programme in assessment be provided on a whole school basis to all teachers.

Appendix I

Summary of main findings from evaluation reports

The Department of Education and Science and the NCCA have published a number of reports in the last decade that considered the implementation of various aspects of the curriculum in primary schools. The main findings of these reports are summarised briefly below.

Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools: Challenges for Teachers and Learners (DES, 2005)

This report highlighted a low level of achievement in both literacy and numeracy in DEIS schools. The report raised the issues of whole-school and class assessment and planning and professional development of teachers. It recommended more support for schools and teachers in these areas.

Primary Curriculum Review: Phase One (NCCA, 2005)

This report found that the majority of schools and teachers had adopted the teaching strategies, content and essential emphases of the English, visual arts and mathematics curricula.

Counting on Success: Mathematics Achievement in Irish Primary Schools' (DES, 2006)

This report was based on an evaluation of mathematical achievement in 4th classes, which was carried out by the Educational Research Centre. The results showed an overall increase in performance by mathematics strands and skills over the previous evaluation in 1999. The mean percent score across all areas was 55 with the calculator section scoring lowest at 40. 12% of pupils scored at the highest level, while 15% scored at the lowest level.

Succeeding in Reading? (DES, 2006)

First and fifth class pupils were assessed for this report. Mean scores for fifth class were slightly up on 1998 scores but not significantly (first class pupils were not assessed in 1998). Girls continue to outscore boys.

Irish in Primary Schools: Long-term National Trends in Achievement (DES, 2002).

This report looked at Irish listening, speaking and reading achievement in sixth classes. It reports a considerable drop in Irish listening skills and a significant drop in Irish speaking skills in ordinary schools since the last assessment in 1985 (a new reading test was used and no comparison was made). There were slight but insignificant drops in Irish skills in both all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools with the former outscoring the latter in all three areas. Much of the report explored possible reasons for the decline of Irish and a long list of recommendations was made.

Irish in the Primary School (DES, 2007)

This more recent report covered an evaluation of forty schools inspected in 2004-05. It found that 75% of classes displayed an acceptable level of understanding during Irish lessons. In over half the classes, pupils could express themselves adequately. The teaching of reading and writing was good in about half of the classes inspected. There was little evidence of the use of a wide range of assessment techniques in classes. It was recommended that standardised tests be developed in Irish and that schools be issued guidelines on the methodologies of assessing pupil progress in Irish.

Ready for Tomorrows World? PISA 2006 (ERC, 2008)

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a skills and knowledge assessment of 15-year-olds in mathematics, science, reading and cross-curricular problem solving undertaken by the OECD every three years.

In mathematics, Ireland achieved at the OECD average in both 2000 and 2003. Fewer students in Ireland achieved at both the highest (11%) and the lowest (17%) levels compared to the OECD average, indicating that there are fewer students operating at these levels than the OECD average (highest 15% and lowest 21%). In 2006, Ireland was again at just above the OECD average, ranking 16th out of the 30 member states and was 22nd out of the 57 participating countries, worldwide. Male students had a significantly higher mean score than females and again Ireland had fewer high and low achievers than the OECD average.

Reading literacy was well above the OECD average in 2006 and Ireland ranked 5th in the OECD and 6th among all participating countries. The number of students achieving at the highest level was above the OECD average, while the number of those at the lowest level was well below average. The mean scores of females were significantly higher than males. There was no greatly significant difference between scores from 2000, 2003 and 2006.

In science, Ireland scored significantly higher than the OECD average in 2006. It was ranked 14th in the OECD and 20th of the 57 participating countries. This was similar to the position in both 2000 and 2003. The highest achievers were operating at the OECD average, while the lowest were achieving above average. There were no overall gender differences in scientific literacy, although males achieved higher scores in some subsets, while females scored higher in others.

Primary Curriculum Review: Phase 2 (NCCA, 2008)

This report presents the findings of the second review of the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum, which was carried out by the NCCA. The review focused on Gaeilge, SPHE and science. The review found that children enjoy active learning and working with their peers although textbooks still prevail and whole-class settings predominate. The issues, in general, are relevant across the curriculum. The challenges which emerged in this review include time, methods of

teaching and learning and assessment. The development of oral language skills in Gaeilge is improving but at some cost to reading and writing skills.

ICT in Schools: Inspectorate Evaluation Studies (DES, 2008)

An evaluation of the infrastructure, planning and use of information and communications technology and teaching was conducted by the inspectorate in primary and post primary schools during the school year 2005/06. The evaluation found that schools were under-funded. While, at primary level, the computer room is generally a feature of larger schools teachers indicated that access to computers was better when they were located in classrooms. Only 30% of primary teachers reported themselves to be comfortable users of ICT. Effective use of computer applications was made by some teachers but many were unaware of the range of peripherals and applications already available to them in their schools. The level of awareness of teachers of the local ICT advisory service was low. The majority of primary schools surveyed had a written ICT plan and an acceptable use policy. ICT is widely used in schools' provision of special education. No clear evidence was found of ICT being used in the assessment of students' academic progress.

Recommendations were made on ICT infrastructure, professional development needs of teachers, planning for ICT in schools and ICT in teaching and learning.

Appendix II

Additional information on assessment and DEIS

DEIS or Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools is an action plan for educational inclusion for children from three to eighteen years of age. The action plan is being rolled out over the years 2005-2010. DEIS action plans are an attempt to draw together a number of new ideas and concepts, in schools' three year action plans. The three year action plans are an attempt to pull many strands together to assist the educationally disadvantaged pupil. In addition to the measurement of progress and outcomes to ensure increased investment is matched by an improvement in educational outcomes (DES, 2007), DEIS includes:

- (a) early intervention
- (b) new/additional/improved literacy and numeracy measures
- (c) measures to address early school leaving
- (d) renewed emphasis on involvement of parents and families
- (e) an increased emphasis on planning at school level

Schools in DEIS had to agree to participate in the school support programme in order to qualify for funding under DEIS. Schools were assisted in developing and writing a three-year action plan by the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) and the School Development Planning Support (SDPS) (now Primary Professional Development Service - PPDS). PCSP cuiditheoirí assisted schools in developing a DEIS action plan and the SDPS service developed a module for schools on DEIS which schools could request for their planning day. Follow up visits were provided by SDPS when needed. In general, the SDP service supported schools in drawing up and in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the three-year plan at intervals up to and including the last school year. SDP monitored and advised on the three-year plan systematically over a two-year period up to last June 2008, and supported schools in prioritising aspects of the plan for 2008/2009. PCSP, in general, provided cuiditheoireacht support in relation to aspects of First Steps (English writing) with some in-class modelling provided when sought by schools. Since the 2008-2009 school year support is provided by the PPDS.

In assessing where they stood, schools in the scheme were asked to look at their standardised test results and target the children with the lowest scores for intensive support over the three-year plan. A debate on standardised tests ensued in the participating schools. This debate was facilitated by SDP personnel during whole school planning days in some cases. The Sigma and Micra tests and the Drumcondra Maths and English tests are the only tests developed in modern times for use in Irish schools. Even the MIST which is often recommended by the DES and used as an early intervention tool is an English test. Gaeltacht schools and Gaelscoileanna raised the issue that there is no Gaeilge standardised test

available. They also claim that intervention and support for underperforming children is generally taken to mean support in English only. They argue that intervention and support should also be given in Gaeilge.

The DEIS plans themselves also require intervention and support for educationally disadvantaged children in numeracy. Many schools are making valiant efforts to do this for their pupils and are reassessing their whole maths programmes, but for other schools the reality will probably be that thinly-spread resources will mainly be targeted at literacy in English. Standardised tests have weaknesses undoubtedly but a major weakness may be their failure to give teachers information on children experiencing educational disadvantage. If a child's score is very low on a standardised test, for instance at or below the 10th percentile, very little useful information can be gleaned from the test. Other tests are then used to discover where the child can be helped. However, none of these tests is available in Irish.

The Educational Research Centre (ERC) was commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation of measures in the School Support Programme (SSP) over the period of the DEIS action plan to 2010. In a letter to schools dated 14th March 2007 the DES stated:

“A vital element of the DEIS initiative is the commitment to develop and implement an in-depth programme of research and evaluation to inform policy formation and to facilitate a better understanding of the role which interventions have to play in the achievement of better outcomes for children targeted by the DEIS action plan”

The ERC will assess the impact of the DEIS action plan on pupils, schools, families and communities. The ERC will also try to assess the extent of the progress schools make in their DEIS three year action plans.

Tests in English reading and mathematics were conducted in selected participating DEIS schools in May 2007 in order to provide baseline data. The tests were conducted with 3rd and 6th classes. In rural schools, most tests were conducted by Rural Coordinators, where they had been appointed. The tests were returned to the ERC for analysis before the end of the school year 2006/2007. The intention is to repeat the exercise in selected DEIS schools in 2010. When the testing is repeated by the ERC in 2010, the 2007 cohort of third classes will be in 6th class but the 2007 cohort of 6th classes will be sitting the Junior Certificate. How the 2010 Assessments will be used to track progress remains to be seen.

Teachers involved with the baseline tests were of the opinion that the English test was an abridged version of the Drumcondra English test and that the mathematics test bore similarities to the Drumcondra mathematics test. The tests were designed to be corrected by computer. Personal information on children was also collected by the schools and returned to the ERC. A questionnaire was administered to the children in 3rd and 6th classes which attempted to elicit information about the children's attitude to reading, learning, television viewing and school in general. Schools could also decide to exempt a child from the tests if they felt he or she would not be capable of completing the tests.

The results of the tests were communicated to the schools in the first term of the school year 2007/2008. Many schools felt that the test scores were generally quite low and some attributed the low scores to the difficulty of the tests. Teachers considered the English test to be more difficult than the Drumcondra English Test. The Drumcondra English test is also perceived by many teachers to be more difficult than the MICRA English test.

In Gaeltacht areas DEIS schools were offered the choice of the maths tests in English or in Irish. Many Gaeltacht schools took the Irish version of the tests, although many schools had poor experiences previously dealing with DES documentation in the Irish language. Gaeltacht schools argue that the terminology used in curriculum and other documentation bears little or no resemblance to the spoken language. Similar criticisms were levelled at the Baseline Data tests by the schools who administered the Gaeilge versions and many claimed that tests that were already difficult were made more difficult for the children concerned by the style and terminology of the Gaeilge used in the tests.

All participating DEIS schools are required to formulate a three-year action plan. The action plan was to have been written up by December 2007 at the latest. The elements required in the action plan were:

- a literacy action plan
- a numeracy action plan
- attendance and retention plan
- parent and community partnership plan
- and a plan for partnership between schools and other agencies.

Targets, target-setting and attainment in relation to action plans are new experiences for teachers. Some schools have expressed concerns that if targets were attained they might lose their DEIS status, which brings with it additional resources and funding. The three-year action plans are an attempt to pull many strands together to assist the educationally-disadvantaged pupil. The primary concern of schools was to write an action plan in the first place. To implement, review, evaluate and monitor these plans is another series of challenges.

The programmes recommended to improve literacy and numeracy levels will take time, resources and training to implement effectively. The Reading Recovery programme requires a year's training for the teacher and then is put into practice with the child in a series of intensive half hour sessions. However, there is limited availability of this course. Reading Recovery is an early intervention programme designed for children who are at risk in literacy after one year of schooling. Early diagnosis, therefore, is essential. Even though most teachers teaching educationally disadvantaged children could identify the children in the highest risk category very early in the child's school life, it has only recently become accepted that this is the case. Advice given previously was that children should not be identified until the end of the infant cycle.

Many teachers claim that children at risk of educational disadvantage can be identified with a reasonable degree of certainty at the end of first term in Junior Infants. However, the “Staged Approach” now being recommended for meeting the needs of pupils with SEN needs may slow up any identification process. Children in DEIS schools below the 20th percentile may be experiencing educational disadvantage but may also have SEN needs.

The Rural Coordinators are centrally involved in the DEIS plan in rural schools. On the practical side, they were involved centrally in administering, collecting and returning Baseline Data tests (May 2007) and many principals make use of their expertise in advising, assisting or administering standardised tests.

In summary, from the assessment aspect, DEIS has brought some new elements to the Irish primary school system. Standardised tests have been a reality in the majority of schools for some time now but the rigorous analysis, interpretation and the subsequent action plans for literacy and numeracy in DEIS schools is a new aspect of assessment. Baseline data collection in reading and maths in selected DEIS schools in 2007 and again proposed for 2010 is also new. Three year action plans in literacy and numeracy will require resources, monitoring and evaluation. It is likely that DEIS schools will do further screening or diagnostic testing to identify children that need most help, as these are the children that the literacy and numeracy resources are to be targeted towards. DEIS appears to emphasise summative assessment rather than formative assessment which is very useful in planning for teaching and learning. There is a concern that the emphasis on summative assessment in DEIS, may leave DEIS schools with less time and energy for formative assessment.

Appendix III

INTO Questionnaire on Assessment 2008

ASSESSMENT
INTO Questionnaire on School Policy
All responses are strictly private and confidential

School Profile

1. **Size of School** (number of pupils) _____

2. **Size of School** (number of teachers) _____

3. **Location** ___ City ___ Suburban ___ Town ___ Rural

4. **Gender type of school** ___ Mixed ___ Boys ___ Girls ___ Jnr Mixed/Girls

5. **Type of school** ___ Full Stream (inf – 6th) ___ Infants/Junior ___ Middle/Senior

6. **Disadvantaged Status** ___ Yes ___ No
 ___ DEIS Primary Urban 1 ___ DEIS Primary Urban 2
 ___ DEIS Primary Rural ___ Ex-Disadvantaged

7. **Teaching through Irish** ___ Yes ___ No
 If 'Yes' ___ Gaeltacht ___ Gaelscoil

Assessment Policy

8. Does your school have a written policy on assessment? ___ **Yes** ___ **No**

9. If 'YES', does the policy address the following?

	Yes	No
Assessment for learning	___	___
Assessment of learning	___	___
Standardised assessment	___	___
Diagnostic testing and screening	___	___
Peer / Self-assessment	___	___
Other : _____		

10. Did your school receive the NCCA Guidelines on Assessment? ___ **Yes** ___ **No**
 If 'YES', has your school found them useful? ___ **Yes** ___ **No**

11. What impact, if any, did **Circular 0138/2006 – Supporting Assessment in Primary Schools** have on your school policy on assessment?

Standardised Assessment

12. In what classes has your school decided to carry out the obligatory Literacy & Maths standardised tests?

___ End of 1 st class	OR	___ Beginning of 2 nd class
___ End of 4 th class	OR	___ Beginning of 5 th class
___ No decision made		

13. Does your school have a policy of carrying out standardised tests in **English Literacy** in other classes? ___ Yes ___ No

If 'YES', please indicate in which class(es)

Jnr Inf Snr Inf 1st Class 2nd Class
 3rd Class 4th Class 5th Class 6th Class

If 'YES', at what stage of the year? _____

If 'YES', how frequently? Twice a year Once a year
 Every 2 years Other _____

14. Does your school have a policy of carrying out standardised tests in **Mathematics** in other classes? Yes No

If 'YES', please indicate in which class(es)

Jnr Inf Snr Inf 1st Class 2nd Class
 3rd Class 4th Class 5th Class 6th Class

If 'YES', at what stage of the year?

If 'YES', how frequently? Twice a year
 Once a year
 Every 2 years
 Other _____

15. For what purposes are the results of standardised tests used in your school?
(*tick all that apply*)

To inform other teachers about pupils' progress _____
 To inform parents about their child's progress _____
 To group pupils for instructional purposes _____
 To identify pupils who have learning difficulties _____
 To identify pupils' strengths and weaknesses _____
 To compare the school to national performance _____
 To monitor the school's progress from year to year _____
 To identify aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved _____
 Other _____

16. In what other curriculum area, if any, would your school like to use standardised tests?

Assessment for Screening and Diagnosis

17. Please indicate what tests/forms of assessment are used in your school
(*Please tick all that apply*)

Sigma T	<input type="checkbox"/>	Teacher Observation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Micra T	<input type="checkbox"/>	Norm reference tests	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drumcondra English	<input type="checkbox"/>	Teacher Designed Tests	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drumcondra Maths	<input type="checkbox"/>	Pupil Profiles	<input type="checkbox"/>
BIAP	<input type="checkbox"/>	Basic number tests	<input type="checkbox"/>
MIST	<input type="checkbox"/>	Criterion Reference tests	<input type="checkbox"/>
NRIT	<input type="checkbox"/>	Aston Index	<input type="checkbox"/>
RAIN	<input type="checkbox"/>	NEALE Analysis	<input type="checkbox"/>
Diagnostic Reading Analysis	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Marino or other word recognition tests	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Schonell or other spelling tests	<input type="checkbox"/>		

Other : _____

18. Does your school screen in order to plan work schemes?

If 'YES', When? _____

Who conducts the screening? _____

What tests are used? _____

19. Does your school screen in order to allocate pupils for **Learning Support / Resource Teaching**?

If 'YES', When? _____

Who conducts the screening? _____

What tests are used? _____

20. How are children selected for psychological assessment? _____

Recording

21. How are the results of tests recorded in your school?

	<u>Central Storage</u>	<u>Classroom Storage</u>
Standardised Tests	___	___
Diagnostic Tests	___	___
Class Tests	___	___

22. For how long are the results of tests kept in the school?

Standardised Tests	Diagnostic Tests	Class Tests
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Reporting to Parents

23. *Please tick all that apply:*

Do you report to parents on:

Standardised Tests ___ Screening Tests ___
Pupils' progress ___ Diagnostic Tests ___

24. How often does your school provide written reports of pupils' progress to parents?

Once a year ___ Twice a year ___ More often ___ Never ___

25. At what stage of the year are written reports given to parents (if applicable)?

26. In what manner are the results of standardised tests shared with parents?

Written only ___
Oral only ___
Both ___

27. How are written reports distributed to parents?

By post, at school's expense ___
By post, at parents' expense ___
Brought home to parent by the child ___
Other _____

28. How often does your school hold formal parent / teacher meetings?

Once a year ___ Twice a year ___ More often ___ Never ___

29. At what stage(s) during the year are parent / teacher meetings held?

30. What other mechanisms, if any, exist in your school regarding communicating information to parents regarding their children's progress?

In-service

31. Did teachers from your school attend the in-service seminars on standardised assessment organised by the PCSP? Yes ___ No ___

If 'NO', why not? _____

If 'YES', how many? _____

If 'YES', what teachers attended? _____
(e.g. Class teacher, LS teacher etc.)

If 'YES', when? _____

If 'YES', how useful was the seminar?

Very useful ___ Somewhat useful___ Not useful ___ Not useful at all ___

Please comment on the seminars:

32. In relation to Assessment, what form of further professional development is required by teachers in your school?

33. In your opinion, is Assessment fulfilling a useful role?

Comments

34. Any further or general comments you would like to make on Assessment:

Appendix IV

Additional information from the INTO survey on Assessment

Table 10 Purpose of standardised test results

Q15 For what purposes are the results of standardised tests used in your school?	Yes Freq	% of total (n=189)	Missing Freq
To inform other teachers about pupils' progress	182	96.3	7
To inform parents about their child's progress	167	88.4	22
To group pupils for instructional purposes	125	66.1	64
To identify pupils who have learning difficulties	183	96.8	6
To identify pupils' strengths and weaknesses	166	87.8	23
To compare the school to national performance	86	45.5	103
To monitor the school's progress from year to year	125	66.1	64
To identify aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved	145	76.7	44

Table 11 Other curricular areas schools would like to use standardised tests

Q16 In what other curricular area would your school like to use standardised tests	Frequency
Gaeilge	49
SESE	7
Spelling	5
PE	3
Geography	2
All Areas	2
English	2
General Knowledge	1
History	1
Maths	1
Oral Language	1
Language Assessment for Foreign Nationals	1
Memory Skills	1
None	12

Table 12 Test/forms of assessment used

Q17 Please indicate what tests/forms of assessment are used in your school	Yes Freq	% of total (n=189)
Teacher observation	180	95
Teacher designed tests	170	90
MIST	162	86
Sigma T	147	78
Micra T	143	76
Basic number tests	125	66
Schonell or other spelling tests	112	59
NEALE analysis	105	56
Drumcondra English	104	55
NRIT	97	51
Pupil profiles	93	49
Drumcondra Maths	75	40
Aston Index	79	42
BIAP	59	31
Marino or other word recognition tests	56	30
Norm reference tests	55	29
RAIN	48	25
Diagnostic reading analysis	46	24
Criterion reference tests	42	22
SPAR	22	12

Appendix V

INTO Assessment Policy (2005)⁷

Purpose of assessment

The primary purpose of assessment should be to guide teaching to improve learning. Therefore, pupil assessment is an integral aspect of the teaching/learning process. However, other purposes of assessment include the identification of pupils with learning difficulties, reporting to parents, system evaluation, and assessment for the purposes of accountability.

Assessments, including teacher designed tests, standardised tests and diagnostic tests, in addition to teacher judgement, are used to identify pupils in need of additional teaching support in the areas of literacy and numeracy. Pupils with special needs are also assessed by psychologists, with a view to identifying their precise needs and designing suitable educational programmes for them.

Parents are entitled to information regarding the progress of their children in school. This information is often given at parent / teacher meetings and in end-of-year reports. Much of the information given to parents is based on assessments carried out by the teachers in class, including teacher observation, teacher designed tests and standardised tests.

The State is also entitled to information in relation to progress in the education system. Schools are accountable to the State for the use of resources and for the provision of education to its pupils. For the purposes of accountability, the inspectorate evaluates schools (at primary level) every four years approximately, and furnishes a report to the school on the school's work. A copy of this report is kept in the Department's files. In order to assess progress at system level, the Department of Education and Science conducts surveys of literacy and numeracy achievement, in a random selection of schools, every five years. Ireland has also participated in international assessments in the areas of literacy and numeracy.

Raising standards

Teachers will always strive to improve their teaching and the learning of pupils. If assessment is to improve learning it needs to do more than merely give grades and marks which tend to lower the self-esteem of many pupils. Teachers are of the view that assessment will not improve learning if it emphasises comparing pupils with others which is demoralising for less successful learners. There is now strong evidence that formative assessment (assessment for teaching and learning) can indeed raise standards and improve learning, while having positive effects on pupils. For instance, the Assessment Reform Group in Britain conducted research which indicates that formative assessment strategies do indeed raise

⁷ This policy was prepared by the CEC following the Minister's announcement to introduce mandatory standardised testing in all primary schools. It is dated 21 January 2005.

standards of attainment – particularly for children of lower ability – if the following five key factors are present:

- Effective feedback is given to pupils;
- Pupils are actively involved in their own learning;
- Teaching is adjusted to take account of the results of assessment;
- Account is taken of the profound influences assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils; and
- Pupils are able to assess themselves and understand how to improve.

Ironically, summative assessment which seeks to show that targets are met, has produced, in Britain, no improvement in teaching and learning which is required if standards are to be raised.

The main conclusion of the Assessment Reform Group's research was that standards rise through good teaching and learning rather than through summative assessment or short-term measures to boost attainment.

On the positive side there are indications that some countries have learned their lessons from failed testing experiments. In some formerly high-stakes testing regimes the light has dawned that testing cannot raise standards. In July 2004, in Wales, the Education Minister announced, following an expert inquiry, that existing tests would be scrapped. The Minister, Jane Davison said they were unhelpful, put teachers under pressure, narrowed the curriculum and had a negative effect on teaching and learning. Parents, pupils and teachers in the recent Scottish National Debate on Education argued so strongly that assessment for monitoring purposes totally dominated classroom activities with the result that the Scottish Executive has begun moving away from high-stakes testing towards assessment methods that support learning and teaching in classrooms. Testing for seven year olds in England is to be radically changed with more emphasis to be placed on work done throughout the year. The decision to bring in these changes came after research in 5,000 schools showed that teacher assessment, supported by a more flexible test, was more accurate than raw test results. The research shows that parents, worried about test stress, have more confidence in the judgement of their child's teacher, whom they know and trust, than others whose motives are mistrusted and whose professionalism is unknown. These systems of education are returning to where Ireland is now in relation to developing an assessment policy and practice, where the teacher is central to the process.

Assessment for teaching and learning

Until relatively recently educators' notions of assessment tended to focus almost exclusively on summative assessment of some kind which took place after the process of teaching and learning. Summative assessment is normally associated with structured testing like standardised testing but even less structured forms of assessment – such as teacher-designed tasks and tests – have also been summative because they took place at the end of some stage of learning rather than during the process of learning.

More recently, teachers have become familiar with assessment which is more child-centred, for instance, records of achievement, work samples, achievement folders or portfolios. Many teachers have now progressed to forms of assessment which give a more comprehensive picture of the teaching and learning process. Teachers have always used their observation to assess and describe the process of teaching and learning but there is now a body of work which helps teachers to use formative assessment strategies in the classroom.

Formative assessment, or assessment for teaching and learning as it is commonly known, focuses on the real and immediate learning activities of students and is supported by teachers who carry out such assessments on a regular basis based upon their views of how young children think and learn. Assessment for teaching entails the collection of detailed information about the children which enables the teacher to plan and teach effectively in order to maximise children's future learning. It involves one or more of a range of assessment activities from informal observation to oral, practical or written tasks. Diagnostic assessment is often used as part of formative assessment insofar as it informs future teaching and learning activities, but usually it involves the use of specific procedures such as standardised tests or other diagnostic instruments. Diagnostic assessment is usually applied when more general formative assessment fails to indicate activities from which children can learn.

Educationalists in many countries have expressed concerns that traditional standardised assessment (and, indeed, teacher-devised tests) has tended to focus on rote learning rather than on higher level thinking skills. This has led to a move towards the blending of assessment and instruction which would help pupils to be flexible, adaptive and able to change in response to rapidly developing and complex technological changes. A number of newer assessment techniques have been developed which seek to help teachers to plan activities which address the real issues which confront young learners. These include:

- Adaptive testing (testing to provide material at a level with which a pupil can cope);
- Dynamic assessment (assessment which emphasises the role of higher order skills and how they should be explicitly taught and assessed) and;
- Assessment for learning (assessment which emphasises the importance of high self-esteem in successful learning).

The move towards the use of formative assessment has been prompted by research into the role of motivation and self-esteem in children's learning. This research has shown that children's attributions for success and failure are associated with self-esteem and self-esteem is seen as influencing achievement through its effect on motivation. Children who have high self-esteem are motivated to try harder and to persist with difficult tasks while children whose self-esteem is low tend to reduce their efforts or to give up altogether on difficult tasks. Children who perceive themselves as less able tend to give up trying because they feel that there is little to be gained by trying and nothing to be lost by not trying.

One of the major inhibiting factors of norm-referenced standardised tests is that they can have a demoralising effect on less successful learners through comparing them with their more successful peers. The demoralising effect which summative assessment can have on less successful learners has led to calls for a movement away from an emphasis on summative assessment in other education systems. In England for instance, a group of assessment academics calling themselves the Assessment Reform Group decided to investigate the efficacy of formative assessment which involved aspects such as sharing learning goals, pupil self-evaluation and feedback. The researchers found that formative assessment strategies did indeed raise standards of attainment with a greater effect for children of lower ability. The researchers identified one recurring theme – the importance of high self-esteem – and five key factors:

- A recognition of the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils, both of which are crucial influences on learning;
- The active involvement of pupils in their own learning;
- The importance of effective feedback to pupils;
- The need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve;
- The need to adjust teaching to take account of the results of assessment.

Irish teachers have begun to use formative assessment based on the type of principles mentioned above and base their reporting to parents on those principles. There is also very recent Irish research into the use of formative assessment in Irish primary schools. There is, however, a need for in-service to share these teachers' practice with other teachers and to link it with Irish and international research to show how formative assessment strategies might look in the classroom.

Standardised testing

Standardised tests used in Ireland (Micra-T, Sigma-T, Drumcondra Tests) are norm referenced tests standardised on an Irish population, and allow teachers to benchmark any pupil's performance against standards nationally. Standardised tests, when properly designed, carefully administered and judiciously interpreted can enhance teacher professionalism by enabling teachers to make more informed decisions regarding how best to instruct pupils. The information obtained from standardised tests can serve a number of functions which include the monitoring of progress of pupils and tracking changes in performance over time. This information is useful for reporting to parents on a child's progress, and for planning teaching programmes at either class or individual level. The results of standardised tests can also help teachers in identifying pupils with difficulties in either reading or mathematics, and in

quantifying these difficulties. Diagnostic tests can then be administered to determine the nature and causes of the difficulties, enabling the planning of appropriate teaching interventions, including learning support or resource teaching. However, standardised tests should not be accorded undue importance in making such decisions for a comprehensive appraisal of a child's level of, for instance, reading. The results ought to be combined with other strands of evidence that teachers possess arising from other sources of informal and formal assessment.

The importance of standardised assessment in overcoming learning difficulties can be overstated, however, since there is a tendency for the public and policy makers to imply that identifying a problem will automatically solve it. The difficulties surrounding learning problems no longer relate to identification through assessment – rather they relate to the quality and the timing of interventions to help pupils with learning problems. There is a huge body of evidence that suggests that the optimum age for interventions to help children with reading difficulties is around six years of age – and it is worth stating that there are no standardised reading tests for children of that age. Also, it is worth stating that there are children who have been identified as having low literacy levels even after they had the benefit of intensive interventions.

Evaluative assessment

Evaluative assessment can have a role to play both in the provision of effective teaching and learning and in monitoring the success of the education system generally. At school level evaluative assessment can complement formative assessment in the areas of curriculum and organisational planning. At system level, evaluative assessment is concerned with monitoring the performance of the educational system at a more general level. The results of such assessment have an important contribution to make to the effective operation of the primary education system. The results of such evaluation can be useful in informing decisions in the following areas such as, curriculum review, pre-service education, in-service education, provision of resources, and the needs of second level education.

When evaluating the system, it is important to identify assessment procedures that cause the minimum interference with children's learning. Current research indicates that selective random testing of schools or pupils can produce information in areas such as literacy and mathematics whose accuracy and reliability is just as trustworthy as that resulting from national testing while avoiding such educationally undesirable outcomes as pupil stress, curriculum distortion, educationally inappropriate methodology, manipulation of test procedures and inappropriate decisions on the retention and promotion of pupils.

School reports carried out by school inspectors every four or five years enable the Department to monitor the effectiveness of individual schools in fulfilling the educational needs of children across the full spectrum of the curriculum while at the same time contributing to the school's own process of evaluation. The combined experience of the inspectorate can provide a profile of attainment in the primary education system and of the general

effectiveness of the system which, although not expressed in exact measurement terms affords an evaluation that reflects the mediation of the curriculum more truly than the standardised testing of pupils in some of its narrower aspects.

Difficulties in forming public policies on assessment

The history of formation of public policies that aim for changes in curricula and assessment suggests that difficulties arise if:

- Curriculum and assessment are developed separately;
- That pace of change is too fast;
- Teachers feel they do not have ownership of the new practices or;
- The changes are made by diktat.

A further complication in the introduction of any new assessment practices is that the public generally (and policy makers in particular) have an imperfect understanding of the functions and limitations of assessment and testing and of their interactions with effective learning.

The attempt to introduce curriculum profiles in Irish primary schools had many of the weaknesses mentioned above. It also failed to ensure that the use of curriculum profiles would facilitate the easy recording of the maximum amount of information involving a minimum of teaching time. Teachers felt that profiles would make unacceptable demands on teachers' allocation for teaching and that this would not enhance pupils' learning. They welcomed the profiles' facilitation of a structured approach to recording teachers' ongoing information on observation and assessment but felt that the profiles failed to address the issues of accessibility, reliability and manageability.

The need to develop a system which facilitates the easy recording of assessment information has still not been met and it is unreasonable to expect each school to develop its own system.

Accountability assessment

According to the experience of other countries, testing for accountability is fraught with difficulty. When assessment results are mandated to reach a wider audience than the teacher who administered the assessment, assessment becomes progressively more "high stakes", where there are usually serious consequences attaching to the outcomes of testing. For example, the teacher's professional reputation, prestige or even promotional prospects or the enrolment levels and future viability of a school may be effected by the results of assessment. High-stakes testing, can often lead to teachers beginning to restrict what they teach to those topics in a curricular area which are likely to appear on the test paper, irrespective of their intrinsic educational value. The taught curriculum therefore, often contracts to conform to the assessed curriculum and areas of the curriculum for which assessment tests are more easily developed (reading, mathematics) are likely to command greater attention from teachers if testing takes place only in these areas and where the results of these tests carry significant consequences.

There are sound educational reasons for not publishing test results or for holding schools accountable based on pupils' achievement in tests. Valid conclusions about the effectiveness of schools cannot be drawn from test scores. Statistically valid distinctions among schools cannot be made and comparisons of schools may not correct for differences in student intake, or for different conditions under which schools operate. Schools which are often seen as effective often engage in "cream skimming", reinforcing their dominance, and schools which are perceived to be poor performers, are left with the vulnerable and challenging disadvantaged and special needs pupils (World Bank, 1995).

INTO position

Assessment has an important function at many levels of the primary education system ranging from its formative, diagnostic and summative roles at classroom and school level to its evaluative role at national level. If the education system is to be effective each form of assessment should be accorded its appropriate importance and legitimacy and that the functions of the different forms are clearly defined and acknowledged. Appropriate procedures must be employed to fulfil the functions of the different forms, thereby avoiding the misuse of assessment which leads to the distortion of curriculum and methodology. There are however, a number of concerns which need to be addressed by the teaching profession.

- 1 There are concerns about the quality of some of the testing currently undertaken in schools.
- 2 There is some anxiety in relation to the quality of the information being passed from primary to second-level schools and the manner in which it is done.
- 3 The importance of assessment data in informing parents of pupils' progress needs to be reiterated.
- 4 Questions have also been raised by the inspectorate, among others, regarding the timing, the regularity and the recording of attainment data in schools.

The **INTO's position** on assessment of pupils at primary level is as follows:

Incareer development

- A comprehensive programme of incareer development should be introduced enabling teachers to become familiar with the methodology involved in assessment. Incareer development programmes should also help familiarise teachers with standardised assessment systems. The process of recording and of developing effective communication techniques should also be addressed in incareer development programmes.

School policies

- Schools should be facilitated to develop policies on the formative assessment of their pupils. The application of tests or any alternative system must not make disproportionate claims on class time or pupil activities. Schools will determine the timing and regularity of the use of various testing procedures which meet the needs of their own school. Recording and reporting the outcomes of pupil assessment will also form part of school policy.

Screening and diagnostic tests

- In addition to teacher judgement, standardised tests are often used as screening tests in all classes, in order to determine what pupils may need additional support for learning. Diagnostic tests may then be used to assist in identifying particular problems pupils may be experiencing. The Senior Infants' class is the optimum time to initiate intervention for learning difficulties. However, schools should regularly and continuously carry out assessments of pupils with a view to identifying pupils who need additional support.
- Appropriate diagnostic tests should be developed for administration to children in senior infants, such tests to be applied only in circumstances where more general formative assessment fails to identify areas where a small group of children may be experiencing particular difficulties. Such tests should be available in both English and Irish. The purpose of such testing should be to provide access as early as possible to appropriate intervention for those children who present with particular difficulties in certain curricular areas. As part of an overall assessment programme, sufficient resources and back up services should be provided, as of right, to help each child overcome his or her identified difficulties.
- Access to an appropriate support service should be made available to all children who require help in the various curricular areas, irrespective of geographical location or size of school.

Standardised tests

- Irish-normed standardised tests or other appropriate screening instruments should be made available for administration in all classes or class groupings. Tests and screening instruments should also be developed for administration to pupils who are learning through the medium of Irish as either a first or a second language. Such tests should be made available to schools free of charge with a view to enabling teachers, in line with their respective school policies, to implement formative assessment programmes in their schools. Within each school's formative assessment policy, provision may be made for the administration of standardised tests in relevant curriculum areas. The timing of such assessments should be a matter for decision at school level.

- Pupils' achievements in standardised tests should be recorded and retained by the school. Inspectors should have access to such results, when carrying out school evaluations. Parents should also be informed of the achievement of their own children, vis-a-vis national standards and class or school standards.
- The administration of tests for the purpose of aggregating assessment outcomes for each school is totally undesirable, inappropriate and unacceptable because of the danger that it will narrow the focus of the curriculum, distort the purpose of assessment and cause irreparable damage to the pupil teacher relationship, where confidentiality and trust is so much a part of the teaching learning process.
- The results of standardised tests alone should not be used for making decisions in relation to educational provision for any individual child, as there is always a margin of error, and should therefore be used in conjunction with other assessment information and teacher judgement.

System evaluation

- Teachers will continue to cooperate fully in the administration of regular assessment of the performance of a sample of schools with a view to providing information on an aggregate basis to the Department of Education and to the general public, in all curricular areas.
- Teachers will also continue to co-operate with regular school evaluation processes such as tuairiscí scoile and whole school evaluation.

Reporting

- Guidelines need to be made available to schools in relation to recording and reporting assessment processes and outcomes. Reporting templates need to be designed to ensure consistency throughout the system, with templates designed for reporting to parents, reporting to other teachers and schools, reporting to the Department of Education and reporting to Health and/or psychological services.

Summary

In summary, the INTO *supports*:

- √ The systematic use of formative assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning
- √ Development of formative assessment procedures, to improve teaching and learning
- √ Early diagnosis of learning difficulties leading to appropriate intervention
- √ Standardised tests being used for purposes of formative assessment and for assisting in the identification of pupils with learning difficulties
- √ Regularity and timing of the organisation of all assessment, including standardised tests, to be decided at school level
- √ Recorded information on pupils' assessments, to be retained in the school, for reference by teachers and inspectors
- √ Information to parents on their own child's achievements, including achievements in standardised tests.
- √ The forwarding of information of individual pupil achievement, including achievements in standardised tests, to post-primary schools, to which the pupils are transferring, (subject to legislation)
- √ School evaluation through regular 'tuairiscí scoile'
- √ System evaluation through regular national assessments in the various curricular areas, including literacy and numeracy, in a random sample of schools

The INTO is *opposed* to

- ✗ The aggregation of assessment results on a school by school basis
- ✗ The recording of pupils' achievement in the pupil data system
- ✗ All forms of high-stakes testing
- ✗ Any use of any test for a purpose, other than the purpose for which the test was administered
- ✗ Assessment procedures that impinge excessively on teaching time
- ✗ The mandatory use of any one form of assessment

Part 2

Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education

Tullamore

November 2008

7

Presentations

Current practice and policy in assessment in Irish primary schools

Pat Scanlan, Education Committee

I'm sure that as teachers of science ye all know about sun spot cycles. You'll be delighted to hear that I'm going to give a lecture on them – no! No, even though I'd love to talk Astronomy with you - I'd better stick to my brief. However, for those of you who may not be in the know, there is a cycle of solar activity based on an eleven year period.

What has this got to do with assessment, I hear you think. Well, this is the third Consultative Conference with assessment on the agenda and my third presentation on the topic! The previous two were in 1986 and 1997. Do the maths!

So I hope, this means that assessment can be safely put to bed until 2019. By then, we should have been living in a perfect world for three years. How do I know this? No, it's not astrology! It's all in that agreement *Towards 2016*, which all the social partners and government have signed up to and we can depend on them. Can't we? - At least we can depend on the sun spots!

History

OK. We've done the science and the maths for now. Let's go on to a little history that has some resonance to the here and now. The economic recession back in the eighties led indirectly to the changes in assessment we are seeing today. The government then raised the pupil teacher ratio to shed jobs and were stymied by a successful campaign from the education partners. However, a review of primary education was set in place which involved committees and debates and reports that led eventually to the NCCA and the revised curriculum.

The revised curriculum places emphasis on both assessment for learning and assessment of learning. The NCCA guidelines on assessment, issued earlier this year, are most welcome and most useful but to fully implement the revised curriculum, it is necessary not just to have had in-service in the various subjects areas – good and all as that may have been – but also in-service in assessment - techniques, uses, interpretations, planning, policy making, reporting, review and evaluation.

I cannot understand the logic of providing a comprehensive programme of in-service to teachers in each and every individual aspect of the revised curriculum and then failing to finish the job they started by ignoring the

one overarching and uniting element – assessment – that if adequately provided and implemented would guarantee the overall and future success of the Primary School Curriculum.

Not a lot of people know this but another of the Minister's petty cutbacks has been the cancelling of a pilot professional development initiative in assessment which was planned by the PPDS.

I fervently hope that the revised curriculum which is accepted by all as being generally successful so far, will not fall at the final hurdle and end up the way of the 1971 curriculum, which was never fully implemented.

Geography

At this point, I intended to go on to geography - you see how cross-curricular I am - and introduce a name that appears a number of times in the discussion document - that of Michael O'Leary. But I discovered that it was not referring to the famous Ryanair Michael O'Leary and not even to the second most famous Michael O'Leary (former Minister of Education). Rather it refers to Dr Michael O'Leary, Education Lecturer in St. Patrick's College of Education in Drumcondra and a former primary teacher, who in my opinion should be famous and if both curriculum and assessment go the right way, may well be and deservedly so!

I'm sorry, I have no picture of him and I've never met or heard him speak but I've read him and I urge you to do the same. A good place to start would be the article referred to in the references of this discussion document - an article from *Oideas*, the journal of the Inspectorate, published in 2006.

Positive developments in assessment

O'Leary defines assessment as 'the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using and communicating information about all aspects of a learner's development (social, emotional, physical, cognitive) to aid **decision making**.' And that'll do for me. I hope you agree.

He goes on to reflect on formative assessment or assessment for learning and outlines why it is the most important type of assessment that links the teacher, the pupils, the classroom and the curriculum through planning, strategies and methodologies based on informed decision making.

He is backed up by international research - check out Black and Wiliam's meta-analysis – which covers a huge body of work in this area - also in the references. This shows that the judicious use of formative assessment - in many countries, at many age levels and in many varied circumstances - was the single most potent means of improving achievement.

Diagnostic assessment

By the way, I'm not ignoring diagnostic assessment. There are more diagnostic tests available to teachers at every level than any other kind of test. The following tests are universally used for infants and there are a whole plethora used for SEN.

Assessment at Infant Level

- The Infant Reading Tests
- The Belfield Infant Assessment Profile (BIAP)
- The Middle Infant Screening Test (MIST)
- Quest

Assessment for Special Needs

- Drumcondra Tests (Primary Mathematics and Primary Reading)
- Micra-T
- Sigma-T
- Marino & Schonell Graded Word Reading Tests
- Spar Reading Test
- RAIN Sentence Test
- Neale Analysis of Reading Ability
- Diagnostic Spelling Tests
- The Schonell Graded Spelling Test
- Spar Maths Tests
- The Bristol, Nottingham and Staffordshire Number Tests

But while diagnostic assessment is often seen as a distinct entity and the precinct of specialist teachers – it is in fact a sub-section of assessment for learning and a very effective area of formative assessment – and as such must be accessible to as many pupils and teachers as possible and a vital element of every school's policy on assessment.

Evaluative assessment

Evaluative assessment can perform a dual role – at both school level and at system level. Schools do need to take stock and some form of self-evaluation should be incorporated into assessment policies.

School reports carried out by the inspectorate and the regular, random testing of schools in some curricular areas provides an accurate picture of standards within the system.

Some criticisms regarding the use of assessment and the applications of results in schools, while having some basis in fact, are unfair in the light of lack of in-service and time for planning.

The INTO does realise that there are a number of concerns that need to be addressed by the teaching profession and these are highlighted in the INTO policy document published in 2005.

Concerns

- There are concerns about the quality of some of the testing currently undertaken in schools.
- There is some anxiety in relation to the quality of the information being passed from primary to second level schools and the manner in which it is done.
- The importance of assessment data in informing parents of pupils' progress needs to be reiterated.
- Questions have also been raised by the inspectorate, among others, regarding the timing, the regularity and the recording of attainment data in schools.

(INTO 2005)

You may wish to reflect yourselves on what progress has been made in each of these areas since 2005. By the way, the full policy document is an appendix to this discussion document.

Negative assessment

While emphasising the importance, indeed the supremacy, of formative assessment – O'Leary does not ignore summative assessment or assessment of learning – neither do I. It is both necessary and useful. Teachers, schools and the education system need it.

The danger is an over-reliance and/or a political use of test information. This has been the case throughout the United States and the United Kingdom (though Scotland never opted in and Wales have recently opted out and some states are having second thoughts).

The result of an over-reliance on assessment of learning in these two jurisdictions, at least, has led to an increase in test scores in the areas tested – but a narrowing of the curriculum as schools try to improve their standings by cramming in the tested areas.

The education systems in the US and in the UK are led not by educationalists but by politicians who have an unwavering faith in the ability of testing to push up standards. The *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 in the US has merely led to NO CHILD LEFT UNTESTED and OFSTED in the UK (the inspectorate) as recently as September of this year have criticised the government's testing regime for narrowing children's understanding.

The Report stated:

“that there was evidence to suggest that strategies to improve test and examination performance, including ‘booster’ lessons, revision classes and extensive intervention, coupled with a heavy emphasis on ‘teaching to the test’, were successful in preparing pupils to gain the qualifications but were not equipping them well enough for their futures”

(Ofsted 2008)

I am in no doubt that the inspectorate here are of like mind with ourselves – that there is a legitimate need for summative assessment and

the results can be used both at local and national level to influence policy and decision making – but keep the politicians out of it – we’ve seen what they have done to the country in general.

Every farmer in the country knows (in fact, every dog in the street knows) that it doesn’t matter how often you weigh the pig – the only way to fatten it, is to feed it!

Maybe the slogan for the US should be No Child Left Unweighed and No Child Fat on Education!

A balanced approach

O’Leary argues for a balance between assessment for learning and assessment of learning.

He states that it is a prerequisite of any system ‘that we put a plan in place that will ensure that all teachers become highly skilled in classroom assessment’ i.e. formative assessment. He goes on to say that teacher educators and inspectors would require similar up-skilling!

Finally, writing in 2006, O’Leary opposed mandatory testing citing the oppression it has caused in the UK and US and the fact that it would be redundant if informed and adequate formative assessment could be universally achieved in our education system.

INTO survey

A survey to ascertain current assessment practice in schools was issued by the committee in early 2008 and as such is probably slightly out of date! However, it does give a good snapshot of practice at that point in time.

More than three-quarters of schools had developed a written policy on assessment. In these schools, assessment ***of*** and ***for*** learning and diagnostic and standardised assessment are overwhelmingly addressed.

Table 13 School assessment policy

If School has a Policy on Assessment, does it address the following?	YES	NO
	%	%
Assessment for learning	82.9	17.1
Assessment of learning	91.0	9.0
Standardised assessment	99.3	0.7
Diagnostic testing and screening	98.6	1.4
Peer/Self-assessment	52.3	47.7

Most schools found the NCCA assessment guidelines useful (91%).

In relation to the introduction of mandatory standardised testing, schools had no difficulty in implementing same and more than four-fifths reported using these tests in most classes - as seen here:

Table 14 Classes in which standardised tests are carried out

Classes - Which class(es)	English Yes	% of total (n=189)	Maths Yes	% of total (n=189)
Junior Infants	24	12.7	9	4.8
Senior Infants	103	54.5	21	11.1
1 st Class	150	79.4	148	78.3
2 nd Class	162	85.7	161	85.2
3 rd Class	169	89.4	167	88.4
4 th Class	159	84.1	160	84.7
5 th Class	167	88.4	167	88.4
6 th Class	162	85.7	157	83.1

Tests are usually carried out at either the start or end of year and schools have listed a variety of purposes for their use as illustrated here:

Table 15 Purpose of standardised test results

	Yes (freq)	% of total (n=189)
To inform other teachers about pupils' progress	182	96.3
To inform parents about their child's progress	167	88.4
To group pupils for instructional purposes	125	66.1
To identify pupils who have learning difficulties	183	96.8
To identify pupils' strengths and weaknesses	166	87.8
To compare the school to national performance	86	45.5
To monitor the school's progress from year to year	125	66.1
To identify aspects of instruction of the curriculum that could be improved	145	76.7

It can be seen that teachers use results for formative, summative and diagnostic purposes.

Teachers are not in favour of having standardised tests in other areas of the curriculum except for Gaelige where there is a real need for them, especially in schools teaching through the medium of Irish. If any of you are among those, I have good news for you, since the ERC has developed same and they are currently being piloted.

At least four-fifths of schools reported standardised test results to parents (this may be higher as the remaining fifth did not answer as opposed to saying 'no').

The vast majority of schools provide written reports to parents on pupils' progress mostly at the end of the year and a similar number hold parent / teacher meetings during the school year.

Many of the almost 90% of responding schools that attended assessment in-service found it useful, but expressed the view that all teachers would need to have access to such in-service, if assessment policy in schools is to develop and evolve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that schools and teachers need support in developing and implementing policies on assessment to meet their needs and those of the education system.

1. The revised curriculum requires a new and more involved approach to both planning and assessment and professional development for all teachers is just, if not more, important than that previously allotted for the curriculum areas.
2. There has been shown to be a great and growing use of standardised tests in schools, apart altogether from those that are mandatory. Many teachers require professional development in this area and schools need to develop clear and unambiguous policies regarding reporting to parents and retaining results and materials. There is also a need for standardised tests in Gaelige.
3. We all recognise the need for system evaluation and we support the present method of national monitoring by sampling on a regular basis. If you're invited to participate in the National Assessments next May, we urge you to accept the invitation.
4. Assessment for screening and diagnosis forms one of the school's best tools for identifying and remediating children with special needs. However, schools need the support of outside agencies immediately and it only stands to reason that SEN children should be protected from any education cuts.
5. Finally, and in my opinion most importantly, professional development - and not just limited to standardised testing. Remember, O'Leary recommends this for lecturers and inspectors also! It is not only the logical follow-on to the introduction and the implementation of the revised curriculum. It is a prerequisite for a successful curriculum. We all have too much invested in primary education to allow any complacency to slip in and derail us from our goal of providing the best education possible for our children.

Let's develop and use all forms of assessment – formative, summative, diagnostic and evaluative towards that end. But above all let us expand our knowledge and use of assessment for learning

The Assessment Process - current practice and perspectives in Irish primary schools: improving teacher motivation to assess

Ita Kelly, Scoil Pio Naofa, Co. Kerry

Good morning. My name is **Ita Kelly** and I'm a primary school teacher from Co. Limerick, working in Co. Kerry. I was awarded an educational research grant from the INTO and was asked here this morning to discuss the findings of the dissertation I completed in 2007. While the idea of completing my masters had always been my intention even during my time as an undergrad it wasn't until I became a resource teacher in 2005 that I realised that assessment was the area I wanted to learn more about.

As a new and young teacher I suppose I was quite green when it came to special education. I vividly remember the first day I sat down dissecting Sigma-T and Micra-T results distinguishing what children needed resource and learning support hours. I pored over psychological assessments and began my own testing of children. And what really hit me was the fact that the testing instruments I had available to me were so out of date and so irrelevant to the children I teach. We are part of the DEIS scheme and the wording of many of the tests were far too difficult and if I'm to be completely honest even I had to think hard about some of the answers. I knew that my children could perform better than these tests were suggesting and I felt at a complete loss. I spoke to the teacher that had been in my position the year before and she too felt that a major overhaul of the current assessment system was needed. So, I started to speak to other colleagues and friends about the area of assessment in schools and realised that it was an area that got very little attention considering it is the one aspect of teaching that transcends the entire curriculum and according to the curriculum is, and I quote, 'an integral part of teaching and learning.'

I was very fortunate to have a real assessment expert as my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Eugene Wall. Together we talked about what aspects of assessment I should look at and eventually I decided that an attitudinal study would be most interesting and revealing.

My dissertation title was: The assessment process-current practice and perspectives in Irish Primary Schools: Improving teacher motivation to assess.

In essence, I wanted to ascertain what we as professionals were currently doing in terms of assessment and what according to us as a group, could be done to motivate us to make assessment a truly integral part of teaching.

The ability to assess and test children effectively is perhaps one of the most important skills any teacher must acquire. Assessment is the one aspect of pedagogy that transcends the entire curriculum and, as such, is of central importance to teaching at primary level. Despite this, numerous studies have indicated that assessment is not being conducted as efficiently as was originally envisaged by the revised Primary School Curriculum in 1999. Indeed, in-depth analyses of these studies found that a significant

number of schools nationwide did not have appropriate policies for assessment in place. There was also a significant failure to plan effectively for assessment. The aim of my research was to attempt to ascertain the attitudes of teachers working in a representative sample of primary schools in County Kerry, in relation to current assessment and testing practices. In light of the fact that the Education Act 1998 introduced the concept of mandatory testing of all pupils, my study sought to establish the extent to which teachers are familiar with this legislation and their attitudes towards testing and assessment.

Following an examination of current literature, focusing in particular on two studies conducted in 2005 by the NCCA and inspectorate respectively, I identified a number of areas that required further research. My study gathered data regarding the implementation of testing procedures by teachers, and examined their approaches and attitudes towards the process. It sought to establish the importance teachers and schools place on testing and assessment in order to analyse whether or not assessment is seen as 'an integral part of teaching and learning' (DES, 1999, p. 11) by teachers.

My study was conducted in a sample of 78 schools in County Kerry. There are 144 schools in County Kerry so my sample size was over 50%. The return rate of questionnaires was extremely high at 90.5% therefore it was deemed a representative sample.

Quantitative analysis showed that despite the introduction of assistive services from the SDPS and PCSP (now the PPDS), many schools still do not have an assessment policy in place. Qualitative analysis indicated that teachers are dissatisfied with current provision of in-service education in the area of assessment and as such, did not prioritise it as an area of central importance.

My thesis showed that if teachers are to be expected to test children on an annual basis, significant in-service education programmes and further assistance in the area of planning must be put in place nationwide.

I appreciate that it's early on a Saturday morning when you should be having a well-deserved lie-in but to keep you all awake I've come up with a few simple questions for you to think about. Some of these I did use in my research and when I am finished here you are going to do be doing workshops - if nothing else it is going to provide some food for thought for the workshops and might get you thinking in terms of assessment, what you are doing or what you should be doing or maybe would like to be doing. As it says here on the slide be honest with yourself! This is just for yourself - you are not going to be asked what you do.

Be honest with yourself:

- Do you (does your school) have a policy on assessment? I know that Pat said three quarters of schools now have a written policy but is it gathering dust in the office of your school where all the policies are?
- Do you plan for assessment in class? (and I don't mean "I'm going to do a spelling test on Friday morning" isn't that assessment?)

- What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘assessment’? Does it fill you with dread or do you love the idea of it?
- How do you feel about assessment? Are your feelings positive or negative? Why?
- Are you familiar with the new legislation regarding standardised testing? Have you read Circular 0138/06: Supporting Assessment in the Primary School?
- In the scheme of your teaching - how important is assessment to you? (in-line with English/Gaeilge/maths?)
- Have you received in-service in the area of assessment? I know that it was rolled out last year but certainly in our school it was only two of the teachers actually attended the seminars and I am just wondering whether you have actually received the in-service?
- I know I have used an outdated term here (PCSP) but it was PCSP during my research period. Did your school take the opportunity to access PCSP assistance last year? The reason I asked that question is because I know that only two schools in the whole of Kerry actually took it up, the majority of schools did visual arts and science and I have to say we were guilty of that ourselves.
- What are your concerns in relation to assessment? How could/should these concerns be addressed?
- Do you think that Departmental initiatives and curricular adjustments have worked?

Now, to discuss the findings of my research. In the overall findings there were four particular areas that kept coming up and these were: initial teacher education and professional development, policy development and implementation, accountability and resources.

Findings

- 75% of teachers surveyed never received in-service in formal assessment procedures
- 71% of respondents never received in-service in informal assessment procedures
- 65% of respondents feel inadequately trained to test children
- 75% of respondents think that current in-service levels are unsatisfactory
- 96% feel that in-service is urgently required
 - The result of this: teachers lack confidence in designing their own tests and lack confidence in recording and reporting results. In fact, most respondents felt unsure what to do with results as a result of this lack of training.

- **Result:** negativity towards assessment and testing.

I think the most important finding from above is that 96% of teachers feel that in-service is urgently required. Everything reverts back to in-career education. For example if you are looking at policy development you don't want to write a policy unless you feel confident enough and you can't feel confident until you receive training. The same goes for litigation, for communications to parents, for storing results, if you are trained and being told that this is what happens across the board then positive change can come about. The least we deserve as teachers is in-service training so that we feel confident and competent when it comes to assessment.

Findings indicate a need for the following improvements:

1. Initial and in-career teacher education and professional development
2. Policy development and implementation
3. Accountability
4. Resources

Initial and in-career teacher education and professional development is self explanatory.

Policy Development

- No written policy in over 19% (almost one-fifth) of respondents' schools (in context: consider the importance of policy development...) – this was two years ago and changes may have occurred since the publication of my thesis.
- A further 14% unsure of existence of a policy in their school. This means that approximately one-third of schools in Kerry didn't know whether they had an assessment policy and that is telling in itself. That means that they haven't seen it and don't know what is in it so they might as well not have any at all.
- **Result:** teachers (inadvertently) are neglecting weaker and more able students and are failing to forward plan.

Resources and Assessment Tools

I mentioned earlier that I felt that they were outdated and again a fifth of teachers felt that there was a major need for an updating of the tests and the tests needed to be redone. But this is the statistic that shocked me - that 80% of teachers felt dissatisfied with standardised tests that were available to them, particularly in relation to English. So four fifths of respondents were dissatisfied. That is a huge number considering that now we actually have to test all children. It is not a choice. We have to do it. But the question remains- why should we have to assess them if we are not happy with the actual standardised tests available to us?

- 19% of teachers felt that they lacked suitable test instruments- and lacked knowledge as to the tests/assessment tools that were available to them.
- 80% of respondents felt dissatisfied with standardised tests that were available to them, particularly in relation to English. Particular grievances cited in relation to their lack of relevance for foreign children and those from disadvantaged areas.
 - *Question:* when dissatisfied with the tests, what alternative do we have? We must devise our own tests. Unfortunately, self-devised tests are subjective, they lack consistency and coherency.
 - *Result:* A need for set guidelines on how to design appropriate tests.

Accountability and Litigation

- 75% of respondents were concerned about accountability in relation to test results- storage, written reports etc. They were worried about how long they should store the tests for. What information should be given to parents? How much should we write down?
- Because of the uncertainty surrounding the issue of interpretation and communication of results - it comes back to the issue of not being trained. If I don't feel that what I am doing is the same as what another teacher in my school is doing, we are all writing different things, then there is no correlation between us and difficulties are going to arise.
 - *Result:* A real need for pre-service and in-service education and training

Recommendations

- ✓ Provision of comprehensive in-service (explicit and systematic training)
- ✓ Possibility of observation templates
- ✓ Employment of paid substitute for standardised testing in a multi-grade setting (to assist teachers and allow for individual testing of classes)
- ✓ A set of tests be made available to teachers in education centres-for accessibility (I am aware that this has actually happened since the publication of my thesis!)
- ✓ A database of available tests, year of publication etc. Made available to teachers-perhaps on www.ncca.ie

- ✓ DES to raise awareness on the importance of a policy on assessment and to draw teachers' attention to their requirements as in the Education Act.

I would like to conclude by saying that obviously there is a lot of work that needs to be done in assessment. The first thing we have to do is to train everybody across the board. Not just one or two teachers but everybody - because we all have a duty to assess. I know that I flew through the presentation as time was limited but I hope I got you thinking about it because in the workshops we are going to get a chance to talk in more detail. I merely opened the door to a huge room of thought about assessment and I hope you enjoyed it and that it got you thinking. I would like to thank you all for listening and hope you enjoy the rest of the day.

The Challenge of Assessment Today

Anne Looney, CEO, NCCA

I'd like to begin with two stories. These stories work as a set of book ends. The first is a personal one of my own niece, age six and three-quarters. Her job is to visit her granddad in hospital and to tell him her news. She ran in the week before last to tell him that it was a very important time and that *history was happening*. He asked what she meant. She told him that a black man was going to be the 44th president of America. And that was history, because they had all been white. But Barack Obama would be the first. My father asked where she heard all about this. *Teacher*, she said. *She told us all about it and told us we had to pay attention because it was history. And King Martin Luther tried to help black people and he was shot, but he would be very happy today if he hadn't been shot. We all prayed for Barack Obama then that he would be a good president. And Andy prayed for his kids that they would get a nice dog.*

Her story made us smile, but I thought about in preparing for this conference. It was magnificent intuitive teaching on the part of the teacher. She had learned so much, in such a way that she was dying to tell it. And I just know that the lesson was not written in a scheme, and probably not written down at all. I know that there were no learning outcomes, no assessment strategy, no test, no resources used.... Just a teacher doing what good teachers do best – thinking and teaching on their feet, in the moment, the unrecordable and unmeasurable events that define teaching as an art, as well as a profession.

The second is a story from a book that made a great impression on me - ten years old now - 'Testing Teachers' by Jeffrey and Woods, which was about research conducted in England following the reforms associated with the national curriculum there, and the system of assessment associated with it. One teacher said....

I don't feel the job satisfaction now I once had working with young kids because I feel that every time I do something intuitive I just feel guilty about it. 'Is this right; am I doing this the right way; does this cover what I am supposed to be covering; should I be doing something else: should I be more structured; should I have done this.....

What happened to my creativity? What happened to my professional integrity? What happened to the fun in teaching and learning? What happened?

If you were to take a pile of the very many tests that are used in Irish schools and a pile of the tests that are used in English schools, they look the same. But they serve different purposes. What happened, as that teacher asked, is that the two stories illustrate the shift from one extreme to another. What happened, what happens in policy and practice that can shift us from one extreme to another? How can that middle ground be found. I think that is very important in this conference - that teachers find their assessment voice - and it is interesting and exciting for us in the NCCA to hear teachers talk about their assessment and find that middle ground. Back in the 80s, I don't think teachers would have spoken about their assessment practice. It wasn't something that was in their vocabulary - but it is now.

What are the forces that push education systems, especially around assessment, from one story to another? There are three main points that I think we as policy makers and teachers need to consider.

The first one is something shared by both teachers and policy makers. As public servants we are part of what was recently referred to as the "inert mass" of the public service! A general suspicion of what public servants do generates pressure for more accountability. The UK minister, in fact I think you quoted him yourself in the paper on assessment, when asked about dismantling the testing regime (and they have actually cancelled Key Stage 3 tests in England from next year on), he said that parents don't want to go back to a world where the achievements of students are hidden from them in that the only way you could see the achievement of schools was in the test scores. Accountability is important – we need to attend to it in all sectors of public life. But accountability constructed on suspicion and a belief that something is 'hidden' generates more anxiety and less transparency. This 'suspicion' is one of the forces that can move us from one extreme in assessment towards the other.

The second force has to do with the fact that we live in a world that is pathologically fixated with numbers and statistics. We like numbers, scores, measurements - someone has described is as taking our collective pulse 24 hours a day. There is a public fascination with numbers and statistics. Therefore any assessment that generates a number - as somebody in my discussion group said this morning, *puts a number out there* - that assessment and that score can take on a power and a role that it was never intended to have.

Interestingly, a couple of writers have begun to speak about our fixation on numbers and about the strange process whereby an increasing fixation on the score often leads to a deterioration in the quality of what is being measured! A Canadian writer, Janice Gross Stein has written about the cult of efficiency. Why is it, she asked, when you call a big company and go into their phone system and it tells you the exact percentage of calls that they managed to answer within 10 minutes that you are never in that percentage. In other words, why is it in system change that is designed to make a system more efficient - you know that message at the start of customer service 'we will record all our messages in the interest of training' and you think as you hang on for twenty minutes, well they haven't recorded this one! So the fixation on numbers and scores and number of calls answered and the actual experience of the service, become detached from each other.

This process of detaching has a further consequence. In order to generate the score, you actually put energy into the generation of the number or the evidence and that becomes the primary purpose of the service. Teachers all over the world, especially in high-stakes contexts discuss the process whereby they stopped doing the intuitive and started doing the expected. In other words, they began to work to generate the evidence they were doing a good job, instead of doing a good job. As you might imagine, the impact on self-identity and professional integrity of this displacement is quite literally soul-destroying.

The last force that can move us from one extreme to another, and again you quoted this in your own document, is a belief that things will get better in any system if we set targets. Nothing wrong with a few targets - they are useful and offer clarity and directions. But there is absolutely no relationship between the setting of the target, the measuring of its delivery and the actual improvement. Our strategy on educational disadvantage makes this mistake at times I think - and you have the quote in your own documentation - it says that in DEIS schools there will be a measurement of progress *to ensure* that there is improvement in educational outcomes. Measuring the progress does not *result* in improvement - you don't fatten a cow by weighing it. The conviction that the measurement leads to the improvement has no basis and you can invest enormous amounts of money in collecting the information when, if you had invested the money in generating the improvement, it might have been money better spent.

A quick point about educational disadvantage and target setting - I think one of the reasons why, within educational disadvantage in particular, we are interested in setting targets is that it is the poorest children in the system who are the most measured, counted and assessed. It is the most disadvantaged who are the most measured, counted and monitored. We could have a whole conference as to why that is. One of the great American educators stated that in any discussion on assessment and disadvantage you are missing the point if you ignore the 500lb gorilla in the room. And that 500lb gorilla is poverty. He says, unless you factor in that those children are poor and that they are the least successful and the hardest to teach and the least powerful and the most dependent, unless you consider all of those, setting targets is a complete waste of time. Teachers are very enthusiastic about monitoring students' progress because we are passionate as educators that children get the best education that they can.

We are really anxious to monitor their progress. I know from working with principals of DEIS schools how soul destroying they have found it to communicate to parents, whose children already live in poor housing, whose environments are already among the worst in the country, the news that their children are 30% below the national average in reading and mathematics. That is extremely disheartening news for parents and it doesn't matter whether it is a STEN or a percentile it is still not good news for your children. That is an issue that we in NCCA are planning to work on with a number of DEIS schools next year as we look for ways to report on progress as well as on the 'standard' score.

The Guidelines on Assessment which were published last year following consultations with yourselves are closer to the six and three quarter year old story than to the English story I used at the opening of this address. We are not far from the middle ground in Ireland. But the pressures do not go away. Assessment theory talks about the field of judgement and suggests that whoever controls the field of judgement is crucial. In primary schools teachers control the field of judgement. There are other judgement fields - WSE, for example, or the programme of national monitoring in literacy and numeracy where the teacher has less control, but that's fine. In fact a good system has multiple fields of judgement.

Interestingly, in post-primary education in Ireland, teachers do not want control of the field of judgement in the state examinations, particularly in the high stakes of the Leaving Certificate examination. The difference in that field of judgement position between primary and post-primary teachers is very interesting. Post-primary teachers see their role as ending with the dressing room pep talk, after which they leave the stadium, they do not even stay for the Haka! They do not get involved in the field of judgement.

And in between the primary position in the field of judgement and post primary position we have generated a case study in how not to do assessment. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Entrance Test.

Now there are there are particular examples of really good connections between primary and post-primary schools in Ireland, but in general our entrance tests tick all the boxes for bad assessment practice. They do not happen on the site of the learning nor close to the time of learning. I don't know of any entrance test that is taken in primary school. They happen in the post primary school. They never offer feedback on performance - the most you get is that *she got into the "A" class*. On what basis we are not told. Entrance tests generate results that are not shared, they do not have a clear purpose. We know from other research that the NCCA is doing that the vast majority of students in first year are not in streamed settings. One of the purposes suggested is that they can identify the students who need additional support. After eight years in primary school I think most primary teachers have an idea as to which children need support. They do not have a clear purpose and they have very uncertain stakes. What are the stakes around entrance tests? One of the people in my discussion group this morning talked about as a teacher coming under pressure from parents to prepare children for entrance exams. They have no assessment criteria and they are often based on knowledge and understanding and skills that are not related to the curriculum.

The NCCA conducted research along with the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) on transition from primary to post primary, particularly for first year. The ESRI said there were close to 30 different tests being used. I think we have to ask very serious questions. We could spend a long time discussing why we have them. Someone has described Irish entrance exams as operating a bit like the Sorting Hat at Hogwarts – we don't really know what goes on in there but suddenly the kids are divided up into groups. We could spend a long time discussing why we have them. Are they a symbolic gateway? Are they a signal of transition? Do they send covert messages that the information collected in primary schools may not be suitable or relevant? Or do they allow primary teachers to shelter behind their often articulated concern that they don't like to write something down about a student that would come back to haunt them? Or a deeply felt and well meaning desire to give a child a fresh start?

It is a common pattern that at the point of transfer there is assessment. One of the things we were able to do with our study was to monitor 1,000 students in first year. We administered a test in English and Mathematics to the 1,000 students in the study and at the end of first year we retested. The vast majority of students made no progress and a minority of students had gone backwards. In the interviews with the children and the post-primary teachers it was clear that quite a number of the students felt that they were repeating material that they had already done in primary school. Equally the really strong message - and I will put my hand up and say as a post primary teacher I was guilty of this too – students heard over and over again 'it doesn't matter how you did it in primary school you will do it my way'. Or 'it was alright to do it that when you were in primary school but now you are in secondary school'. So that is a huge symbolic transition for us. Someone suggested in the discussion group that I was in this morning, that in fact primary schools need to have no interest in what happens in entrance tests but I think you do. You should pay attention to it. It has a symbolic value and a potential backwash into primary education that you have to attend to. Therefore, I think the work that the NCCA is planning in this area will be very significant and this is in our plan of work to start next year. We purposely did not begin the work on transition while we were still working on assessment at primary school because we wanted to be extremely careful that what was happening to develop assessment in primary school was not colonized by the needs of the post primary sector because the post primary sector knows what it is like to have its assessment colonized by the needs of the university sector. So let's not make the same mistake twice.

Two elements of the NCCA's plan of work for the coming year are of particular relevance to yourselves. The first is when we advised on standardised testing we advised on standardised testing only in primary schools. But at the time we were asked for advice for compulsory education so we have yet to advise on whether standardised tests should be administered, say at the age of 14 for example, and that is advice that will be generated in the normal NCCA way through consultation, engagement and research. But the Education Act also gives us the responsibility to advise on a national policy on transition and that is what we are going to begin work on next year. It has to be national. It has to be for everybody and has to apply in every school.

I think that we need to move towards that goal - you need local flexibility but local arrangements and informal arrangements around transition are probably not serving the system well.

A final point is to do with mathematics. We have a new revision of post-primary mathematics about to take place. It has started in 24 schools. For the first time we are generating what we have called a bridging framework that makes a connection between the curriculum in 6th class and the curriculum in first year. Now you could argue that that is not rocket science and it is about time that we did it but it is the first time that we are actually making that connection. Those with expertise in primary mathematics are working with those with expertise in post-primary mathematics for the first time. In the 24 post-primary schools the teachers of mathematics will sit down with the teachers in 5th and 6th class to talk about mathematics. I think that is a very welcome development - to talk curriculum rather than to talk assessment.

I want to add one final point because it is something I know that has been a constant theme at your conference and Ita brought it up this morning. We are acutely aware, as you are, about the lack of in-service on assessment. While we advise on in-service needs, we don't provide it. But we have decided to take some short-term action to support our own guidelines. I know it is not ideal - but many of you have very practical questions about the administration of tests, about storing, about data reporting, what is required and what is not. So to make it easier for those who haven't the time to read the book we are going to generate some questions and answers podcasts on the NCCA website that will effectively deal with the questions that people have. And I know it is less than ideal. It is not in-service development but at least it gives you access to information that you can even plug into the car on the way to the match or even listen on your iPod. They may be a useful short term fix-it until we manage to get a comprehensive programme available so that teachers can continue to be the people who inhabit and work in the field of judgement and we avoid a situation that in 10 years time any teacher can sit around and scratch their head and say I lost my professionalism, what happened?

Míle buíochas.

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Plenary Discussion Session

Following Anne Looney's presentation, delegates were invited to make comments or to pose questions to members of the panel, which included; Anne Looney, CEO, NCCA, Sheila Nunan, General Treasurer, INTO, and Siobhán McGovern, St Patrick's College. The session was chaired by Milo Walsh, leaschathaoirleach of the Education Committee. The questions posed and their responses are outlined below.

Questions

Anthony O'Malley, Belmullet Branch

It's heartening to listen that commonsense is prevailing. I trained in Aberystwyth in Wales. I did my teaching practice in Ireland in a medium-sized town and in a small country school as well. What I noted was, and even talking to my brother who was teaching in London in second level, teachers over there are bombarded with paperwork and are putting in ten or eleven hour days and going home knackered. It is just crazy and in their system as a result, the actual standards are not near, and the quality isn't a patch on what we have here in this country. I think the system we have here in this country is very good at the moment and I wouldn't want to see it change too much. We all know how we can improve in our assessment but if we go down the same road as the UK, I think we are making a very big mistake.

Doreen Sheridan, District 3 and Letterkenny Branch

I am concerned about the assessment of our newcomer children as it is not an area that was touched on much today. So while there are increasing materials from the Department there are quite a few faults in relation to it – I kept with it but I would have liked to see a kit with it as a lot of the documentation cannot be downloaded. Maybe some guidelines should be given to us from the INTO in relation to including our newcomer children in the standardised tests so that the right picture is given to the Department in relation to the language deficiencies within our schools and that they will support us in giving us the language support teachers. Because if we don't even get them to write their names and exclude them from the standardised testing then the Department and our schools are not getting the proper picture in relation to the literacy levels of our newcomer children and of our classes overall.

Paula Kelly, Craobh Chualann

I would just like to echo what the previous speaker has said about the children with special educational needs. Some schools are being pressurised by inspectors to include those children in standardised testing to give a fairer reflection of the actual abilities within the school and how does the panel feel about that?

John Boyle, CEC

I would like to thank Anne for her presentation. In relation to the NCCA's disquiet regarding the Department's rollout on in-service on assessment, is the NCCA considering making a much stronger recommendation to the Department to do school-based whole staff training during the school year? I know that some of the recommendations have been ignored in the past but I think it would be very useful if a strong message went out that you can not introduce this on the cheap.

Niamh Ní Mhaoilealla, Ballinrobe/Clonbur/Cong Branch

I want to reiterate something that I have been saying for the last while. We have been doing assessment in the classroom for a very long time with our cuntas míosúil and we must remember that. We're saying that the child has achieved and that is very essential.

Responses

Anne Looney, NCCA

In terms of the language issue obviously, as you know, the IILT was closed down. I know that every school got the primary assessment toolkit. We have actually broken it down and it will be accessible in a better way. I also want to say however, once it had gone up on our site we got feedback straight away from teachers about how it may need to be amended. We had no role in developing it but we are going to make a proposal to the Department about how to make it more suitable.

Regarding SEN, I don't know. I know from working with the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, and you know yourselves, that there is a judgement call to be made by a teacher on whether having a child with special educational needs sit through a standardised test is actually far too traumatic for that child in the first instance. And there may be other cases where a child may benefit from having a go. But the experience and the frustration of failure, even the hand eye co-ordination that may be required to sit the test, I think the teacher has to make a professional judgement call. They know the child and I do think they have to stand their ground (it is easy for me to say) but I do think that there is a professional call to be made. The purpose of standardised testing is not to diagnose learning difficulties; it is to measure a child's performance against the norm. If a child has already been identified as outside that, then I think you have to make a judgement call on the emotional and social impact of the standardised test.

In terms of the in-service for assessment, as my colleagues here who sit on the Council - both Declan and Sheila who are members of the Council - they will know that we have regularly made a strong plea for in-service. In fact our decision of podcasting has come from our own frustration that it isn't there. A further development that we are embarking on, however, is that to provide additional support we have established a network of primary schools where we will use the NCCA resources to enable those schools - it is only a small number - to access additional support on assessment and in so doing generate more material that other schools can

access. It is a less than ideal solution but at least it means that groups of teachers are getting some in-service and when there is a better disposition towards it, we will have people available to provide it. But we do make it loud and clear and we will *continue to do that*.

Siobhán McGovern, St Patrick's College

Regarding Continuous Professional Development in particular, I would argue very strongly, - I did say assessment for learning is where I am coming from - if we want to promote that type of assessment and that is the purpose for assessment, all the research evidence is very very strong that it is where whole school in-service was made available was where the best outcomes were for that type of assessment. And I think looking at the nature that the in-service might look like and looking at action research projects, looking at things like reflective practice and using that model for in-service. That probably links to the speaker who said we are doing this already in our classrooms. What we need to do is share it, disseminate it and make it public and raise all our consciousness around it.

Sheila Nunan, General Treasurer

The first point I want to make is that in the gloom that has descended upon us in the current week and month, I think we should go home with one positive thought and something to be grateful for. We should be very satisfied and relieved that we have avoided all of that standardised testing as was originally envisaged by Minister Dempsey at the time - that we don't have a single test, we don't have it administered on one day, and we won't have it collated nationally and that it won't be used in that way. I think it was a very core value of this organisation, driven by the Education Committees repeatedly over the years and driven by members at Congress, and last year when the circular issued we were entirely satisfied that we had avoided all those pitfalls. It was really important that that political debate had been won in Ireland and put to bed once and for all - where our colleagues in the UK and the USA are still struggling, time and time again, with 'bring the schools into special measures'. It is really an important professional and political win for primary school teachers.

And just to say, as Milo has said, that we should be grateful for the alliance we have and the support we get from the NCCA. They very much reflect what is best in teaching and what is best in education. In a time, when there is not a lot to be grateful for, I think it is important that we recognise that it is off the agenda.

The second point about CPD is clearly a frustration after a number of years where we enjoyed in-service for the revised curriculum to the point where we were slightly getting fed up with it and were looking for a bit of a break. We didn't realise that it was going to be a continuous break and lose everything that we had gained over the last number of years. So it is going to be a huge challenge and a huge battle for us to get back proper CPD for our members, for our teachers and for our schools. Because the second positive thing is that we have this superb curriculum - again this organisation made sure that it wasn't a behavioural objectives curriculum but an enabling curriculum. So we are all very willing to do it but we are not able if we don't have the CPD support. That is clearly one of the absolutely strong messages coming from this particular conference today.

Reports from Discussion Groups

Introduction

Delegates were assigned to different discussion groups to facilitate closer examination of some of the issues that arose from the conference documentation and presentations. Each one of the seven discussions groups was given a list of questions to focus on, and topics discussed included assessment for learning, standardised testing, early childhood assessment, transfer tests, reporting to parents and professional development. Members of the INTO Education Committee acted as facilitators and rapporteurs. Reports from all the discussion groups, summarizing the views of participants were collated under thematic headings and are outlined below.

Assessment for learning

Formative assessment was explained by some delegates as setting a goal before the lesson, telling the children what they are going to learn – “This is what I’m looking for” – with random questioning taking place at the end of the lesson. Can they do what was set out in the lesson? All the children, including weak children, are involved in assessment for learning. Assessment and planning go hand in hand.

In a project conducted in St. Patrick’s College of Education on formative assessment (AFL), involving four teachers, it was found that standards of achievement improve as do attitude and self-esteem.

According to delegates, assessment for learning should be kept separate from standardised testing, as teachers are doing AFL in the classroom every day.

Early childhood assessment

In one group serious opposition was expressed to any degree of screening taking place prior to entry into mainstream primary school. Questions were asked as to what kind of test? Who would administer? Who would interpret? To what purpose?

In general, it was felt that children should have the personal and organizational skills indicating school readiness – being toilet trained for example - and that these should be clearly laid out to the parents at an induction night / on an enrolment form, sometime in the last term of the year prior to their child starting school.

Then they would have the summer to ensure that their child was ready to be independent in these matters.

In another group it was stated that entrance to primary education should have some form of testing to ascertain what help children needed when starting school - a comprehensive developmental test. It might highlight problems with eyes, ears, ADHD, etc. The Belfield is an infant attainment profile used in a lot in schools and it was suggested in one group that it should be mandatory and that parents should be brought on board as soon as possible.

Some children are presenting, already, with assessments done, in the case of special needs.

Standardised tests

Teachers have been administering standardised tests in schools for many years. Mandatory testing is done now at two points in a child's school life. Micra-T and Sigma-T emerged as the tests most widely administered. The Belfield Infant Assessment programme is useful, but hard to administer – time-consuming but worthwhile. Irish version of standardised tests were welcomed.

One delegate stated that standardised tests measured a very limited intelligence – maths and reading only, and raised the issue of multiple intelligences.

A view was expressed that teachers are not being well served by the tests that are available at the moment. There was a lot of dissatisfaction with the current tests. They were viewed as crude instruments, providing only a snapshot in time. Concern was expressed that some teachers were obsessed with standardised tests and overloaded with work. Some delegates thought that standardised tests were of no benefit to weak children while others were of the view that there is a place for standardised testing (a small place), in that results can be used for early intervention at Infant level, and for resource and learning support teaching. Some delegates were of the opinion that some children would never make up the gap.

One delegate offered the opinion that pupils who did the Mathemagic programme in Maths had an advantage over other pupils as the same company published the Drumcondra tests.

Some teachers were of the view that the results of standardised tests bore a reflection on themselves. Concerns were expressed about teachers' hang-ups about the tests and about their possible negative implications for the school or child. Questions were asked about the role of the standardised tests. It was stated that too much testing was of no benefit.

Standardised tests were not considered very valuable, and it was questioned why such tests should be done in other areas. Profiling was considered a possibility but the draft Drumcondra Profiles in music were thought to be very labour-intensive and difficult for teachers to understand. English and Irish profiles were briefly mentioned but not discussed.

The INTO's original advice to members regarding the use of the English profiles was that they could be useful as a resource but that teachers were not obliged to use them. The difficulties of profiling and testing in multi-class situations were highlighted.

There was confusion as to how and where to give feedback to parents on the results of mandatory standardised tests, with several views being expressed. There was a call for in-service in relation to reporting to parents and in relation to interpreting and analyzing results. It emerged in the groups that not all schools report in writing. It was generally held that parent /teacher meetings were the most useful and appropriate times to report results to parents. It was stated that it was important to ensure that the results were rendered intelligently to parents. It was also recommended that descriptors should be included in written reports, at the end of the year, where the STEN score is preferable. In cases where a learning difficulty was diagnosed or apparent a face-to-face individual meeting was held to be vital, following on, as soon as possible, from the test. It was suggested that the standard score be used here, talking in terms of average band – below average or above average. Mediating orally, in a way parents understand, is vital to the process. Delegates were of the view that once a child performs at average or above that he/she is capable of dealing with literacy levels in secondary school.

On the retention of scripts, views varied, with delegates being under the impression scripts had to be held for one year. It was generally accepted that results had to be held on file until the pupil reached 18 or 21 or until they completed full-time education, though delegates requested clarification on what schools' precise obligations were.

The issue of who should have access was raised, with the view expressed that only relevant professionals should see the results, with parental permission.

One group expressed the view that the Micra-T was not appropriate for foreign nationals while in another group it was felt that newcomer children were not taken into account at all in the tests. It was stated that the EAL assessment pack was very labour intensive. It was also commented upon that teachers were just handed the pack and had to work out for themselves how to implement it. It was stated that the fact that EAL pupils have difficulties with language can disguise other difficulties.

One delegate recommended that resource teachers should administer standardised tests. Another delegate stated that in their school the learning support teachers did the tests and kept the tests while another said that class teachers had no input into the testing of their own class and that they tested another class instead. Another delegate commented that it was a bad sign in a school if the class teachers were not seen to be involved with the testing.

Another delegate pointed out that in Northern Ireland the scores from tests had to be forwarded to the Department of Education. Teachers in Northern Ireland plan for the test. The view was expressed that assessment and testing should be kept separate, that assessment goes on continuously and comes naturally to every teacher.

Transfer tests

In one group it was believed that transfer tests were done too early in the school year when it was impossible to have the programme adequately covered. Another group expressed that they should be abolished or if they were being done they should only test where children are at. Delegates cautioned that teachers must be careful not to go down the route of formal assessment, and should be very wary about testing from pre-school to primary and from primary to post-primary. It was suggested that communication should be done in a less formal structure – not testing. Perhaps there should be oral communication between primary and secondary especially in the case of children with learning and/or behavioral difficulties.

Delegates recommended that every school should have a school policy and form its own methods of assessment, including teacher observation. It was stated that the purpose of testing was to inform learning. First year in post-primary should be a year for exposing children to all subjects – a year of transition. One delegate from a rural school explained how they have a file for each child over four years from 3rd - 6th classes. Parents can see the development. Dissatisfaction was expressed with current levels of communication, but no solution was arrived at.

Using assessment results

Delegates commented that there was some evidence of unprofessional approaches at local level where teachers taught to the test or tested children at a lower level to show improved results.

It was recommended that schools should adopt specialised literacy or numeracy programmes to target problem areas.

Professional development

Delegates were strongly of the view that there should be in-service on assessment in school time and that it should be compulsory for all teachers. It was suggested that smaller schools in rural areas could be clustered and that whole staff in-service could be provided for bigger schools. It was agreed that the NCCA Guidelines on Assessment should be used as a starting point for in-service. It was suggested that there should be an agreed implementation period (perhaps six months) followed by a review to collect positive and negative feedback. Individual delegates stated that that in-service should explain that a STEN score was not a reflection on a teacher's teaching. A delegate who is teaching in a hospital school, where conditions were not the same as in mainstream schools, felt she needed support. Special education and learning support teachers were generally sent on courses on testing and assessment but class teachers also need to attend such courses. Education Centres were believed to be the most feasible option for providing professional development in assessment for teachers. It was noted that St. Patrick's College of Education was offering an on-line course aimed at class teachers at the moment.

Reporting to parents

Delegates commented that oral reporting motivates the parents to help the child. Some delegates questioned the value of written reports and believed the interaction of the oral report was more beneficial to all concerned. Delegates differed on the issue of standardised reporting. Some participants were unfamiliar with the NCCA Report Card Templates. While one delegate felt there should be standardised reporting another wondered if the same type of reporting would suit all schools. Another thought that it was up to each school how they report and that each school should have a policy taking a holistic view of every child. Teachers should agree on the language to be used when reporting in writing. One delegate reminded us how important it is to remember that we are dealing with human beings.

Concern was expressed about possible legal implications of written comments. However, most participants believed that teachers should have the professional confidence to stand over what was written. The need for training and professional development for teachers in relation to reporting on assessment was again highlighted.

DEIS

There was a general consensus that the three-year plan placed a huge emphasis on early intervention and was working well. Although standardised results were not always indicative of children's progress, targets should be set and an effort made to improve on them the following year. It was pointed out that there were huge discrepancies between the Micra-T/Sigma-T and Drumcondra tests. There were a number of areas of concern regarding the reliability of test results. It was considered important that there was consistency in testing, making sure that the follow-up test was the same. It was stated that children had become very familiar with the tests and that the timing of assessment had an effect – poorer results in October than May.

There was a view expressed that targets should not be about looking at test results but should concentrate on the bigger picture, involving parents, attendance, and literacy. It was stated that the most important assessment tool is the teacher – ongoing and continuous.

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