In this paper, Hall provides a comprehensive evaluation of the Irish policy position on primary school assessment. She first chronicles key events that influenced the development of the policy, including the 1990 Review on the Primary Curriculum, the 1992 Green Paper on Education, the NCCA’S Programme for Reform (1993), the National Education Convention (1994), and the 1995 White Paper on Education, culminating in the recommendations for assessment set out in the draft document of the Revised Primary School Curriculum (1997). She documents a move towards and subsequently away from the marketization of education throughout this process, and associated discontinuities in the discourse surrounding assessment, most notably summative vs. formative understandings of assessment, and whether or not assessment should be used as a mechanism for teacher and school accountability. She then describes the policy in detail, outlining what she sees as its major strengths and weaknesses. Recognition of the importance of formative assessment practices is lauded as a key strength of the policy, due to the alignment of this stance with contemporary research literature. Hall argues; however, that this is not accompanied by concrete guidelines on how to implement these practices. Furthermore, she believes that the policy’s assertion that all forms of assessment should have parity of esteem is heavily contradicted by the disproportionate attention afforded to standardised tests and their functions. She considers the factors that may have led to these undesirable features, and concludes with a number of recommendations. These include, among others, the redeployment of funds set aside for the development of standardised tests towards the provision of teacher training in formative assessment, and the need to ensure that all those involved in policy development are suitably informed by contemporary research.

Following on from Hall’s (2000) criticisms of assessment policy under the Revised Primary School Curriculum of 1999, Hall & Kavanagh report the findings from a series of interviews conducted with various interest groups in Irish primary education. They contend that, due to the lack of clarity in many aspects of the policy, the manner in which these groups understand the purposes and forms of assessment will determine how it will eventually be implemented. Stakeholders interviewed included teachers, parents, the then ‘shadow’ Minister of Education, the Chief Executive of the National Parents Council, a senior inspector at the DES and a senior official at the NCCA. Hall & Kavanagh conclude that these groups hold markedly different views about assessment, with each group tending to interpret the purposes of assessment primarily in relation to its own needs, rather than the needs of the learner. They also note a somewhat unanimous confidence in formal, standardized tests. On the basis of these findings, they emphasize the need for greater discussion and informed debate amongst these interest groups, and draw attention once more to the wealth of literature supporting the use of assessment to inform and guide pupils’ learning (as opposed
to solely for purposes such as accountability).


In light of the paradigm shift from summative to formative assessment, and the associated need to develop a range of alternative modes of assessment, this research explores the portfolio approach to assessing pupils’ writing at primary level. The Educational Research Centre’s *Drumcondra Writing Project*, which saw the collation of portfolios of children’s written work in natural settings over the course of the 1995-1996 school year, provided a springboard for this research. A selection of these portfolios was identified as being of especially high quality, and the teachers and pupils in question were invited to participate in this further study. Over the course of two years, portfolios of these pupils’ work were examined, and both pupils’ and teachers’ experiences of the processes were sought through written reflections and semi-structured interviews respectively, with a view to thoroughly exploring the use of portfolios as assessment tools in these exemplar cases. Murphy concludes that portfolios allow for and generate the use of formative assessment techniques, and the incorporation of feedback that is relevant for individual children. She invites further study on the use of portfolios for assessment purposes in other subject areas of the primary school curriculum, especially those for which assessment procedures are not currently evident, such as music, physical education, and visual arts.


In this paper, Little considers the learner-centred approach and the integration of self-assessment with other forms of assessment in the context of second language learning. He reports on a project that has drawn on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the European Language Portfolio (ERP) to define an English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum for newcomer pupils in Irish primary schools, and outlines plans to develop assessment and reporting procedures for the ESL curriculum, in which learner self-assessment plays a central role.


This research investigates the use of learning stories as a form of assessment over a ten-week period with a junior infant class. Ennis reports how this approach successfully highlighted learning in subjects such as language, mathematics, science, visual arts and music, and was associated with a high level of parental participation and engagement. The time required to implement the approach is noted as a significant challenge.


In this paper, Kilfeather, O’Leary and Varley document their development of a set of performance-based tasks to facilitate science assessment in primary schools. This project was conducted over a four-year period in response to both the introduction of science as a subject area at primary level, and the emphasis on assessment as an integral part of
teaching and learning under the revised primary curriculum of 1999. Five distinct stages of the project are described. Phase One involved locating extant performance tasks used in five English-speaking countries with science curricula at primary level, whilst Phase Two involved adapting these tasks to match the aims and objectives of the Irish curriculum. In Phase Three, a selection of the tasks were sent to a representative sample of primary teachers for evaluation, and in Phase Four, 11 of the tasks were evaluated 'in action' in different classroom settings. Evaluations of the tasks revealed a predominantly positive response, with teachers reporting active involvement of teachers and pupils in the tasks, pupil enjoyment of the tasks, and the potential to use the assessment information gleaned from the tasks in different ways. Finally, in Phase Five, amendments were made to the tasks on the basis of these evaluations. Kilfeather et al note that, as a result of this project, 124 tasks are now well aligned with the Irish primary science curriculum, and may be used for teaching, learning and assessment in science in Irish primary schools.


Six years on from Hall’s criticisms of assessment policy and practice in primary schools, this paper provides an overview of the developments that have taken place since then, whilst simultaneously considering the situation at post-primary level. Looney notes that certain cultural and economic factors in Ireland have fostered widespread faith in its education system, with the result that the response to any issues arising is typically to demand additional resources, as opposed to seeking fundamental change. She sees this as the major reason behind the fact that ‘assessment-led reform’, which has heavily featured in educational policy internationally, has not yet occurred in Ireland. Looney echoes many of Hall’s initial concerns regarding primary school assessment, but notes some progress, namely an emerging dialogue surrounding good practice, in which teachers are included, and increasing recognition of the need for professional development in the area of assessment for learning. In response to the recent government proposal to introduce mandated standardized testing in literacy and numeracy, she warns against the ‘assessment hierarchy’ that this may create, and reiterates the many different purposes of assessment. Finally, Looney argues that post-primary assessment is also in urgent need of reform, (specifically, a move away from the focus on high-stakes state examinations) but that little to no progress has been made in this domain in comparison to the emerging changes evident at primary level.


In this paper, O’Leary puts forward a model of what he considers to be a balanced assessment system for Irish schools. He opens by considering the increasing prominence of assessment in the Irish education discourse, and provides a comprehensive definition of the term, drawing attention to its expansion in recent years to include the notion of assessment for learning as well as assessment of learning. He contends that good assessment should inform decision-making, acknowledging the challenges arising from the fact that various stakeholders in education have different decisions to make. These diverse needs, he argues, are what necessitate a balanced assessment system, and he laments the situation in many countries, whereby bureaucratic requirements are prioritised at the expense of teaching and learning. His principle argument is that assessment should serve the needs of learners first and foremost, and he makes a series of recommendations as to how this might be
achieved. These include prioritising classroom assessment and resisting the introduction of mandated national testing.


This is a comprehensive document considering the role of assessment in primary education. It opens with an overview of the developments pertaining to assessment that took place during the period 1997-2008 as a result of the Education Act (1998), the Revised Primary School Curriculum (1999), and the introduction of mandatory standardised testing at two stages during primary schooling. In Chapter 2, three major purposes of assessment are identified and explored, namely: (i) to support the process of teaching and learning, (ii) to report on pupils’ progress and (iii) accountability. It is acknowledged that all three are valid, and that the purpose of an assessment should determine the type of assessments to be used. Chapter 3 outlines the general assessment policies and practices in Ireland, whilst Chapter 4 reports on the findings arising from a questionnaire administered to teachers relating to specific assessment practices in schools. Chapter 5 considers international assessment practices, whilst Chapter 6 offers a series of recommendations regarding assessment policy and practice for the future, including the allocation of time for planning for assessment, the provision of professional development in relation to assessment, and the development of standardised assessments of Irish, amongst others. The second half of the document presents the proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education (2008).


This action research investigates the implementation of self- and peer-assessment strategies in the context of process writing with fourth class pupils. Pupils received a series of lessons on writing, during which specific learning targets and success criteria were introduced. Data were collected through observations of the lessons, pupils’ writing samples, focus groups with pupils and interviews with teachers. Feedback to and from peers, self-reflection, feedback from the teacher, and engagement emerged as significant themes facilitating the process of self- and peer-assessment. Elements of writing that improved throughout the course of the ten week study included word usage, lead sentences, character descriptions and titles. On the basis of these findings, Lambert identifies areas for further research.


This study explores the Afl strategies of sharing learning intentions and identifying success criteria in a phonics lesson for children with mild general learning difficulties, and the introduction of a Teacher Learning Community (TLC), a professional tool designed to support the implementation of Afl strategies in the classroom. Data were collected through the process of observation, documentation from the TLC meetings and Lesson Reviews, children’s lesson sheets and a researcher’s log. The findings reveal a number of challenges associated with the use of Afl strategies in the special classroom.

In this paper, Looney & Klenowski consider how the concept of the ‘knowledge society’ has fuelled not just educational ‘reform’, but a thorough reconceptualization of many key components of education. They then demonstrate how this has been reflected in practice, via case studies of recent changes in curriculum and assessment in Ireland and Queensland, Australia. In Ireland, the NCCA’s review of senior cycle education and the associated consultation process have culminated in the identification of a number of ‘key skills’ (e.g. personal effectiveness, critical thinking, working with others) as the core of a proposed new curriculum. There is no accompanying explanation of how these skills will be assessed, however. In Queensland, the development of the “Queensland Assessment Task” is described as offering a promising opportunity to capture rich information about student achievement in a range of processing skills. Looney & Klenowski compare the two cases, drawing parallels between their emphases on concepts such as ‘skills’ and ‘learning power’, as opposed to ‘content’ and ‘information’. They argue that both policy initiatives illustrate a true transformation in education, but that precisely how assessment practices, in particular high-stakes testing, will be informed by this transformation remains unclear.


This research examines the use of Assessment for Learning techniques, including self- and peer-assessment, in the context of English writing with a group of third class students. O’Callaghan reports that these strategies developed students’ competence in identifying strengths and weaknesses in various genres of writing, and promoted skills of reflection, self-correction and independence in writing.


In the wake of repeated calls for a programme of teacher professional development in assessment in Ireland, this paper provides a suggested menu of topics for inclusion in such a programme. Informed by both international literature and national documents relevant to the Irish context, the proposed programme encompasses numerous aspects of assessment, including assessment terminology, the use of performance assessment tasks to improve learning processes, interpreting standardized test results, facilitating pupil self-assessment, understanding how assessment can cater for a range of pupil abilities, issues associated with grading, and the challenge of communicating assessment information, among many others. O’Leary notes that any such programme should also take into account the research indicating that teacher professional development is more effective when it is school embedded, co-operative and sustained over time. Finally, he acknowledges the considerable financial challenges associated with the development of an effective programme.


This is a reflective and exploratory piece of action research investigating how Assessment for Learning (Afl) practices may be implemented in the Irish language classroom through
the use of e-portfolios. Clerkin documents how her second class pupils developed self- and peer-assessment skills and gradually became more autonomous in their learning, through the process of compiling a selection of their work over time using ICT. She simultaneously reflects on her own experiences, citing the challenge of maintaining a balance between supporting her students and allowing them freedom to explore. The need to move towards more formative approaches to the assessment of Irish is expressed, and it is suggested that e-portfolios may be an effective tool to this end.

In this paper, MacRuairc argues that the possibility of an inherent bias in standardised assessments has not received sufficient consideration when attempting to explain the lower levels of attainment typically observed in disadvantaged schools. He reports on a series of focus groups in which children from both middle- and working-class backgrounds were asked to describe the strategies they employed when responding to items on standardised tests. Children from both backgrounds described similar strategies, such as seeking a context for target words from the test in their own experiences. This revealed a marked discontinuity between the linguistic register of the test instrument and the linguistic repertoire of the working class children. MacRuairc argues that the use of the dominant linguistic code in standardised tests ‘negates a whole way of being’ and erodes the self-efficacy of working-class pupils. He thus cautions that continued used of standardised assessments that fail to acknowledge the language variety used by specific groups may exacerbate stratified patterns of achievement.

McCrudden, E. (2009). *Questioning for appropriate assessment and learning.* Master of Science, Dublin City University
This thesis investigates three forms of assessment in chemistry – the Leaving Certificate Examination (summative) and two distinct continuous assessment methods used during undergraduate chemistry modules in Dublin City University (formative). Referring to Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Domains, McCrudden reports that most questions in the Leaving Cert. exam are written at the lower levels, and that some topics are not frequently assessed, while others are over-assessed. Analyses of the third-level assessments reveal that these formative methods can encourage students to take a more active role in their learning, and increase their engagement with the material.

In this paper, Collins & O’Leary note that, despite the recommendations outlined in the Revised Primary School Curriculum of 1999 that assessment should be an integral part of teaching and learning within all areas of the curriculum, there remains a tendency to perceive it as inappropriate in the context of the visual arts. In response to this issue, they compared two types of lessons on the Fabric and Fibre strand of the art curriculum with fifth class pupils: one with the use of ‘success criteria’ as a method of peer- and self-assessment and one without. Teachers’ and pupils’ experiences of each lesson type were recorded by means of a reflective journal and a questionnaire, respectively, and thematically analysed. The findings suggest that incorporating the use of success criteria yielded a range of positive outcomes, including greater focus on the task during lessons,
reduced frustration and increased willingness to engage amongst certain pupils, more constructive feedback from the teacher, and greater variation in the artwork produced. Collins & O’Leary argue that these findings contradict concerns that success criteria may encourage routine compliance and thus reduce the learner’s independence. They conclude that the integration of assessment with teaching and learning in the visual arts is possible.


In this theoretical paper, Dunphy argues that increasing understanding of assessment and curriculum as inter-related constructs necessitates greater consideration of how children’s learning from birth to six years may be formatively assessed. Theoretical constructs related to early learning are discussed, and, on the basis of these, a variety of methods and approaches that may be used for the formative assessment of early learning are presented. These include the observation of children’s behaviour and actions, the skilful use of questioning and of multiple modes of communication (e.g. gaze, facial expression, gestures) during conversation with young children, and the compilation of portfolios that serve as a record of learning, amongst others. Challenges and additional requirements associated with these methods are also noted, including their time-consuming nature, and the importance of a close personal relationship between the educator and the child.


This paper posits that the increasingly ‘child-centred’ nature of the primary school curriculum, although commendable, may inadvertently facilitate an unacceptable breech of children’s privacy, with ‘patterns of disclosure’ of information pertaining to personal and family life now a fundamental element of pupils’ schooling experience. With regard to assessment, Hanafin et al. draw attention to classroom questioning, observation, peer assessment, and the provision of feedback in group situations. Their argument is not that these practices should be abolished, rather that they should be accompanied by an awareness of the potential negative consequences, and means of alleviating these identified.


This research investigates the implementation of an AfL programme consisting of eight science lessons in a junior infant classroom, using an action research approach. Data collected from interviews, observation notes and researcher’s reflective journal suggest that AfL strategies were successfully introduced, with pupils reportedly achieving gains in learning and associated language development. The challenge of developing AfL materials appropriate for this age group and the need for on-going professional development in this area are noted.


Using an action research approach, this research explores the impact of an AfL programme on third class pupils’ writing and self-assessment skills. Following a series of lessons on
writing, pupils selected pieces of their work for inclusion in a portfolio, accompanied by reflections on their choices. These portfolios were then used during pupil-involved parent-teacher meetings. Darcy notes that although the programme was associated with increases in preparation and lesson time, it yielded an increased sense of teacher-pupil collaboration, and positive reactions from pupils and parents alike.

This paper describes the design, development and trialling of the Assessment for Learning Audit Instrument (AfLAI), an instrument designed to support teachers in reviewing their existing knowledge, skills and practices in formative assessment. Lysaght & O’Leary first unpack the complex concept of Assessment for Learning (AfL), and juxtapose this against the traditional theories of teaching and learning to which teachers are typically exposed in their training. In doing so, they reveal the extent of the challenges teachers may face in appreciating and implementing basic AfL strategies, such as peer- and self-assessment. They suggest that this mismatch between teachers’ mental models and the core of AfL may explain its failure to take hold to the extent that might have been expected, given the wealth of literature attesting its value. The AfLAI is then offered as a practical first step in addressing this issue. The instrument contains 58 items across subscales pertaining to four AfL strategies: (i) sharing learning intentions and success criteria, (ii) questioning and classroom discussion, (iii) feedback and (iv) peer- and self-assessment. Lysaght and O’Leary track its development and report findings from its administration to a convenience sample of 476 primary school teachers. These findings reveal that the instrument has sound psychometric properties, and tentatively suggest that, on average, the use of AfL practices amongst Irish primary school teachers is ‘emerging’, with the exception of peer- and self-assessment practices, which remain ‘sporadic’.

This paper reports on the experiences of five primary school teachers as they implemented formative assessment strategies in the context of physical education. Each teacher planned and delivered a series of 6-8 lessons based on the Primary Schools’ Sports Initiative lesson plans, and selected a variety of written and verbal assessment strategies to examine their pupils’ learning within these lessons. Their experiences of the process were recorded using a combination of focus groups and reflective journals. Qualitative analysis of these data suggested that the process enhanced teachers’ knowledge, pupils’ learning experiences, and the ‘status’ of physical education from the perspective of the learner. Lessons became more structured and learning more explicit. Some challenges were noted, such as guiding pupils in how to engage in peer assessment, and adapting the assessment strategies to suit the context of infant classes. Ni Chroinin & Cosgrave conclude that the use of formative assessment strategies has a positive effect on teaching and learning in the context of physical education, but that the current lack of guidance surrounding the design of these strategies during initial teacher education presents an obstacle to their future use.

This article explores the “inclusive assessment” framework, outlining how the concept of inclusivity can refer not only to who is assessed, but also to how pupils are assessed and what is assessed. The assessment policies and practices of Ireland, England and the U.S. are then examined and compared in terms of the extent to which they exhibit these features of inclusivity. Findings reveal that Ireland falls behind both the US in England on the first two of these three criteria, in that national assessments of literacy and numeracy at primary level in Ireland do not include all children with SEN, and do not offer accommodated or alternative versions to ensure that pupils with SEN can be assessed appropriately. On the other hand, the more deeply ingrained culture of national testing in both the US and England may have the unintended consequence of narrowing the range of curriculum outcomes assessed, thus detracting from inclusivity, as some of the neglected areas may include those that are of particular concern to certain SEND groups. This may be less of an issue in Ireland, where mandatory testing at primary level had only recently been introduced, and is conducted less frequently. Continued analysis of assessment practices in these three countries is advised to track the development of these issues.


In this paper, Harrison, O’Hara & McNamara criticize the assessment system in Irish education, which they believe continues to rely solely on traditional ‘teacher-centred’ methods. Arguing that this fosters a sense of dependency in learners and undermines their potential to become self-reliant individuals, they advocate for the introduction of self- and peer-assessment (S&PA) strategies, beginning as early as possible in the education system. Following this, they document their investigation of S&PA applied to student group work, which included 11 teachers and 523 students across a range of contexts, from primary and post-primary classrooms to further education settings with early school leavers and senior learners. In each setting, students selected criteria they believed to be important in the process of group work, and marked both themselves and their peers according to these criteria. This was then combined with the teacher’s mark for the overall product. Following analysis of interviews with the teachers in question, observations, and a research journal, Harrison et al suggest that S&PA can be as valid and rigorous as traditional assessment, and that it helps students to become self-directed and independent learners. They acknowledge the need for longitudinal studies to determine its true value and benefits, but nonetheless encourage its use.