

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND
ASSESSMENT



ASSESSMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Contents

Preface	5
1. Introduction	7
Education Act 1998	9
Primary School Curriculum (1999)	10
Developments in assessment since 1990	10
Context and purpose of an overarching statement on assessment	10
The structure of the document	11
2. Recent developments in assessment	13
Assessment for teaching and learning	16
Assessment across the curriculum	16
A range of modes of assessment	17
Assessment and the early identification of learning difficulties	18
Recording and reporting the results of assessment	19
Assessment competencies	19
Professional development for teachers	20

3. Re-envisioning assessment	21
What is assessment?	23
Assessment <i>for</i> learning and assessment <i>of</i> learning	23
Assessment and Information and Communications Technology (ICT)	28
Access to assessment information	29
4. General considerations in developing an overarching statement on assessment in primary schools	33
5. Developing a school policy on assessment	37
The use of assessment results for the purposes of assessment <i>for</i> learning	39
The use of assessment results for the purposes of assessment <i>of</i> learning	40
The different dimensions of the child’s learning and development that should be assessed	40
The assessment of children at different stages throughout their primary school education	42
Diagnostic assessment and the early identification of learning difficulties	42
Recording the results of assessments	44
The formal reporting of assessments results	45
Access to assessment results	45

Preface

The function of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is defined in Section 41.—(1) of the Education Act 1998, which states

41.—(1) *The object of Council shall be to advise the Minister on matters relating to*

- a) the curriculum for early childhood education, primary schools and post-primary schools, and*
- b) the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum.*

The Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum (1999) identifies assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning, and emphasises the importance of assessing the process of learning as well as the product. The curriculum includes general guidelines on assessment for each subject and suggests a range of assessment tools that can be used for specific purposes. More detailed guidance and support on assessment – general and subject specific – will enable schools and teachers to continue to develop good practice in assessment. The development of this guidance and support will draw on the experiences of those implementing the curriculum and the approaches to assessment incorporated therein, including teachers, principals, parents and children.

In addition to the experience and insights of those already working with the Primary School Curriculum, national and international research and reports regarding assessment policies and practices will inform the NCCA's development of further assessment guidance and support. The findings of research into the relationship between assessment and children's learning will be central to the NCCA's work. The many functions of assessment and of the information that may be gathered in the course of assessment will also need to be considered. The importance of reporting to parents and guardians on children's learning and on providing meaningful relevant information on transfer to post-primary school or to other primary schools or educational settings will also be important, as will the need to provide appropriate feedback to children on their own progress. The potential role of some forms of assessment in providing valuable information for the education system, and for the public at large, will also need to be considered in any developmental work undertaken by the NCCA.

This document explores these issues and sets out foundational principles for the proposed developmental work.

1. Introduction

Introduction

Assessment in Primary Schools has been developed in the context of

- the Education Act 1998
- the Primary School Curriculum (1999)
- reports and documents that chart relevant developments in assessment in Ireland since 1990.

Education Act 1998

The Education Act redefines, radically, the responsibilities of principals and teachers in relation to the assessment of children. The Act states

22.—(2) ... *the Principal and teachers shall—*

(b) Regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents.

In the past, it was common practice for schools to assess pupils and issue reports to parents. Notwithstanding common practice, the generally agreed benefits of assessment in the teaching and learning process, and the desirability of informing parents about children's progress and attainment, it is now a statutory requirement that every school must assess its pupils and periodically report the results of that assessment to parents. This requirement has significant implications for teachers and schools. The more important of these are

- the statutory entitlement of parents to regular information on the progress and attainment of their children
- a requirement that schools put assessment procedures in place that will provide an accurate account of children's progress and attainment
- a requirement that schools will establish individual records of children's progress and attainment on a continuing basis during the period they are attending the school
- a responsibility on the school to provide parents with accurate and clearly accessible information about their children's progress and attainment.

Section 9 of the Education Act places another requirement on schools. It states

9.—*A recognised school shall provide education to students which is appropriate to their abilities and needs and ... it shall use its available resources to—*

(a) ensure that the educational needs of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational needs, are identified and provided for ...

This provision has considerable implications for schools in developing and implementing a policy on assessment. The most significant of these include

- developing mechanisms for identifying pupils with learning difficulties
- liaising with NEPS, where appropriate
- co-ordinating the monitoring of pupils' progress and attainment by the class teacher, learning support teacher, resource teacher(s), and other professionals
- developing an efficient system for recording and storing the results of assessment.

Primary School Curriculum (1999)

The Primary School Curriculum contains a statement on assessment in the curriculum for each subject. This assessment statement outlines the formative, diagnostic, summative and evaluative functions of assessment. The curriculum emphasises formative classroom-based assessment and its use in providing feedback to inform the next stages in children's learning. The wider purposes of assessment are also formally acknowledged and emphasised. The methods and tools of assessment recommended in the curriculum range on a continuum from less structured, informal methods such as teacher observation to more formal structured methods such as the use of standardised tests and diagnostic tests. These statements on assessment in the curriculum outline in general terms the principles and strategies that should govern the approaches to assessment in the curriculum.

Developments in assessment since 1990

This topic is dealt with in greater detail in Section 2 of this document. It is pertinent to note here that the documents examined, represent considerable agreement regarding what are seen as desirable and undesirable features of assessment. In particular, there is agreement, within the documents, that approaches to assessment should involve neither mandated, high-stakes assessment, nor the publication of assessment results on a school-by-school basis. Rather, the discussion of assessment in these published documents concerns the preparation and implementation of an assessment policy within each school which is tailored to the specific needs of the school population. Sections 4 and 5 of this document discuss important considerations in developing a school policy on assessment.

Context and purpose of an overarching statement on assessment

Taken together, the Education Act, the Primary School Curriculum, and the recent developments in assessment, provide a key context and purpose for the development of this overarching statement on assessment in primary schools. The Education Act places a statutory requirement on schools to assess children and report the results of assessment to parents, thereby underlining the need for a policy within which this can be accomplished most effectively; the Primary School Curriculum provides the educational rationale and imperative for assessment in the teaching and learning process; and successive reports and documents delineate, in broad terms, both the development of thinking on assessment in Ireland since 1990, and the principal concerns that a policy statement on assessment should address.

The structure of the document

Section 2 of this overarching assessment statement discusses in more detail *Recent developments in assessment*, identifying some of the principal issues on which there is broad agreement. Under the heading *Re-envisioning assessment*, Section 3 attempts to give a balanced and coherent approach to the functions of assessment, categorised alternatively as assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning. Section 4, outlines briefly *General considerations in developing a policy on assessment in primary schools*. Finally, Section 5, *Developing a school policy on assessment*, offers detailed recommendations on developing a school policy on assessment.

2. Recent developments in assessment

Recent developments in assessment

The assessment of children's learning has long been a feature of primary education in Ireland. Many teachers construct and administer their own tests, administer standardised tests, and report the results of these assessments to parents and to others. Teachers also engage in their own informal assessments of pupils and use their findings to inform ongoing teaching and learning activities.

Recent legislation (the Education Act, 1998), the ongoing implementation of the Primary School Curriculum (1999), the promotion of whole school policies in all aspects of education, and research findings on the value and uses of assessment, point to a need to review and refocus assessment of children's learning at primary level. The purpose of this section is to review these recent developments and thinking, and to consider their implications for assessment practice at school and class levels.

Attempts to refine policy on assessment in primary schools are not new. Since 1990, several documents have addressed assessment policy. These include

- The Report of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum (DES 1990)
- Curriculum and Assessment Policy. Towards the New Century (NCCA 1993)
- Charting our Education Future, White Paper in Education (DES 1995)
- Assessment in the Primary Curriculum: Primary Assessment Subcommittee Report (NCCA 1996, unpublished)
- Primary School Curriculum (DES 1999)
- Learning-Support Guidelines (DES 2000).

Taken together these documents represent shared thinking regarding assessment, and are in broad agreement on the following:

- Assessment is integral to teaching and learning.
- Assessment relates to all aspects of the curriculum and encompasses the cognitive and affective domains.
- There is a variety of assessment modes, each of which is appropriate in particular circumstances.
- Assessment can play a critical role in the early identification of learning difficulties.
- Schools should implement procedures both at school and classroom levels for recording and reporting assessment outcomes.
- It is important for teachers to recognise the technical qualities of different assessment instruments.
- Teachers need support in the implementation of assessments, and in the recording and reporting of assessment outcomes.

A further concern, addressed in some of the documents but not all, pertains to developing and implementing an approach to assessment that will provide a reliable summative assessment of individual pupils and at the same time serve the essential formative function of assessment in teaching and learning.

The following is a summary of the thinking on the assessment issues outlined in the six documents identified.

Assessment for teaching and learning

The view that assessment contributes significantly to teaching and learning is strongly supported by research and is endorsed in recent policy documents, including the Primary School Curriculum. There is agreement that assessment has a central role to play in the teaching and learning process. In particular, the Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum (1999) states

Assessment is central to the process of teaching and learning. It is used to monitor learning processes and to ascertain achievement in each area of the curriculum. Through assessment the teacher constructs a comprehensive picture of the short-term and long-term needs of the child and plans future work accordingly. Assessment is also used to identify children with specific learning difficulties so that the nature of the support and assistance they need can be ascertained, and appropriate strategies and programmes put in place to enable them to cope with the particular difficulties they are encountering.

Assessment assists communication about children's progress and development between teacher and child, between teacher and parent and between teacher and teacher ...
(Primary School Curriculum, 1999, page 17)

This document recognises that assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning; significant importance is ascribed to assessment *for* learning which is discussed in detail in Section 3, *Re-envisioning assessment*.

Assessment across the curriculum

The Primary School Curriculum echoes the concern expressed in recent policy documents and reports, that assessment should mirror the full range of the child's learning, encompassing the cognitive, creative, affective, physical and social dimensions of his/her development. The Primary School Curriculum notes that assessment in each subject should reflect the child's attainment of objectives, particularly in terms of knowledge, concepts and skills, as well as taking account of the full range of his/her abilities.

The Primary School Curriculum was developed as an integrated learning construct. The structure of the curriculum, the choice of curriculum areas and the subjects they comprise, and the strands, strand units and detailed content objectives reflect a particular view of the child and his/her learning needs at different stages of development. This view of the child as a learner is set out clearly in the aims,

principles and features of the Primary School Curriculum (Introduction, pages 6-11). It is based on the two fundamental principles of the curriculum: that each child is unique and that the potential of each child should be fully developed. It is a central concern of the curriculum, therefore, that all dimensions of the child's life should be nurtured. Assessment should mirror this view, and all aspects of the child's learning and development should be assessed. In relation to the areas to be assessed the introduction to the curriculum states

Assessment is integral to all areas of the curriculum and it encompasses the diverse aspects of learning ... In addition to the products of learning, the strategies, procedures and stages in the process of learning are assessed. Assessment includes the child's growth in self-esteem, interpersonal and intrapersonal behaviour, and the acquisition of a wide range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values.

(Primary School Curriculum, 1999, page 17)

This broad perspective on assessment, represented in the Primary School Curriculum, will not only ensure a consonance between learning and assessment but will further stress the equal claims of the various dimensions of the child's learning and development. If assessment is to have such a broad focus, implications arise for both the range and choice of assessment modes.

The ability to read and write and to understand and use basic mathematical operations is essential to living a reasonably fulfilled life in modern western society. Conversely, the failure to master these skills can seriously disempower an individual, vocationally, socially and culturally. The child's mastery of literacy and numeracy skills is of increasing importance as he/she progresses through primary school and engages with second-level education. It is important, therefore, that, in the context of the child's progress and development in every curriculum area, due account be taken of the extent to which the child's levels of literacy and numeracy skills can enhance or impede his/her understanding of concepts, acquisition of knowledge, and mastery of skills and processes. Research clearly demonstrates that the earlier the child's difficulties in literacy and numeracy are identified, the greater the likelihood that the child can be enabled to overcome these difficulties.

A range of modes of assessment

There is agreement in the documents that a broad continuum of modes of assessment is necessary in order to create a picture that will reflect the full range of the child's progress, attainment and development. Such a continuum would include

- teacher observation
- teacher designed tasks and tests
- work samples, portfolios and projects
- curriculum profiles

- standardised tests
- diagnostic tests.

No single form of assessment is adequate in developing a comprehensive profile of the child. The documents suggest that the mode of assessment should match the purpose of the assessment.

Assessment and the early identification of learning difficulties

The documents examined, are unanimous in stressing the importance of identifying learning difficulties at the earliest possible stage and of providing the learning supports to deal with these difficulties. This issue is addressed in detail in the Learning-Support Guidelines (2000) issued by the DES. The guidelines recommend

- the preliminary screening of pupils by their class teacher, using checklists, rating scales, screening profiles or curriculum profiles in the case of very young children, and standardised norm-referenced tests from the middle of first class onwards
- the selection of pupils for diagnostic assessment
- an initial diagnostic assessment by the learning-support teacher, the interpretation of the outcomes of the assessment, and a determination of the most appropriate form of learning support for each pupil
- a review of each pupil's progress at the end of an instructional term, comprising assessment of the pupil's progress, evaluation of the learning programme which has been implemented, consideration of the level of learning support the pupil may require in the future, and revision of learning targets
- the construction of an *Individual Profile and Learning Programme* for each pupil in receipt of support from the learning-support teacher.

Some children may be in need of further assessment and support. In such cases the learning-support teacher and the class teacher should decide, on the basis of their assessment of an individual child, whether the NEPS psychologist for the school, or another professional, should be consulted by teachers and parents, in order to consider further possible approaches and interventions, including the option of psychoeducational assessment.

In this event, the NEPS Model of Service Code proposes a three-stage process for individual casework, which complements the recommendations in the Learning-Support Guidelines.

Stage One involves the class-teacher and parent(s). Concerns are shared on the basis of screening results and observation of the child's work and personal development. An individualised approach to the child's needs is developed collaboratively resulting in an Individual Education Plan (IEP). At this stage, the educational psychologist may

have an advisory role, but would not normally be involved directly with the individual pupil.

Stage Two involves more specialised teachers, for example the learning-support teacher, along with the class-teacher and parent(s). The effectiveness of the initial IEP is reviewed and, if appropriate, more diagnostic testing is carried out. At this stage the Educational Psychologist would not normally be involved directly with the individual pupil. The psychologist's role continues to be advisory, but may involve indirect support for the child on the basis of the information available. A new IEP is developed collaboratively to address the child's needs. Consultation about the possibility of more formal casework may take place at this stage.

At Stage Three, the NEPS psychologist, subject to parental consent, will become involved directly with the individual pupil, and a formal individual assessment of the child's needs may take place. Based on the total information available, a programme of support will be drawn up in consultation with the class teacher and the learning support teacher to address the child's needs. The implementation and review of this programme are implicit in this stage.

Recording and reporting the results of assessment

The different documents are in agreement that each school should adopt a systematic approach to recording children's progress and attainments, and to reporting on the outcomes of assessment to parents at regular intervals, which, as has been noted, is now a statutory requirement under the Education Act 1998.

If the reporting of the results of assessment to parents is to be helpful in informing them of their children's progress and attainment, there needs to be some consistency in the manner and form of the reporting. For example, the Report of the Primary Curriculum review Body noted that the Record Card system, introduced after the abolition of the Primary Certificate Examination, had fallen into disuse. The development of a nationally-standardised report card would provide some level of consistency in teachers' assessments across schools and across classes within schools.

Assessment competencies

In order to use assessment competently in the classroom, both in assessment *for* learning and in assessment *of* learning, teachers need to develop a range of assessment competencies. These should include the ability to

- choose, develop and administer assessments as well as score and interpret assessment information
- use assessment information to make decisions about future teaching and learning
- communicate assessment information to children, their parents, and others who may require this information

In developing their ability to choose good assessments, teachers should be skilled in recognising unethical or otherwise inappropriate assessment methods. They should also be aware of the limitations of assessments when taken in isolation. Developing

these assessment competencies will include becoming familiar with the technical language employed in assessments and reports provided by other professionals, including psychologists.

Professional development for teachers

It has already been noted that teachers use assessment consistently in the classroom. However, in the context of the issues referred to above, it is important to provide support to teachers and schools to enable them to use assessment in the most effective way to enhance teaching and learning, and to construct and communicate useful and helpful summarised records of children's progress and attainment across a range of curriculum areas. This document defines, in broad terms, teachers' needs in this area. It will form the basis for the development of practical guidelines on assessment for teachers and schools. Such guidelines will be directed at improving teachers' understanding of the importance and uses of assessment, in developing their knowledge in the various assessment competencies, and in enabling them to develop an effective system of reporting the results of assessment. It is important, however, that the advice contained in the guidelines forms the basis for professional in-career development for teachers in assessment, linked to the programme already under way in supporting teachers' implementation of the Primary School Curriculum.

3. Re-envisioning assessment

Re-envisioning assessment

What is assessment?

The term 'assessment' derives from the Latin word 'assidere' which means 'to sit beside'. In many respects that simple phrase tells us a lot about the essence of assessment in the context of the primary school classroom. Its tone is non-threatening and affirming, and it suggests a partnership based on mutual trust and understanding. It reminds us that there should be a positive rather than a negative association between assessment and the process of teaching and learning in schools.

In the broadest sense assessment is concerned with children's progress and achievement. More specifically, classroom assessment may be defined as *the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using and communicating information about a child's progress and achievement during the development of knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes*. Assessment, therefore, involves much more than testing. It is an ongoing process that encompasses many formal and informal activities designed to monitor and improve teaching and learning in all areas of the curriculum.

The remainder of this section addresses the functions of assessment in the context of teaching and learning in school. It presents a re-envisioning of assessment that recognises two principal functions of assessment, *assessment for learning* and *assessment of learning*, instead of the more familiar categories of formative, diagnostic, summative, and evaluative assessment. The use of these two functions of assessment highlights and emphasises the contribution that assessment can make to the day-to-day process of teaching and learning, while giving due weight to its role in helping to create a cumulative record of children's progress and attainment. This new categorisation does not replace the more familiar description of the functions of assessment; rather, they are subsumed into the new categorisation.

Assessment for learning and assessment of learning

This description of the functions of assessment is comparatively recent in educational thinking and is related to educational theory and ideas that have come to the forefront during the last twenty-five years. These ideas arise from a view of learning that posits the child as an active agent in constructing his/her own learning in the context of social interaction with peers, the teacher and the wider community. Central to this view of learning is the role of the teacher in providing a range of supports designed to maximise both the extent and the rate of learning. The teacher establishes the degree to which the child has acquired particular knowledge, has understood particular concepts or has mastered certain skills, identifies the next step in learning, and helps the child engage in new learning in the most successful way. This is the general theory of learning reflected in the aims, principles and defining features of the Primary School Curriculum.

In this view of learning the role of assessment is crucial. The teacher can only establish the child's stage of development in any aspect of learning through a process of assessment, and that assessment information will then be used to 'scaffold' the next step in the learning process.

Such an approach in no way lessens the importance of assessment *of* learning: using assessment to provide a cumulative record of the child's progress and attainment at different stages in his/her development. Rather, it extends the role of assessment and seeks to harness the potential of assessment in contributing to the child's learning. This broader view of the role of assessment envisages assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning as two complementary and interrelated processes.

Assessment *for* learning

Assessment *for* learning involves an ongoing process of recognising and responding to the child's learning in order to enhance his/her development. For the teacher, this process involves engaging children in their own learning by providing rich feedback, using effective questioning, and engaging children in peer and self-assessment. The goal of assessment *for* learning is to enable learners to further their own learning.

Assessment *for* learning is concerned with applying the information gained from the different modes of assessment to the learning and the teaching process. Planning for assessment *for* learning is critical to its success.

Through assessment for learning, the teacher will gather extensive, continuous information about a child's progress and attainment through observing his/her performance in and engagement with the day-to-day learning activities in the classroom. In evaluating the child's response to the teachers' questions, the quality of his/her involvement in class and group activities, and the questions he/she poses in the learning situation, the teacher can obtain a wealth of information in relation to the minutiae of individual children's learning. Tasks and tests undertaken both in the classroom and at home will be directly related to particular learning objectives, and will add a further dimension to the picture the teacher constructs of the progress of the individual children. Correspondingly, portfolios, accumulated work samples, and projects will provide information regarding the progress the child is making over a longer period such as a month or a term. In using assessment *for* learning the teacher takes account of all this information about the child's progress, attainment and possible areas of difficulty in providing regular and high-quality feedback to the child, and in planning for future learning experiences.

Assessment *for* learning includes that function of assessment known as formative assessment, but is wider in scope since it would also include diagnostic assessment and evaluative assessment. Although the term evaluative assessment is usually associated with the evaluation of schools and of educational systems, the teacher can also use assessment information to evaluate the effectiveness with which he/she is mediating the curriculum. Based on this evaluative information, the teacher can make decisions regarding the sequencing of content and the choice of appropriate teaching approaches and methodologies.

The term assessment *for* learning has the merit, therefore, of combining the different ways assessment can be used to enhance teaching and learning, and at the same time defining this as one of the major functions of assessment.

Relating modes of assessment to assessment for learning

The essence of assessment *for* learning lies in its effective use to improve the quality of the child's learning experience. The information obtained from assessment can be

used to enhance the child's opportunity to advance his/her knowledge, to understand a concept, or to master a skill; and this can involve a variety of timescales.

Information gained from the child's response to generative, rich questioning by the teacher, as well as ongoing dialogue between the teacher, the child and the child's peers may be used in the immediate classroom situation. The quality of the child's answer can, for example, suggest further questions that can lead the child to a greater understanding of an idea in the context of a single phase of a lesson. In the same way, observation of a child's errors in oral reading can be used to enhance the nature and quality of feedback that the teacher provides. In these cases the micro elements of teaching and learning are being addressed and improved through the assessment process.

Such continuous interaction will also form a part of a more extensive application of assessment when used in conjunction with a task or test. In the writing process, for example, after discussion of the subject, audience and purpose of a piece of writing, the child will produce an initial draft. This will be used as the basis for a discussion between the child and the teacher. In the course of this process the teacher will, through questioning, discussion and suggestion, help the child to see how the writing can be improved by providing greater detail, conveying thoughts and feelings in a more expressive form, sequencing the writing in a clearer way, using punctuation to provide greater clarity of expression, choosing vocabulary and syntax more appropriate to the audience and purpose of the writing, and using correct spelling. The child will then redraft his/her writing using what he/she has learned from the discussion process. In this way the teacher assesses writing in an interactive way with the child, and the assessment is related directly to the next stage of learning.

Furthermore, when a task or test, whether in a written or more interactive form, is used for assessment purposes it will be in the context of the information the teacher has already obtained through observation in a lesson, or indeed in a series of lessons. This wider picture of the child's progress and attainment can, in turn, be used to identify learning activities calculated to advance the child's understanding and capability in the area concerned.

When, at the end of a longer period of learning, portfolios, work samples and projects are used for assessment purposes, the information gained from them will be informed both by the teacher's observation of the child, and the different tasks, tests and activities with which the child has engaged during the period in question. The information obtained about the child's progress using these modes of assessment can be used to plan future learning experiences designed specifically to address the stage of learning and development the child has attained.

A crucial element in using assessment for learning is the extent to which the child is actively involved in the learning process. It is important that the child understands the purposes of his/her learning and the use of assessment to support that learning. The use of good questioning and quality feedback is vital to enabling the child to develop effective strategies for self-assessment. If this practice is incorporated as a consistent feature of assessment throughout the primary school, children should become reasonably good self-assessors by the time they reach sixth class. This will not only

assist the child in constructing his/her learning on an on-going basis but will provide a strong motivational factor in learning.

Parents have an important contribution to make to assessment *for* learning. Their knowledge of their own children's personalities, strengths, learning styles, home experience, and any difficulties they may be experiencing can be used to inform the teacher's own assessments. This will help to provide a fuller picture of each child's learning needs and guide the teacher in constructing learning experiences that will best promote the child's development.

Keeping records for the purposes of assessment for learning

Much of this assessment will involve a series of related judgements and responses on the teacher's part that will impact directly, often instantaneously, on the teaching and learning process. Such judgements will, for the most part, apply specifically to individual children or groups of children, but may also involve the whole class when children are learning a new or difficult concept or skill. During this process of supporting the child's learning through Assessment *for* Learning, it may be useful for the teacher to record significant observations that can be referred to as an *aide memoire* when reviewing and discussing the child's progress or when planning future learning experiences.

Relating formal modes of assessment to assessment for learning

Standardised tests are most often associated with the summative aspect of assessment, or assessment *of* learning. This has tended to obscure their value in assessment *for* learning. Information gained from a child's performance on a standardised test will provide a measurement of the child's mastery of particular concepts and skills. In many cases these may confirm the judgements the teacher has made on the basis of other forms of assessment evidence.

The value of standardised tests lies not just in their potential to quantify a child's performance. They can also provide information on the child's performance in specific aspects of learning, including individual test items. Some mathematical tests, for example, allow the teacher to document the performance of each pupil on each item. An item by item analysis of a child's performance on standardised tests can sometimes enable the teacher to identify areas of particular difficulty. Moreover, an error analysis by the teacher of a child's incorrect responses can be particularly informative in illuminating the precise nature of a child's misunderstandings or difficulties. The teacher can then draw inferences about the content or processes that should be emphasised in teaching and learning, either for an individual child, or for a class or a smaller group.

Another way in which standardised tests can be used to plan for teaching and learning arises from a comparison of subtest scores. For example, individuals or groups may perform well in certain aspects of reading (for example, word identification) and poorly on others (for example, higher order comprehension processes). This information is useful to the extent that an aspect of learning on which children perform weakly can become the focus of subsequent teaching and learning. However, in general, there should be a large gap between subtest scores before it can be concluded that a child has performed better on one subtest than on another, since, like

test scores themselves, there is error associated with differences between subtest scores.

The administration of formal diagnostic tests in curriculum areas such as reading or mathematics can facilitate an interpretation of the nature of children's learning difficulties, and enable the class teacher or learning-support teacher to form hypotheses about how such difficulties can be addressed during the teaching and learning process. Diagnostic assessment information can also be obtained using the progress tests that accompany mathematics and other textbooks. These might be described as an informal type of diagnostic test, since, typically, there are no norms. Other diagnostic tests may be of a more formal nature, with the possibility of scores being interpreted with reference to the performance of a clearly defined norm-group. Like standardised tests, diagnostic tests can confirm conclusions drawn on the basis of the teacher's own informal assessments. In general, more formal diagnostic tests are administered to pupils who are experiencing learning difficulties.

Finally, it is important to note that the standardised test is only one of the many assessment tools used to gather information about a child's progress. A child's completed standardised test does not provide an absolute measure of his/her achievement. Given the limitations of standardised tests, for example, cultural bias inherent in test questions, it is important that the outcomes of these tests (and of teacher-designed tests) must be considered in the broader context of the student's overall performance and progress.

Assessment *of* learning

The assessment information the teacher gains from the various modes of assessment will be relevant to both assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning. Similarly, records of assessment the teacher makes for the purposes of assessment *for* learning will also be used in assessment *of* learning. However, the two differ essentially in the purposes for which assessment is used. In recording assessment information for the purposes of assessment *for* learning, the teacher's focus is on using the assessment information gathered to provide ongoing feedback to the child and to plan learning experiences which meet his/her learning needs.

Assessment information in relation to assessment *of* learning will, on the other hand, constitute a record of the child's progress and attainment, whether at class or school level, at the end of a given period of learning, as at the end of a unit of work, at the end of a term, or at the end of a year. It might, for example, involve any or all of the following activities

- reviewing a child's written work for a term, making an overall judgement according to agreed and specified criteria, and assigning a grade
- administering a group-administered standardised test of reading, and generating a standard score and percentile rank for each pupil
- reviewing a child's portfolio of work for a year, making an overall judgement, and after discussion with the child, assigning a grade.

Although both assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning will involve the recording of assessment information, the nature of the record and the language in which it is recorded will be quite different for each.

A further defining feature of assessment *of* learning is that assessment recorded for this purpose will form the basis for reporting to a variety of recipients, including parents, other teachers, other schools, and other professionals associated with the education of the child. It is important, therefore, that the recording of such assessment information is consistent and readily communicable to such a varied audience.

Although, as indicated earlier, summative records of achievement such as standardised test scores or overall grades for a term or a year may be of some value in the context of assessment *for* learning, their primary value is in the area of assessment *of* learning.

The quality of education the child receives in primary school depends on many factors, not least amongst them, a coherent experience of education from class to class. This coherence will depend, in great measure, on the relevance and quality of assessment information about the child that is passed from one teacher to another as he/she progresses through the school or transfers from one primary school to another. Such assessment information should comprise a summative record of the child's progress and attainment together with relevant information pertinent to particular learning needs and characteristics of the child.

Schools have, in the past, commonly reported to parents on their children's progress and attainment. However, as has been noted already, the Education Act 1998 places a statutory obligation on schools 'to regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to students and their parents'. Such a requirement further underlines the importance of assessment of learning. Parents have a right to be informed of their child's progress and attainment in a form that is clear and accessible. It is important, too, that the process of reporting to parents affords parents the opportunity to discuss the content of a written report with the teacher.

The transition from primary school to post-primary school can present particular challenges for the child, the teacher and the school. In ensuring that this transition provides for a coherent learning experience, it is important that a reliable and informative record of the child's progress and attainments in the primary school is available to the post-primary school to which he/she transfers.

Assessment and Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

ICT has the potential to play an integral role in both assessment *of* and *for* learning. ICT is relevant to assessment in three particular areas:

- the use of electronic portfolios in contributing to assessment
- the use of ICT as an assessment tool, including diagnostic assessment
- the use of ICT for recording and analysing the results of assessment.

Electronic portfolios of children's work provide the teacher with a further means of monitoring children's progress and attainment. Individual children should have some autonomy in deciding what is to be included in their portfolios. This will both stimulate their interest in using ICT for learning and foster their ability to assess their own work. The earlier discussion in relation to traditional types of portfolios, work samples and projects are equally relevant to electronic portfolios.

A number of ICT software programmes are available which provide instantaneous test-feedback and progress report information to teachers and children. Diagnostic testing software can be used to record the child's cognitive skills, including short term memory, phonological awareness, decoding skills, reading comprehension rate and fluency. The software records each child's responses and generates a graphical profile of his or her cognitive abilities using standardised norms. Teachers and children can use this test-generated information to identify gaps in their learning and to plan appropriate learning activities.

ICT also provides teachers and schools with an effective means of recording and storing the results of assessments. Assessment records can be stored in a manageable and easily accessible form, and databases and spreadsheets can be used to analyse and extrapolate information on the progress and attainment of individuals, groups and classes in the different curriculum areas. All such records are subject to the Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003. (See page 28.)

Access to assessment information

With the accumulation of personal and educational information about children in schools, consideration needs to be given to the accessibility and confidentiality of records. Both the Primary School Curriculum and recent legislation recognise the rights of parents to assessment information, while recent legislation refers to the assessment needs of inspectors and other professionals such as psychologists in the NEPS and officers of the Education Welfare Board.

The Primary School Curriculum and parents

The Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum states

Parents are the child's primary educators, and the life of the home is the most potent factor in his or her development during the primary school years. There is a continuing process through which the child's formal learning experience in school interacts with the less formal developmental experience of home and the family.

It is widely recognised that significant educational, social and behavioural benefits accrue to the child as a result of effective partnership between parents and teachers. Close co-operation between the home and the school is essential, therefore, if children are to receive the maximum benefit from the curriculum. Regular consultation with parents helps teachers to come to a deeper appreciation of children's needs and so to plan for more effective learning experiences. It also provides the means by which teachers keep parents fully informed about children's progress.

(Primary School Curriculum, 1999, pp 21-22)

In relation to assessment, the Introduction states

Assessment assists communication about children's progress and development between ... between teacher and parent ... It also helps to ensure quality in education.
(Primary School Curriculum, 1999, page 17)

The curriculum, therefore, posits a role for parents in children's education that presupposes a free flow of information between teachers and parents about children's educational experiences. An essential element of this involves regular reporting to parents about children's progress and attainment. In this context the Education Act 1998 and the Data Protection (Amendment) Act 2003 are of particular relevance in relation to the access parents should have to the assessment information that schools hold about their children. Access to assessment information about children can also be seen as central to the relationship between inspectors and schools.

The following is a summary of the statutory implications of the Education Act 1998 for schools in relation to the provision of access to assessment information.

Access for parents

Under the Act parents of primary school children are accorded access to records of their children's progress that are kept by the school. Section 9.—(g) of the Act requires schools to

Ensure that parents of a student, or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years, the student, have access in the prescribed manner to records kept by the school relating to the progress of the student in his or her education.

This provision raises two issues:

- the types of records that are envisaged
- the manner in which parents should have access to such records.

Given the breadth of the curriculum and the central position accorded to assessment in all curriculum areas (as outlined above), it seems probable that assessments of children's acquisition of knowledge, concepts and skills, records of their social, emotional and physical development, as well as information on their behaviour, attitudes and relationships with teachers and other children will be detailed in school and class records.

The Act states that parents will have access to records in the 'prescribed manner'. Section 2.— of the Act, dealing with interpretation, states

'prescribed' means prescribed by regulations made by the Minister ...

Section 33.— states

The Minister, following consultation with parents, national associations of parents, recognised school management organisations and recognised trade unions and staff associations representing teachers, may make regulations for the purpose of giving effect to this Act ...

Such regulations have not yet been issued.

Additionally, provisions in the Data Protection (Amendment) Act 2003 mean that children, represented by their parents, are entitled to access all personal data relating to themselves whether stored in any electronic form, or in hard and/or manual copy in a structured filing system in school.

Data protection is concerned with safeguarding the rights of individuals in relation to the processing of personal data. The Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003 confer rights on individuals as well as responsibilities on those persons processing personal data.

Schools as organisations and teachers as individuals collect, store and process data about children on computers and in structured filing systems. In this capacity they are acting as data controllers and so must comply with the regulations as set out by the Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003.

A data controller has certain key responsibilities, which are summarised in terms of eight fundamental rules. These are to

1. obtain and process information fairly
2. keep it only for one or more specified, explicit and lawful purposes
3. use and disclose it only in ways compatible with these purposes
4. keep it safe and secure
5. keep it accurate, complete and up-to-date
6. ensure that it is adequate, relevant and not excessive
7. retain it for no longer than is necessary for the purpose or purposes for which it is held
8. give a copy of his/her personal data to that individual on request.

The Data Protection Commissioner has published a booklet called 'Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003, A Guide for Data Controllers'. It includes a self-help checklist, which is designed to assist organisations and individuals to examine the issues involved in data protection in a structured manner. The results of such an examination may help in formulating a clear policy position on data protection.

Data protection as it pertains to schools must be examined in conjunction with the legislation that already exists in relation to schools, including the Education Act 1998 and the Education (Welfare) Act 2000.

In the event that primary schools become subject to the Freedom of Information Act at some time in the future, parents may seek access to even the most detailed information that schools record about their children.

Access for others

There is now a statutory onus on all involved in the education of children to cooperate in the best interests of those children. The Education Act states

Section 6.—Every person concerned in the implementation of this Act shall have regard to the following objects in pursuance of which The Oireachtas has enacted this Act

(g) to promote effective liaison and consultation between schools and centres of education, patrons, teachers, parents, the communities served by schools, local authorities, health boards, persons or groups of persons who have a special interest in, or experience of, the education of students with special educational needs and the Minister ...

Since effective liaison and consultation could in any one of a variety of situations involve schools in providing access to records of assessment, the implications of this provision need to be examined carefully.

4. General considerations in developing an overarching statement on assessment in primary schools

General considerations in developing an overarching statement on assessment in primary schools

The elements of a strategy for assessment in primary schools is implicit in the analysis of the thinking and development on assessment presented in Section 2, *Recent developments in assessment*, and in the re-orientation of the functions of assessment outlined in Section 3, *Re-envisioning assessment*. Whereas the principal elements of an overarching statement on assessment in primary schools can be extrapolated from these two sections, these are contingent on the acknowledgement and acceptance of particular actions in a wider national framework. The more important of these would include

- a commitment to the equal importance of assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning
- the incorporation of assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning as integral elements of the school plan in every primary school
- the development of a common framework for recording important assessment information
- the development of a common framework for reporting to parents, which would ensure consistency, irrespective of the schools their children attend
- the development of guidelines to support teachers and schools in using assessment effectively for the purposes of assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning
- the development of guidelines to support teachers and schools in providing access to assessment information in the context of the Education Act 1998, the Data Protection (Amendment) Act 2003, and the Education (Welfare) Act 2000
- the development of regulations by the DES in relation to the reporting of assessment results, as envisaged in Sections 1.—(4) (b) and 22.—(2) (b) of the Education Act
- the development of assessment instruments and assessment resources appropriate to Irish primary schools
- the provision of adequate in-service education and supports to enable teachers to implement the approaches to assessment outlined in Section 5 of this document
- the modification of pre-service education courses to prepare students to implement the approaches to assessment outlined in Section 5 of this document.

If these matters are addressed effectively schools can approach the issue of assessment in such a way that it fulfils its dual role of furthering the learning and development of individual children and of providing parents and others concerned with the education of the child with accurate and helpful information on the child's progress and attainment.

5. Developing a school policy on assessment

Developing a School Policy on Assessment

In fulfilling its statutory requirements under the Education Act 1998, in giving effect to the aims, objectives and learning principles of the Primary School Curriculum, and in the context of wider national considerations outlined in Section 4, the school should develop a plan for the assessment of all the children for which it is responsible. This should be an integral part of the School Plan and address the following issues:

- the use of assessment results for the purposes of assessment *for* learning
- the use of assessment results for the purposes of assessment *of* learning
- the different dimensions of the child's learning and development that should be assessed
- the assessment of children at different stages throughout their primary school education
- diagnostic assessment and the early identification of learning difficulties
- recording the results of assessments
- the formal reporting of assessment results
- access to assessment results.

The use of assessment results for the purposes of assessment *for* learning

The principal and staff should examine the teaching approaches and methodologies of the Primary School Curriculum that they are using in different subjects, and explore the ways in which assessment can be used to make these more effective in furthering the child's learning and development. Together they should

- ensure that information from a broad range of assessment modes is used to plan for and support the child's learning experience in all areas of the curriculum
- match assessment modes to curriculum objectives and planned learning outcomes
- identify a practical method for the ongoing recording of significant assessment information derived from observation, teacher-designed tests and tasks, standardised tests, diagnostic tests, and so forth
- use information derived from a range of assessments, including standardised tests, to construct relevant learning experiences for individual children

- enable parents to share relevant information about their children, and incorporate this information in the development of learning experiences
- discuss the results of assessment with children as a means of motivating them to learn, and provide children with opportunities to develop self assessment skills using, for example, portfolios and learning logs
- use the results of assessment in planning the acquisition and deployment of educational materials and resources.

The use of assessment results for the purposes of assessment *of* learning

In conjunction with assessment *for* learning, information from assessments is also used to monitor children's progress in learning. This information will form the basis of a record of each child's progress and development at class and school level. In order to effect this, the school should

- ensure that assessment takes account of the full range of learning appropriate to the child as this is set out in the curriculum, and identifies gaps, if there are any, in the child's learning
- use modes of assessment that are particularly appropriate to the assessment *of* learning
- compile a record of children's progress and attainment at least twice a year for the purpose of reporting to parents
- be aware of the individual circumstances and requirements of children with special needs or serious learning difficulties in the assessment *of* learning and in the interpretation of the results of assessment
- ensure that parents are aware of the school's policy on assessment
- combine information acquired about children through assessment *for* learning with information acquired through assessment *of* learning, taking account of all facets of the child's progress and attainment
- give due importance to every curriculum area in the assessment *of* learning.

The different dimensions of the child's learning and development that should be assessed

Just as the curriculum takes the broadest view of what is entailed in the education of the child, assessment must address not only each area of the curriculum but also the different dimensions of the child's development including his/her cognitive, affective, creative, social and psychomotor development. The Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum addresses these dimensions in relation to assessment

Assessment is integral to all areas of the curriculum, and it encompasses the diverse aspects of learning: the cognitive, the creative, the affective, the physical and the social.

(Primary School Curriculum, 1999, page 18)

- Assessment of the *cognitive dimension* will take account of the acquisition of knowledge, concepts and skills. It will also take account of the development of the child's literacy and numeracy skills, and his/her mastery of higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Assessment of the *creative dimension* will take account of the development of the child's capacity for creative expression and response. Just as creative thinking requires going beyond accepted knowledge in order to generate new knowledge and understandings, assessment of the child's creative development will focus on the child's ability to develop insights, interpretations, visualisations, and so forth, in responding to his/her environment.
- Assessment of the *affective dimension* is concerned with developing a sense of discrimination in response to the expression of ideas and emotions in artistic form. It should also take account of the child's growing awareness of the relationship between function and form and, inevitably, it will encompass the emotional reactions of the child to artistic expression and to human relationships both in real life and to their expression in creative and aesthetic form. It will also take account of the moral and spiritual development of the child, both of which are inseparable from his/her engagement with the content of every curriculum area.
- Assessment of the *physical dimension* will take account of the child's development of fine and gross motor skills and the gradual development of his/her bodily control and co-ordination. Assessment of the child's development of psychomotor skills will not be limited to Physical Education but will be relevant to all learning experiences that involve the child in physical interaction with objects encountered in his/her learning environment.
- Assessment of the *social dimension* will take account of the child's interpersonal and intrapersonal development, including the behaviour, attitudes and social values he/she develops throughout his/her engagement with the Primary School Curriculum.

Finally, it is important to note that, in developing a plan for assessment of the child's progress vis-à-vis the Primary School Curriculum, the teacher must avoid the perils of over-assessment.

The assessment of children at different stages throughout their primary school education

Children mature and develop throughout their years in primary school, and their perception of learning and their experience of education change as they grow older. The child's perspective on the world and on his/her experience of learning is more holistic in the early years than it is later, and the demarcation of different areas of learning is largely irrelevant to the child. Later, children become more conscious of the nature of different areas of the curriculum and the different dimensions of learning expressed in the knowledge, concepts and skills characteristic of different subjects. Approaches to assessment should reflect this growth and change.

The teacher should

- take account of the developmental variability displayed by individual children, while being aware of the accepted milestones in children's development
- take account of the contextual basis of a young child's learning, and the degree to which school experience differs from home and pre-school experience
- allow time in each classroom day for active observation of children and listening to children, in addition to the normal use of observation in the learning process, in order to construct as full a picture as possible of each child's progress and development
- make judgements over a period of time and avoid snapshot judgements
- use modes of assessment appropriate to the child's age and stage of development
- ensure vigilance in identifying learning difficulties in particular children, noting whether these relate to individual learning styles, and use assessment information in providing appropriate intervention and support
- maintain close and consistent contact with parents, in order to share information about children and to explore the interpretation of children's attitudes, actions and learning styles.

Diagnostic assessment and the early identification of learning difficulties

It is important that assessment is used to identify children with learning difficulties at the earliest possible stage so that appropriate support and intervention can be put in place. Using appropriate tools, it should be possible for teachers to identify at-risk children by the end of senior infants. Diagnostic assessment has an important role to play in this process. It is not necessary to administer formal diagnostic tests to all children. Indeed, most teachers would not have the time to do this. Part of the school's assessment plan should detail the role of diagnostic assessment, including its place in the sequence of assessment procedures appropriate in identifying and addressing individual children's learning difficulties. The following is for the most part a

summary of the approach to the early identification of learning difficulties contained in the Learning-Support Guidelines issued by the DES.

- The class teacher should understand the nature and function of diagnostic assessment, and be familiar with a range of formal and informal diagnostic tests.
- All class teachers should be familiar with the *Learning-Support Guidelines* issued by the DES.
- The class teacher should routinely monitor children whom he/she perceives as experiencing learning difficulties, using monitoring activities such as running records of oral reading, identifying conceptual and computational difficulties in mathematics, and analysing individual children's learning styles.
- The class teacher should, on the basis of his or her own assessments and the results of screening tests, and in conjunction with parents, select those children for whom further, more formal, diagnostic assessment is appropriate.
- The learning-support teacher, in conjunction with the class teacher, should perform a formal diagnostic assessment, interpret the results of that assessment, and determine the most appropriate form of learning support for each child.
- Diagnostic assessment, where relevant, should lead to the development of an Individual Profile and Learning Programme for the child, constructed by the learning-support teacher in consultation with the class teacher.
- The learning-support teacher, in conjunction with the class teacher, resource teachers, other relevant members of staff, and parents should conduct a review of each child's progress at the end of an instructional term, comprising
 - an assessment of the child's progress
 - an evaluation of the learning programme that has been implemented
 - a consideration of the level of learning support the child may require in the future
 - a review of learning targets.
- The learning-support teacher and the class teacher should decide, on the basis of their assessment of an individual child, whether the NEPS psychologist for the school should be consulted by teachers and parents, as described in NEPS Model of Service document, to consider further possible approaches and interventions including the option of psychoeducational assessment, or whether another relevant professional should be involved.

Recording the results of assessments

Assessment information should be recorded in different forms as appropriate to the child's particular learning experience and the different modes of assessment available. The teacher's assessment activities should involve

- recording significant observations of children in day-to-day learning activities, talking account of both the processes and products of learning
- recording significant details of children's performance in tasks and tests
- keeping significant and useful records of children's performance in learning.

For the purposes of assessment *of* learning the record of a child's assessment outcomes needs to be more formal. It will be in line with the school's assessment policy and will be recorded at class and school level. However, as a general guide in developing a policy in relation to recording assessment outcomes

- the class teacher should keep a record of each child's progress and attainment, which should be updated at least twice a year, preferably at the end of the first term or early in the second term and at the end of the school year, and used as the basis for reporting to parents and others
- the results of assessment should be recorded in different forms, including marks, grades, checklists, profiles, and narrative comment
- the results of standardised tests should include a standard score and percentile rank for each child (additionally, raw scores, reading ages, sten scores, etc. may be used)
- in the assessment of portfolios, work samples and projects, the teacher should involve the children in a process of consultation appropriate to the age of the child
- in order to ensure consistency, there should be a close correspondence in the ways in which the results of assessment are recorded from class to class in each curriculum area, both within schools and, where possible, among schools
- a summary record of each child's progress, based on assessment information compiled by class teachers, learning-support teachers and resource teachers, should be part of the school records, and should be held by the principal
- the central record of each child's progress and attainment should be updated annually and take account of the child's strengths and needs, the progress he/she has made, and areas of development that need particular attention
- in recording the results of assessments the teacher should be mindful of the needs of those to whom the results will be reported, and the results of the assessment of children should be recorded in such a way as to facilitate the provision of the most relevant and useful information about children's

progress and development to other professionals concerned with the child's education.

The formal reporting of assessments results

If assessment is to contribute effectively in facilitating consistent and coherent progress in the learning and development of individual children, the reporting of assessment information should transcend the mere requirements of statutory provision. Assessment information is central to a variety of individuals and bodies who will be involved in furthering the child's progress and development both in primary school and later. These include children themselves, parents, other teachers, other schools, and other professionals concerned with the children's education. In this context schools and teachers should

- report the results of the assessment of children to their parents at least twice a year, preferably towards the end of the first term or early in the second term, and at the end of the school year
- use one of these reports, ideally the earlier report, to meet parents and discuss their children's progress and development, and the setting of future learning goals
- ensure that a formal record of each class teacher's assessment of individual children is available to the next teacher to whom the children transfer
- ensure that, subject to parental consent, a full and accurate summary of the progress and development of each child is available to another primary school, whether inside or outside the State, when a child is transferring to that school, and/or to each second-level school receiving children from a primary school, or alternatively, provide parents with a full and accurate summary of the progress and development of their child, which they may transfer to the school receiving the child.

Access to assessment results

Assessment records of individual children are confidential. It is recommended that direct access to individual, group or class assessment information may be given to designated persons in appropriate circumstances as follows:

- the child's class teacher
- the class teacher to whom the child is transferring
- relevant learning-support and resource teachers, and other relevant professionals
- the principal
- the DES inspector

- the relevant NEPS psychologist
- The Education Welfare Board and its officers
- parents and or guardians, who should have access to assessment information about their own children
- another school, primary or post-primary, to which the child is transferring, subject to the consent of the child's parent(s) or guardians(s).

As indicated in Section 4, a detailed protocol governing the provision of access to assessment information should be developed. This should be done through a process of consultation between the DES and other relevant bodies.