



ASSESSMENT IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Guidelines for Schools



NCCA

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta

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Introduction

This document, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools*, has been developed to support teachers' knowledge and understanding of assessment, and to assist schools in developing and implementing an assessment policy. The guidelines provide examples of how teachers gather information about children's progress and achievement, use this information to enrich teaching and learning, and report this information to all those concerned with children's education.

The document contains four sections. Section 1, *Re-envisioning assessment*, presents two approaches to assessment—assessment for learning (AfL) and assessment of learning (AoL). These approaches build on the four purposes of assessment outlined in the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) - formative, summative, evaluative and diagnostic. The section briefly describes AfL and AoL with further detail provided in Section 3.

Section 2, *Classroom assessment methods*, outlines a range of methods teachers use in assessing children's learning. Descriptions of how teachers use these methods to support children's learning, and their own teaching, are also included.

Section 3, *A closer look at AfL and AoL*, compares and contrasts the two approaches to assessment. It uses five assessment activities—gathering, recording, interpreting, using, and reporting—to show what the two approaches look like in practice.

Section 4, *School policy on assessment*, provides advice on developing the school's assessment policy. It highlights the legislative requirements for recording and reporting information about children's progress and achievement.

Appendix A presents further information on classroom assessment methods to supplement Section 2 with photocopiable resources for some of these methods contained in Appendix B. Appendix C outlines legislative requirements that affect schools in relation to assessment policy. Appendix D summarises the roles of various organisations in supporting children's learning.



SECTION 1

RE-ENVISIONING ASSESSMENT



Section 1

Re-envisioning assessment

Sample activity 1

Assessment in action

Curriculum area/Subject	Mathematics
Strand	Measures
Strand unit	Length
Curriculum objective	The child should be enabled to estimate, compare, measure and record length using non-standard units.
Class level	First and second classes
Strand	Number
Strand unit	Operations—Addition
Curriculum objective	The child should be enabled to add numbers without and with renaming within 99.
Class level	First and second classes

Ms. Coffey organises her twenty-six first and second class children into four groups—three groups of five children in second class and one larger group of eleven children in first class. Building on practical work over the previous days to add numbers with and without renaming within 99, Ms. Coffey presents each group of second class children with a series of number problems and a basket of resources (lollipop sticks, unifix cubes, stick-a-bricks, and number strips). The children work together solving the problems.

Meanwhile, Ms. Coffey works with the first class children to develop their skills in measuring length using non-standard units. After discussing why knowledge of length is important, and linking this to everyday activities, she demonstrates measuring the length of a book using matchboxes, the length of a desk using paintbrushes, and the length of the classroom using footsteps. Ms. Coffey invites the children to work in pairs (with one group of three children) to measure the length of objects including their maths copybooks, schoolbags, their arm-spans, and the class library. During these activities she observes the children at work and talks to them about their findings. She reminds the children about important strategies when measuring, for example placing the measuring units end-to-end, positioning the first unit at the edge of the object being measured, and pointing to the measuring units as they count them.

When the children have completed their measuring tasks, Ms. Coffey invites them to share their findings as a group. Providing feedback through discussion, she helps them to explore reasons for significant differences in their findings. These arise mainly from the children not placing the measuring units end-to-end while a few are caused by counting errors. Noting that a number of the children require more experience in measuring accurately, Ms. Coffey plans to provide similar tasks the following day.

This account of one teacher's classroom practice shows how, as the *Primary School Curriculum* suggests, *assessment is integral to all areas of the curriculum and it encompasses the diverse aspects of learning* (*Primary School Curriculum, Introduction*, p. 18). In this example, the assessment process provides the teacher with the information she needs in order to make important decisions about the teaching and learning process—selecting curriculum objectives, identifying appropriate teaching methodologies, designing learning activities, choosing suitable resources, differentiating learning, and giving feedback to children on how well they are doing. These everyday activities place assessment at the very heart of teaching and learning.

Assessment is, therefore, part of what the teacher does on a daily basis in his/her classroom, as shown in Figure 1.

What is the purpose of assessment in the Primary School Curriculum?

Assessment is about building a picture over time of a child's progress and/or achievement in learning across the *Primary School Curriculum*. Information about **how** the child learns (the learning process) as well as **what** the child learns (the products of learning) shapes the picture. The teacher uses this information to identify and celebrate the child's current learning, and to provide him/her with appropriate support for future learning.

What does assessment involve?

For the teacher, assessment involves gathering information to understand better how each child is progressing at school and using that information to further the child's learning. Assessment, therefore, goes far beyond just testing. It concerns the daily interactions between the teacher and each child that include moment-by-moment conversations, observations and actions.

Assessment is the process of **gathering, recording, interpreting, using, and reporting** information about a child's progress and achievement in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Whether the teacher is questioning and listening to children, observing children working on a task, or using the results of a weekly test to inform teaching and learning, assessment involves many overlapping and often simultaneous activities—gathering, recording, interpreting, using, and reporting information. These activities can happen within a few seconds or, in contrast, over a period of days or weeks depending on the purpose of the assessment and the methods used. The information gathered enriches the teacher's understanding both of what and how the child learns. The teacher uses that information to plan learning experiences based on appropriate objectives from the curriculum, and on the child's previous learning: *Through assessment the teacher constructs a comprehensive picture of the short-term and long-term needs of the child and plans future work accordingly* (*Primary School Curriculum, Introduction*, p. 17). Using assessment information in these ways, the teacher supports and extends the child's learning.

Figure 1: Assessment as part of classroom practice



How has assessment developed since the publication of the Primary School Curriculum?

The *Primary School Curriculum* emphasises, in general terms, the importance of assessment in enabling the teacher to extend and enrich children's learning across all curriculum areas. In recent years, research, theory and practice in teaching and learning have highlighted more specifically **how** the teacher can use assessment to make learning more enjoyable, more motivating, and more successful for each child. Drawing on these developments, these guidelines describe a *re-envisioning of assessment* in the primary school and provide the teacher with information and examples to show how assessment can translate into daily practice in the classroom.

The curriculum describes assessment as having four functions—formative, summative, evaluative and diagnostic. In re-envisioning assessment in the primary school, these guidelines build on these functions, and focus on two principal approaches to assessment:

- Assessment for Learning (AfL)
- Assessment of Learning (AoL).

These interrelated and complementary approaches emphasise two aspects of assessment that are central to the teacher's work:

- The teacher uses evidence on an ongoing basis to inform teaching and learning (AfL).
- The teacher periodically records children's progress and achievement for the purpose of reporting to parents¹, teachers and other relevant persons (AoL).

¹ Throughout these guidelines, the term *parents* refers to the child's primary caregivers and educators. These include the child's father and mother and/or guardians.

Assessment for Learning (AfL)

The concept of assessment for learning (AfL) extends the potential of formative assessment. It emphasises the child's active role in his/her own learning, in that the teacher and child agree what the outcomes of the learning should be and the criteria for judging to what extent the outcomes have been achieved. In essence, AfL helps teachers and children to focus on three key questions:

- **where are** children **now** in their learning?
- **where are** children **going** in their learning?
- **how** will children get to the **next point** in their learning?

Providing feedback to children is therefore central to AfL. This feedback is based on evidence of how and what the children are learning. Feedback focused on the learning or task in hand, can help children identify and celebrate their progress and achievements, pinpoint challenges they experience, and decide what the next steps should be. This level of involvement in shaping their own learning can heighten children's awareness of themselves as learners and encourage them to take more personal responsibility for, and pride in, their learning.

AfL does not generally happen at the end of a particular piece of work or a period of time. It usually takes place in the day-to-day minute-by-minute interactions between teachers and children. Everything children do, say and make—asking questions, working on a project or a task alone or collaboratively, playing, designing or making a model, and so on—has the potential of providing the teacher and the children themselves with information about what they do and don't understand and what they can and cannot do. Using AfL, the teacher interprets this information and uses it to support children in their work and to plan ahead. In this way, the teacher can integrate AfL into teacher-child interactions and children can come to regard it a natural part of how they learn in school.

The teacher can also use information from AfL to evaluate his/her teaching. Based on information gathered from children, the teacher can make changes to his/her planning, organisational strategies, and teaching methodologies in order to make learning more successful for the children.

Assessment of Learning (AoL)

In contrast, assessment of learning (AoL) focuses more on medium- and long-term assessment. AoL generally involves assessing a child's learning at the end of a given period, such as the end of a unit of work, a week, a term, or a year. The emphasis in AoL is on measuring a child's cumulative progress towards curriculum objectives. A grade or a score is often the only feedback a child receives. While these results are useful to the teacher they can be of limited value to the child, unless the teacher identifies the essential information they provide about the child's progress and achievement and communicates this to the child. AoL also helps the teacher to plan future work, to set new targets, and to provide feedback and information for end-of-year assessment.

The teacher uses information from AoL for reporting, particularly to parents and other teachers. The Department of Education and Science (DES) inspector may access assessment records to ascertain literacy and numeracy standards, and/or to assess progress in curriculum implementation as part of the Whole School Evaluation process. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist may also access the information gathered through AoL in order to work with schools in meeting the learning needs of individual children.

Section 3 of these guidelines presents **AfL** and **AoL** in more detail and highlights the acronyms in bold to help distinguish between the two. It compares and contrasts the two approaches using the five activities in the assessment process: gathering, recording, interpreting, using, and reporting information about a child's progress and achievement.