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

SUPPORTING ASSESSMENT IN SCHOOLS - 3

STANDARDISED TESTING IN COMPULSORY SCHOOLING

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Standardised Testing in Compulsory Schooling

Introduction

This paper presents the response of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to the request of July 2004, to identify key issues relating to implementing standardised testing of literacy and numeracy in compulsory schooling, and to provide corresponding advice. It should be seen in the context of the other three papers that comprise the suite of documents *Supporting Assessment in Schools*. As the paper will make clear, consideration of standardised testing in isolation from more general assessment practice and policy issues places an over-emphasis on what is just one of a range of assessment tools availed of by teachers and schools in their day-to-day work. Standardised testing should be considered in context; the inclusion of this paper as part of the suite of other assessment documents is an attempt to do just that.

The paper is presented in two sections. The first presents an initial mapping of issues related to the introduction of standardised testing in compulsory schooling, the second discusses international practice and advises on short and medium term next steps.

The issues presented in the first part of this paper have been mapped out by members of two NCCA committees, the Junior Cycle Review Committee and the Early Childhood and Primary Committee. The Assessment Technical Working Group has also provided ideas and comment. The second part of the paper is informed by initial work undertaken by the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks (known as INCA) project, at the National Foundation for Educational Research in England. NCCA's membership of this project gives access to such compilations of international practice. More detailed thematic studies are also feasible.[1] The initial INCA overview is included as an appendix. The second part of the paper also draws on a number of projects taking place across the NCCA and on its research conducted to support the Primary Curriculum and Junior Cycle reviews.

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[1] The NCCA commissioned a study of this nature as part of its review of senior cycle education.

Section One – Mapping the Issues

In setting out some issues associated with standardised testing this paper firstly discusses the range of purposes currently served by standardised tests. It comments on the relationship between standardised testing and the curriculum. It suggests some of the issues that can arise in the frequency and timing of such tests. The paper examines some of the unintended consequences that can emerge when standardised testing becomes a high-stakes assessment activity in schools and the education system. Finally, some of the logistical and cost issues are raised.

The development of standardised tests, their theoretical context and the technical details associated with their administration and scoring is a specialised field of study. The mapping presented here is done in general terms to allow for accessibility.

The purpose or function of standardised testing

While there are many definitions of standardised testing, this paper is based on the following:

> *A standardised test is an instrument of assessment that contains standardised procedures for its administration and scoring and for the interpretation of its results. In practice, the term 'standardised test' is most often applied to assessment instruments that contain objectively scored items that are produced commercially by a test agency and that are norm-referenced.*

Standardised tests are currently used in most primary schools on a regular basis to test a child's reading and mathematical skills and to measure children's progress in these areas. These norm-referenced standardised tests help the teacher to provide a more accurate picture of the child's development with reference to age or class group. When used in combination with other assessment methods, standardised tests contribute to the

accuracy of the teacher's monitoring and assist in identifying the needs of individual children.

Standardised tests are tests of a pupil's **achievement**, rather than tests of a pupil's ability. However, because standardised tests provide accurate information on achievement, a tendency to extend specific judgements on achievement into more general judgements on ability can sometimes emerge in practice. For example, standardised tests are sometimes perceived as proxies for testing a pupil's IQ. This is an important issue as standardised tests simply measure the pupil's achievement on particular test items at a given time, and relate it to the achievement of pupils of similar age, whereas the potential of a pupil to realise his/her innate ability is determined by a range of in-school and out-of-school factors, some of which relate only indirectly to the process of learning.

A single assessment instrument cannot answer multiple questions. In the letter to the NCCA requesting advice on standardised testing, a number of purposes are linked with standardised testing including the identification of progress, the allocation of resources and the provision of information for decision making among others. The question of fitness-for-purpose of standardised testing emerges as an important issue in this context.

The purposes which standardised tests currently serve in Irish schools include the following:

- Standardised tests are used to identify pupils with learning difficulties at the earliest possible stage so that appropriate support and intervention can be put in place. While standardised tests do not indicate the nature of a learning difficulty, they are used to flag potential difficulties and prompt further assessment.

- Standardised tests are used in the process of pupils transferring from the primary to the post-primary school. Smyth et al (2004) noted the use of standardised tests with pupils on entry into first year. "The majority of schools use various

standardised tests (such as Drumcondra tests, Sigma-T, Micra-T, Gapadol, NFER-Nelson, Shonnell and Richmond)."[2] 42% of schools use their own tests on entry; the researchers reported that post-primary school principals mentioned a total of 26 different types of tests. According to the principals in the study, the results of the tests are used for the identification of students who may require learning support, the establishing of a base-line for ongoing monitoring, the allocation of students to base classes and the allocation of subject levels for the Junior Certificate examination.

- Standardised tests contribute to the evaluation of schools by the Inspectorate of the DES. Standardised test data are corroborated with other measures of pupil progress and attainment, as part of an Inspector's evaluation of overall learning progress in the school.

- Standardised tests are used to report on their children's achievement to parents and guardians. Test results, as well as information gleaned through other assessment measures are used to present a full picture of the child's progress to his/her parents/guardians.

- Standardised tests are used to conduct national assessments of educational achievement in primary schools, approximately every five years. The Educational Research Centre (ERC), in conjunction with the DES uses standardised tests with population samples, in English (reading), Irish (reading, and oral language in co-operation with Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann), and Mathematics. These data are used to gauge the overall standards of achievement in the system as well as changes over time.

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[2] Smyth, E, McCoy, S. & Darmody, M. (1994). Moving up: The experiences of first-year students in post-primary education. The Liffey Press, Dublin.

- Standardised tests are used to identify pupils who require learning support. The number of learning support hours allocated to a school is based on the number of pupils achieving scores at or below the 10th percentile in standardised tests.

- Standardised tests have been used in research commissioned by the NCCA to provide information of student achievement in junior cycle. Tests were administered to pupils participating in the JCSP as part of the review of that programme, and to pupils in the case study schools in the cohort study as a baseline against which subsequent examination performance can be measured.

In testing, questions of purpose fall under three headings:

- What is the purpose of the test?
- How will the data collected be used?
- Who will have access to the data?

Clarity on these three questions is vital when planning any assessment or testing developmental work. For example, if the stated purpose of a test is to provide a national picture of pupil progress, the data collected are used to generate this picture, but the data are then made available to the general public on a school-by-school basis, the initial stated purpose of the test is radically changed. Similarly, if the effectiveness of any educational initiative is to be measured by its impact on test scores, the scope and nature of the initiative is going to be determined by this fact.

Clarity of purpose will also have an influence on the timing of testing. The proposals for the introduction of standardised testing outlined in July 2004 referred to three points of testing during the period of compulsory schooling. The proposals suggest that testing would occur during the first and sixth class of primary schooling with the third point being at some other stage – to be advised by the NCCA – during the period of compulsory schooling. The issue of the role of standardised testing in the junior cycle of

post-primary schooling arises, and as a consequence, the relationship that might be envisaged between such testing and the existing Junior Certificate examination.

Standardised testing across the curriculum

Standardised tests are generally used to assess student achievement in literacy and numeracy, and, although some tests have been developed to assess student attainment of science concepts, standardised testing is generally confined to these two areas of achievement.

The Primary School Curriculum emphasises the importance of literacy and numeracy in the educational experience of children and highlights their vital role in enabling pupils to access the rest of the curriculum. The curriculum for the junior cycle of post-primary education also flags the importance of continuing to support mastery in literacy and numeracy, building on what has been achieved in primary school.

The administration of standardised tests in literacy and numeracy reflects their particular importance. However, there is a danger that an over-emphasis on standardised testing could lead to the establishment of an 'assessment hierarchy' with testing at the top and other forms of assessment perceived as of lower status. Thus a knowledge and subject hierarchy is created with those subjects particularly relevant to the tests (English and mathematics) being accorded more than their recommended time at the expense of the other curriculum areas. For learners, the message is clear – some forms of achievement in particular areas of the curriculum are more valuable than others.

One particular issue that would be faced by schools in Ireland is that standardised tests have not been developed for use by schools where Irish is the medium of instruction. To do so poses a number of challenges given the wide range of linguistic experience of pupils in Gaelscoileanna and in scoileanna sa Ghaeltacht. Establishing norms for these tests would be an exceptionally difficult task. The ERC published standardised tests for English, Maths and Gaeilge for the general population in the mid 1970s. The Gaeilge

test was developed for children with Irish as a second language. It was standardised on all schools, rather than with a sample of children who had Irish as their first language. Currently, the ERC is revising their maths test and it will be published in Irish.

Frequency and timing of standardised assessment

In general, the earlier an assessment is conducted (for diagnostic purposes) the more likely it is to lead to profitable interventions on behalf of the pupil. On the other hand, it may be more developmentally appropriate to use norm-referenced standardised tests with pupils in second class than in first class as reliability of the test results increases as pupils grow older and skills become stabilised.

At the other end of the period of primary schooling, testing at fifth class instead of sixth, it can be argued, facilitates further diagnosis of learning difficulties and implementation of appropriate interventions during the pupil's primary school years. However, if one of the purposes of testing is to contribute to the transfer of information from the primary to the post-primary school, it could be argued that testing in sixth class would provide more up-to-date information. The choice of timing relates to the primary purpose of the test.

Within a school year, testing at the beginning of the year enables schools to develop appropriate interventions for certain pupils, while testing at the end of the year allows schools to make placement and progress decisions based on assessment results. Given the variation in the pace at which the curriculum is covered with classes, and the sequence of coverage, timing the testing can be problematic. Again, the purpose of the assessment will determine the optimal time for administering tests during the school year.

A further related issue is the matter of what test, or what tests? Currently, schools make use of different tests available for Irish primary schools, and, in some cases, tests that are not normed for the Irish primary school population. If the purpose of testing is to

gain a comprehensive national picture, the issue arises of whether a single test should be made available for schools.

The question of stakes

When the results of any assessment, not just a standardised test, are shared with parents/guardians or with pupils themselves the process of testing and reporting is generally seen as 'low-stakes'. Such low stakes exchanges of information are 'high value' for the pupil, the teacher and the parents/guardians.

When the pupils' assessment results are shared between teachers, principals and inspectors the stakes are generally seen as 'medium' as information other than the assessment results may now be inferred about teachers, about classes or about schools. The site of 'high value' also shifts slightly, away from the pupil and parent/guardian and towards the school principal and inspectors.

High-stakes assessment involves sharing the assessment outcome with those further removed from the student, such as resource allocation agencies, evaluation agencies and the general public. The 'high value' of these tests is for the system as a whole – such tests may provide important data about the quality of the education system. It is argued, however, that in the case of high stakes tests the information may be of little use for the individual student; it may even have a negative impact on the quality of his/her educational experience. Commentators have documented a range of unintended effects of high stakes tests on students and classrooms in countries where such testing is widely used. These include

- measurement-driven instruction or 'teaching to the test' resulting in a narrowing of the curriculum

- exclusion of pupils with special educational needs, as well as children who don't have the language of the test as their first language

- increased referral of pupils with special educational needs, retention of children (in the same class), 'encouraged absenteeism' on test days

Consideration of the sixth class test raises many of the issues associated with 'stakes'. Testing in sixth class might well provide useful data to support transfer to post-primary school. But for a child taking the test in sixth class for the purpose of providing transfer data, the stakes become very high indeed.

A range of effects of 'high-stakes' tests has also been identified for schools, teachers, parents and the system at large although it is debatable whether these can be classed as 'unintended' since they are usually associated with the publication or dissemination of results on a school-by-school basis. The results can take the form of raw scores and rankings that are often unadjusted for family and socio-economic background factors that can effect learner characteristics and test scores. Some of these effects include:

- demoralising of schools and parents where there are high numbers of students with low scores – generally serving the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities

- positive reinforcement of schools with high scores – generally those serving the most socio-economically advantaged communities

- the emergence of subtle 'selection' policies in schools in an attempt to raise test scores

- pressure on teachers to coach children for tests, and to focus teaching and learning on test practice

- pressure on parents to 'buy' coaching/grinds for children in preparation for tests

Logistical and cost issues

One final issue to consider is that of the cost of testing pupils (56,000 per class group) three times in the period of their compulsory education. Primary schools currently fund the cost of tests from within the learning support grant or from funds gathered through a 'general purpose' contribution from parents.

Currently, the test booklets for Sigma-T and Micra-T, the most widely used tests, are €1.52 and €1.20 respectively. The scoring manual is €3.00 per level, or €20.00 for all levels on CD. The Drumcondra Primary Tests cost €5.10 for each group of five pupils. The same costs apply in English as in Mathematics. The scoring stencil varies between €1.00 and €6.50 per level. As noted elsewhere in this paper, these tests are for pupils in primary school only.

In the 1970s the ERC developed Drumcondra Attainment Tests (DATs) in English, Reading and Maths for use by 1st, 2nd and 3rd year post-primary students. While the tests have not since been standardised on a nationally representative sample of pupils, they are still used in some post-primary schools. In the absence of recently normed tests for Irish post-primary students, tests developed in the UK are also used in some schools.

The introduction of testing for all pupils as a requirement will have cost implications and the allocation to schools for the purchase and processing of tests would need to match the costs incurred.

The use of more than one test – as is currently the case in Ireland – also has implications. While both sets of tests for primary children have been standardised for an Irish setting, they generate different kinds of results, and thus connecting or comparing

results can be difficult. This is further compounded by the fact that other tests beyond the two mentioned are also in use in primary schools.

Considerable investment would be required to develop a test/tests for use in post-primary schools if the third point were to be identified at some stage in junior cycle. Similarly, were a single test to be developed or identified for use in Irish schools, (as opposed to the multiple test instruments currently in use) this would also have resource implications. The need to provide tests for schools where Irish is the medium of instruction is also an issue as the tests currently available are normed for pupils who learn through the medium of English. Added to the cost of developing and standardising a new test, is the issue of the time required for this process.

Standardised testing is a specialised and complex assessment activity. Additional costs associated with its effective implementation relate to the professional development of those charged with conducting, processing and interpreting the test results. The introduction of a specific programme of standardised testing in all schools would also need to be supported by a public information campaign explaining standardised testing in accessible terms for parents and the general public.

In general terms, the fundamental question of purpose is the most salient one in considering logistical and cost issues. The logistical complexity and the level of investment needed will be determined by the specific purpose(s) of any testing or assessment initiative.

Section Two – Moving Forward

Assessment – along with the allocation of resources – is generally considered to be one of the most powerful policy tools in education. What is assessed, how, when and to what purpose has implications well beyond the assessment process itself. Some commentators would suggest that assessment plays the role of the mediator of the relationship between education and society. In a world where measurement, evaluation and accountability are becoming an ever-increasing part of public life, the 'measurement' of education comes in for increasing scrutiny and the object of growing debate.

In recent times, many countries have invested considerable research and development funding into the formulation of assessment policy, into support for assessment practice in schools, and into the reporting on assessment data to parents and the public at large. In Scotland and Wales for example, the devolved assemblies have recently initiated major changes in the assessment policies for compulsory schooling, shifting the focus away from externally administered tests to a greater emphasis on supporting teacher assessment practice in classrooms. In England, formal end of year testing of seven year olds has been abolished. In the future equal weight will be given to teachers' assessments of how pupils are doing, and tests will be taken whenever teachers think that the pupils are ready for them. Assessment is also the focus of review in Northern Ireland, in addition to the proposals for the replacement of the transfer test at the end of primary schooling.

In their survey of research papers published over the past ten years by the journal *Assessment in Education,* Broadfoot and Black (2004) note a very significant growth in assessment activity. They also note the use of assessment, especially what Connell (1993) calls 'standardised competitive assessment' as an instrument of social control. However, of particular note in the Broadfoot and Black review is their analysis that in recent times, belief in the power of these forms of assessment to provide a 'rational, efficient and publicly accepted mechanism of judgement and control has reached its

high point' (p.19). They argue that much recent research in assessment has challenged the presumed objectivity and efficiency of conventional summative assessment techniques (Harlen and Deakin-Crick 2003, Whetton 2004). They point to an emerging interest in policy-makers in a different set of assessment principles born out of educational priorities which view assessment as a 'powerful force in supporting learning, and a mechanism for individual empowerment' (Broadfoot and Black, 2004, p,22).

Ireland has not had a similar level of attention to assessment policy nor to research in assessment. Teacher practice in assessment has developed largely due to the work of teachers themselves, and their concerns for improvement. Despite the absence of policy-makers' attention, assessment has been the focus of an upsurge of public interest in and debate about the quality and outcomes of schooling. While schools and classrooms have been the focus of considerable teacher work on assessment, that work has not been supported, nor informed, by comprehensive and considered national policy on assessment in schools.

In a review of assessment policy in primary education in the Republic of Ireland, Hall (2000) and Hall and Kavanagh (2002) conclude that assessment policy and practice here are characterised by conceptual uncertainty, by vagueness about goals and purposes and by lack of clarity about the place of assessment information in classrooms and in the education system as a whole. This uncertainty about assessment may be compounded to some degree by the lack of clear statements of what 'literate' and 'numerate' mean at each stage of education. While the administration of standardised tests may be generally advocated for first and fifth classes example, we do not have clear statements about what 'standards' are expected at these stages. Similarly, the outcomes for the end of junior cycle make particular reference to literacy and numeracy but offer no further description for teachers or parents of a literate or numerate 15 year old.

The data collected in the course of the first phase of the primary curriculum review shows that teachers lack confidence in assessment, and that while teachers are fully

aware of the exhortation in the curriculum documentation that 'assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning', they are only beginning to translate it into practice. While the Primary School Curriculum provided the educational rationale and imperative for assessment in primary schools, it is only in 2003/2004 that the NCCA made significant progress in developing advice on assessment policy – including on standardised tests – in primary schools[3].

Given the dominance of the post-primary stage of education of the two certificate examinations, it might be expected that assessment practice, and teacher confidence in assessment might be more well-developed in that sector. However, the report on the consultation process associated with the first phase of the review of junior cycle would suggest otherwise. It showed that teacher understanding and application of assessment practice was dominated by preparation for the junior certificate examination. In response to this finding the NCCA began the Assessment for Learning Initiative (AFL) to support classroom practice in assessment, to develop teacher understanding of the potential of assessment in teaching and learning and to improve the quality of reporting to parents on student progress. Work on this project continues, with the participation of additional teachers and schools planned for 2005.[4] In January 2005 OECD published a report on a cross-national project on formative assessment in lower secondary education that highlighted the following:

- Higher levels of student achievement and greater equity of student outcomes are among the goals promoted by formative assessment.
- Teachers who use formative assessment systematically make fundamental changes: in their interactions with students, the way they set up learning situations and guide students toward learning goals, even how they think about student success.
- With formative assessment, teachers guide students toward the development of their own "learning to learn" skills (OECD/CERI, 2005).

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[3] The first document in the suite *Supporting Assessment in Schools*
[4] A report on this initiative is presented in the second document in the suite

Assessment in the public domain

Many of those working within education have deeply held convictions, beliefs, and sometimes, suspicion, about assessment. While 'learning' is generally presented as an educational 'good', this is not always the case with 'assessment'. Because it can function as means of control or accountability, assessment can become the focus of concerns about the education system that may need to be addressed, but for which assessment is not, and never can be the 'solution'. Thus while the literacy and numeracy levels of some students in some schools may give legitimate cause for concern, standardised testing of literacy and numeracy will not improve the levels of student achievement in these areas.

Debate about assessment in Irish schools, particularly about assessment in primary schools, will inevitably connect to concerns about information on school effectiveness. Successive Ministers for Education and Science have made it clear that comparison between schools in any 'league-table' scenario is not envisaged. In recent times, despite this political will to the contrary, the creation of proxy performance tables for post-primary schools by the national press using data on student entry to third level education has shown that, in the absence of other meaningful information, data intended for one purpose will be used to 'rank' schools. The information vacuum will be filled.

In the context of this absence of information, standardised test and other assessment data may become the focus of considerable attention. The intention may be to develop 'low stakes' assessment. The reality is that in the absence of other data, assessment information might well become high-stakes.

International Practice

The publication of the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results by the OECD serves as a useful illustration of the limitations of international comparisons. The education system in Finland (presented in most

commentaries on the study, as the 'top performer') is characterised by low levels of school and teacher accountability. There is no programme of assessment in literacy and numeracy and data on school performance is not published. In Canada, (the 'second highest' performer) teachers and schools are subject to rigorous accountability policies including the collection of test scores on a school-by-school basis and their publication for parents and the general public. No one set of policies 'guarantees' a 'good education system' (or good scores on comparative tests). Education systems have particular cultures and contexts that make them impossible to replicate.

The review of international practice presented in the final document in the suite *Supporting Assessment in Schools* offers no commentary or evaluation of the practices in each country, state or province – no one approach to the testing of literacy and numeracy is advocated as 'better' than the other. Across the many different approaches, it is evident that the development of assessment and testing has been focused on three different sets of purposes;

- to support work in classrooms.
- to provide information on the effectiveness of the education system.
- to provide information to parents on the progress of their children and on how the education system is serving their family and community.

It is equally evident in the countries surveyed that different assessment and reporting tools have been used to meet different needs. Developments in Australia offer an interesting example of the differentiated approach. Work there began with the articulation of what are called 'national benchmarks' in literacy and numeracy for three stages of education. These are used to guide curriculum planning in schools and they are the basis for reporting on how well the system is doing. Parents are provided with details on how well their child is doing in relation to the benchmarks. Parents are also provided with details of how well all children of the same age are doing. This latter data is collected by a national agency using light sampling of schools to capture a national profile of the % of students achieving the benchmark, % of exempted, % absent, and %

of students 'with a language base other than English'. School by school data is not made available, but the agency responsible for 'reporting to the nation'[5] makes data available for comparable school types to assist schools and school boards with evaluation and planning. In Ontario, Canada, a similar approach has been developed, but, in line with Canadian policy, the tests also serve an accountability function and data is published on a school-by-school basis. Developments in Canada and Australia are relatively new; further more extensive research could provide valuable information on the effectiveness and impact of the approaches taken.

Because Ireland is coming to its work in assessment late relative to other countries this does mean that work here can be informed by the decisions – and revisions – undertaken in other countries. It also gives an indication of the degree of consideration and debate, and scale of work needed to support any initiative in assessment in schools. If, as Broadfoot and Black suggest, the 'peak' of assessment for accountability and control in schools has passed, Ireland is well placed to learn from the experiences of others in creating an approach to assessment in compulsory education that is based in sound research and suits the particular features of the Irish education system, its culture and context.

Developing assessment and testing in Irish schools - recommendations

Before proposing a number of short and medium term actions, it is useful to recall a number of the points made in both sections of this paper:

- Standardised tests are currently used in primary schools to provide teachers, schools and parents with information on children's achievement in reading and mathematics. They are also used by many post-primary schools at the beginning of first year for diagnostic purposes and to assist with assignment to class groups.

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[5] Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs

- Standardised tests and the results of such tests can serve a number of purposes; clarity about the purpose of any test is essential and informs the timing and nature of the tests as well as the processing and sharing of results.

- Depending on the purposes of the tests, they are generally classified as being 'low-stakes' or 'high-stakes', although most tests can be placed somewhere on a continuum between the two extremes. In general, although not always, low-stakes test provide results that are more useful for teachers and students; high-stakes tests provide results that are more useful for policy-makers and the public at large.

- Standardised testing is just one of a range of assessment tools used by teachers in assessment pupil progress across the curriculum as a whole.

- Teachers have not been well supported to date in the development of their assessment practice.

- The NCCA is currently working with teachers and schools to develop good practice in assessment and reporting in primary schools and in the junior cycle of post-primary schools.

- To-date, assessment policy in Ireland has not been well defined. Of late, considerable public attention has focused on the outcomes of schooling, and national media have used data on student entry to third level to produce crude 'league tables' of post-primary schools.

- Ireland can learn from the developments elsewhere in forging an approach to assessment that meets the needs of Irish students and schools and the Irish education system.

The advice on moving forward is presented below. It is based on current work in schools, on the developmental work underway by the NCCA and reflects consideration of research and international practice. It is premised on promoting assessment – of all kinds – that meets the needs of children and young people, supports the work of teachers and schools, and contributes to the general development of the education system.

Supporting and promoting good practice in assessment and reporting

It is important for the quality of student learning and for teacher planning that teachers make good use of all assessment information and that it is reported to parents and used to provide appropriate feedback to students.

Arising from this statement of principle, the NCCA will continue its current work with teachers and schools on developing advice for teachers on the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using and communicating information about a child's progress and achievement. At primary level, this advice includes guidance on the selection and use of standardised tests as part of this process.

As part of this work, the NCCA will develop a common template for recording assessment information and reporting such information to parents. The development of a national report card template would make an important contribution to a level of consistency in teachers' assessments across schools and within schools while still offering schools the flexibility to meet their own needs and the needs of local communities. Such work would also promote common procedures in recording and reporting the results of standardised tests and in reporting on student progress generally. It would support schools in meeting their responsibilities to report to parents and guardians as set out in the Education Act. The national report card template would be developed and piloted by the NCCA during 2005-2006 in preparation for a wider introduction in the school year 2007-2008.

The Assessment for Learning initiative will continue to support improvement in the quality of reporting to parents of young people in the junior cycle of post-primary education.

The NCCA will extend the guidance currently being developed for parents to support their involvement in their children's learning. This guidance will include practical advice on supporting literacy and numeracy in the home as well as information on understanding assessment data from schools.

The successful implementation of any of these initiatives will depend on engagement with and support for teacher assessment and reporting practice, an aspect of the professional practice of teachers that has, to date, been relatively unsupported. A comprehensive programme of professional development for teachers will be required to support these developments.

Standardised tests supporting assessment practice

Standardised tests are a useful assessment tool for teachers and schools. Already, the majority of pupils in primary schools take standardised tests. Building on this established current practice, all pupils in primary schools should be tested in literacy and numeracy at end of first/beginning of second and end of fourth/beginning of fifth class. Schools can choose the most appropriate point for the administration of the tests within those parameters, taking into account the circumstances of the school and age of the students.

It is envisaged that tests will continue to serve current purposes - monitoring student progress, flagging potential difficulties, and providing information for teacher and school planning. For these reasons, the end of fourth/beginning of fifth is suggested as the second point to allow for action to be taken in the event that a difficulty is identified.

It is envisaged that test scores should be included on each student report card – the best format for this reporting should be explored in the piloting of the National Report Card template.

Tests normed for the Irish population should be used, and, it follows that if all students are to have access to tests schools should be provided with the resources to purchase and administer the tests without having recourse to additional funding being provided by parents.

The *Guidelines for Teachers of Students for whom English is an Additional Language* to be published shortly by the NCCA will include advice on the use of standardised tests in classrooms where students have a range of first languages.

This extension of standardised testing should be introduced as soon as is feasible given the need for professional development for teachers and principals and for the provision of funding for the purchase of tests. It may also be necessary to review the tests currently available to assess their suitability for contemporary classroom settings. A comprehensive evaluation of standardised test use in primary schools should be commissioned two years after the introduction of this extension of testing.

This requirement should not be seen as restricting schools in the tests they use or when they are used. Learning support teachers will continue to use a variety of diagnostic tests to provide them with the particular information needed about a student. Similarly, if a teacher believes that a child's test score is at odds with the results of other assessments or does not seem to reflect the child's achievement, the teacher should feel free to administer another test. The identification of difficulties is part of the ongoing monitoring work done by teachers – it is important that it not be confined to the times identified for standardised testing.

Given that schools where Irish is the medium of instruction do not have access to appropriate test instruments, the Department of Education and Science should commission a programme of test development for Gaelscoileanna and schools in the Gaeltacht as soon as possible.

Supporting the judgement of teachers

Recent work with teachers by the NCCA in primary and post-primary has shown that teachers require support in assessing student work and providing meaningful feedback on that work.

Work should begin on providing a bank of annotated examples of student work to illustrate each stage of schooling to guide and support teacher judgement in classrooms. These examples, which will be sourced from and with teachers, can also show how teachers use a range of assessment tools to develop a full picture of student progress in the period of compulsory education.

While the examples alone can be useful, the addition of a commentary on each example will afford the opportunity to show

- how the example illustrates the achievement of a particular objective of the curriculum for the relevant level or class group
- the degree to which the objective has been met
- how a particular teaching methodology contributed to the student work
- how assessment might provide useful feedback to the student

These examples and the commentaries on them should also be accessible to parents, and to the general public.

Work should also begin on the development of brief summaries of what it is envisaged that pupils should have achieved at each level in their schooling based on the curriculum

for each level. Such summaries should be prepared in consultation with teachers and schools and illustrated using the bank of examples outlined above. These illustrations will be important in showing different learning styles and rates and in supporting teachers in differentiating in planning, in teaching and learning and in assessment.

The main purpose of this work would be to support teachers in conducting assessment activity in the classroom. In addition, these summaries can assist teachers in making critical judgements in relation to the need for interventions to support children's learning.

Developing assessment in the junior cycle of post-primary school.

Plans are already underway to continue the successful Assessment for Learning initiative at junior cycle. This initiative focuses on improving the assessment practice of teachers and the quality of feedback given to learners.

To-date, the work has not included standardised tests in the repertoire of assessment approaches for junior cycle. The use of standardised tests for 11-15 year olds is not well-researched. There are no tests available for use in Irish post-primary schools. As part of a wider comparative study, the NCCA will gather data on international practice on testing for this age group before advising on the issue.

Supporting transfer from primary to post-primary school

Research conducted by the ESRI for the NCCA showed that 26 different tests are currently administered by post-primary schools to provide them with information about pupils leaving primary schools. These tests are drawn from a variety of sources, and provide schools with a range of information, depending on the test chosen. The research pointed to poor transfer of information between the two sectors – as evidenced by the need of so many schools to administer their own tests, and showed a lack of continuity and progression for students.

As part of its remit to advise on the transition between primary and post-primary schools, the NCCA is proposing to establish a number of pilot projects across the country to build on and consolidate good practice in transfer. A critical component of these projects will be their evaluation, an evaluation that will be ongoing as the projects are developed and implemented. The outcome of these pilots will be advice on a national policy on transfer from primary to post-primary schools.

Providing robust data on system effectiveness

The current programme of national sampling provides valuable data for the education system on a sampling basis every five years. However, system-wide information is needed on a more regular basis to assist schools in planning, to provide policy-makers with data on system effectiveness and improvement, to guide those who allocate resources, to inform the work of the NCCA and to report on the education system to the public at large. This information should include data on standards in literacy and numeracy, but it should also build up, over time, a picture of progress across the curriculum.

The NCCA recommends that the work of the current programme should be built upon to establish an expanded Programme of National Monitoring that, through national testing on a sampling basis, would provide more regular data on achievement at system level. While literacy and numeracy would be the focus of initial work, the programme should be elaborated over time to include other aspects of the curriculum. The reporting of this data should be developed to provide details of progress by school type/size/socio-economic context and other criteria. The sample will need to be large enough to allow for the data provided through the Programme of National Monitoring to serve a wide range of purposes including

- reporting to the public on literacy and numeracy standards in the education system as a whole
- assisting schools in the process of school and curriculum planning

- supporting the Department of Education and Science in planning for system progress and improvement
- informing the curriculum and assessment work of the NCCA and its processes of rolling review
- assisting in the efficient allocation of resources to schools to target the needs of individual children and groups of children, including those with special educational needs and those who are educationally disadvantaged
- informing the work of the inspectorate in supporting school improvement
- identifying teachers' professional development needs.

Conclusion

The actions suggested would mark the initiation of a significant phase of 'assessment activity' for Irish education. Moving ahead on standardised testing without wider developments in assessment and reporting would place too great an emphasis on the tests and the test results as the only source of meaningful information before the Junior Certificate Examination. What is intended as 'low stakes' could quickly become 'high stakes' in the absence of other data on student progress and system effectiveness and quality. The common approach to reporting, and the development of the Programme of National Monitoring will provide important additional information. A single test score – or even two test scores – should not be the basis for important decisions about individuals or groups (Hamilton, 2004).

Assessment of any kind, is a social process – it is not an exact science, nor is it a clinical procedure. Assessment takes place in a context that includes the classroom setting, classroom peers, the environment in and around the school, teacher and parental expectation, as well as student self-esteem. At a broader level, as stated in the introduction to the paper, assessment acts as a mediator of the relationship between education and society. Issues of gender, class and ethnicity arise. At a time when there are already concerns that the benefits of education are shared equally, the development of an assessment system must take particular account of the needs of those who may

already be losing out. At the very least, it must not add to their disadvantage. At its best, it could be a significant step towards a more equitable system. Moving forward carefully, working with teachers, students and parents, and evaluating vigilantly should be the hallmarks of 'assessment activity' that takes account of the social processes and implications of assessment.

Supporting the development of assessment in schools means supporting teachers and school principals. The quality of the feedback for learners, the quality of the reporting to parents – all depend on the professional competence and confidence of teachers and principal. Supporting them and their professional development will be critical to the success of any developmental work.

Bibliography

To be tabled