



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

Assessment for Learning

Report on Phase 2 of the developmental initiative

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Assessment for Learning

Report on Phase 2 of the developmental initiative

Introduction

As part of the first phase of the initiative, which concluded in June of 2004, the NCCA established two teacher networks in Cork and Sligo, set up for the purposes of testing the applicability of classroom approaches to formative assessment in an Irish context and exploring its potential to support reporting to parents. With the support of the local Education Support Centres, six schools in each area were invited to participate. Each school nominated two teachers, one of English and one of Geography, whose work with first year class groups fed into the initiative.

The second phase expanded on the number of schools taking part and on the numbers of teachers from each school, moving from two per school to an average of six. The number of teachers participating in the initiative was increased to 96. Equally, the number and range of subjects increased and the participating teachers did not always confine their application of assessment for learning approaches to first year classes, or to junior cycle classes for that matter. Subjects being taught by the participants included Irish, English, Mathematics, Science, French, German, Spanish, History, Geography, Business, Home Economics, Physics, Chemistry, Computer Studies, Religious Education, SPHE, and CSPE.

Table of participating schools Phase 2

Cork Region	Sligo Region
Carrigaline Community School	Ballinode College, Ballinode
Coláiste Choilm, Ballincollig	Mercy College, Sligo
St. Angela's College	Jesus & Mary Sec School, Enniscrone
St. Coleman's Comm College, Midleton	St Attracta's Comm School, Tubbercurry
Clonakilty Community College	Colaiste Mhuire, Ballymote
Presentation Secondary Sch, Ballypnehane	Ursuline College, Sligo
Glanmire Community College	Summerhill College, Sligo
	Sligo Grammar School
	St Mary's Sec School, Ballysodare

The central focus of Phase 2

Phase 2 of the initiative (running from September 2004 to June 2005) introduced the theoretical overview and classroom approaches of assessment for learning to a more broadly based cohort of teachers than in phase 1 and included a sharper focus on the ways in which teachers and schools report on achievement to students and their parents.

A model of two different levels of engagement with schools operated for this phase. These were:

1. **Project schools** - who each involved a group of staff members in the initiative over the academic year with the specific purpose of exploring the potential of assessment for learning to contribute to the nature and quality of how the school can report to students and their parents. These schools are listed in the table above.
2. **Associated schools** - who wished to consider the implications of assessment for learning on their own programmes of teaching and learning, but who might not, in the first instance, have felt themselves ready to make a specific commitment to the initiative.

Liaison continued with the Support Services, and with the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI).

Introductory training for teachers

Phase 1 of the initiative was characterised by high levels of input and ongoing support which resulted in a high degree of personal engagement and commitment from participants. Compared to the initial training given to participants in phase 1, a shorter and less intensive in-school training programme was provided for each group of participating teachers in Phase 2. The rationale for this was as follows: the teachers involved in this second phase were not required to generate formal exemplification of their classroom approaches and would therefore require less intensive input and support. In addition, it was considered appropriate to observe the sustainability of the approach to Phase 2 schools that received less intensive levels of input and ongoing support.

The orientation of the training programme focused on the threefold essentials of AfL – sharing the learning intention, sharing the criteria for success, and giving the learner feedback that is clearly related to the learning intention and the shared criteria. A menu of additional possibilities for classroom approaches based on the approaches adopted by teachers during Phase 1 was also offered. Unlike the pattern adopted during the first phase, teachers were not requested to

record and report formally on their classroom experiences of AfL. Instead a feedback session was held in each school where the teacher group completed a review questionnaire and discussed their application of the recommended approaches in an open-ended forum. (See Appendix 1 for a copy of the review sheet.) The findings detailed in the next section of this report are based upon those review sessions.

Findings of Phase 2

The review questionnaire

The purpose of the review sessions was to gather evidence of the approaches the teachers had used most frequently and to initiate discussion and commentary among the teacher groups. The review questionnaire consisted of five sets of statements, which allowed teachers to indicate the approaches that they had adopted with their class groups. These statements were grouped under the following headings:

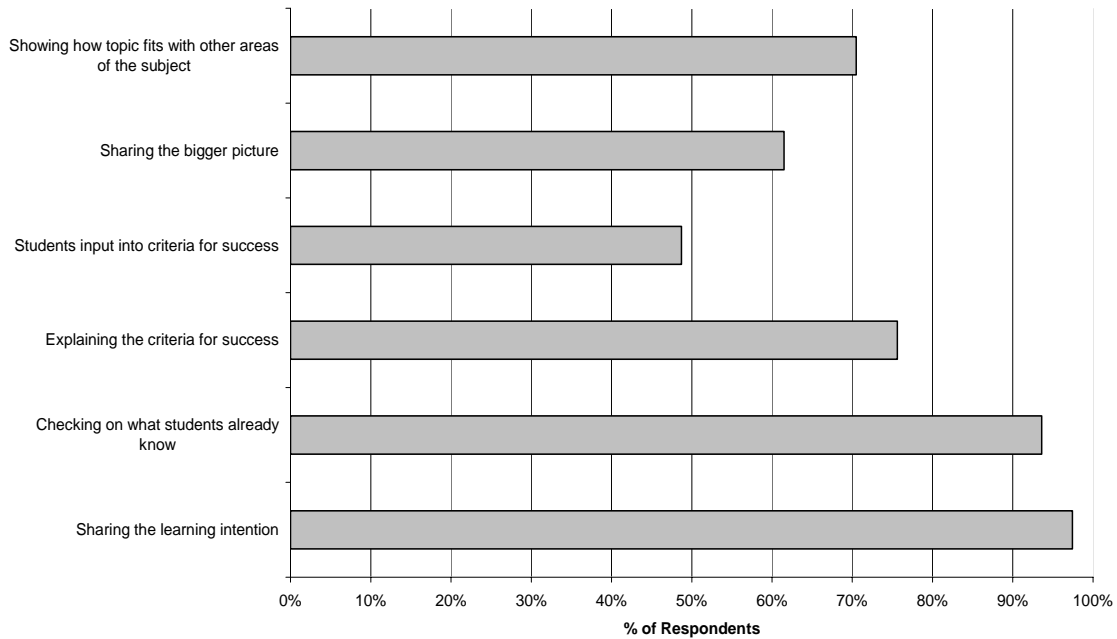
- The learning intention
- Using questions
- Giving feedback to learners
- Student self-assessment
- AfL provides support for...

Two open-ended sections provided an opportunity for teachers to indicate classroom approaches not listed in the questionnaire and to offer views on what the teachers considered to be most significant in the manner in which schools report to students and their parents.

The learning intention

Not surprisingly, formally sharing the learning intention emerged as the most frequently employed strategy at 97% with teachers attempting to provide continuity for learners by relating new topics to what they already know featuring strongly also (94%). Explaining the criteria for success in learning (76%) did not, however, always accompany the articulation of the learning intention. This represents something of a gap in the preparation for focused feedback, which should be an integral part of this methodology. Evidence from the later 'offering feedback to learners' section shows that teachers did attempt more frequently (90%) to link their feedback to the original learning intention. The least popular practice in this section (46%) emerged as allowing students some input into the articulation of the criteria for success.

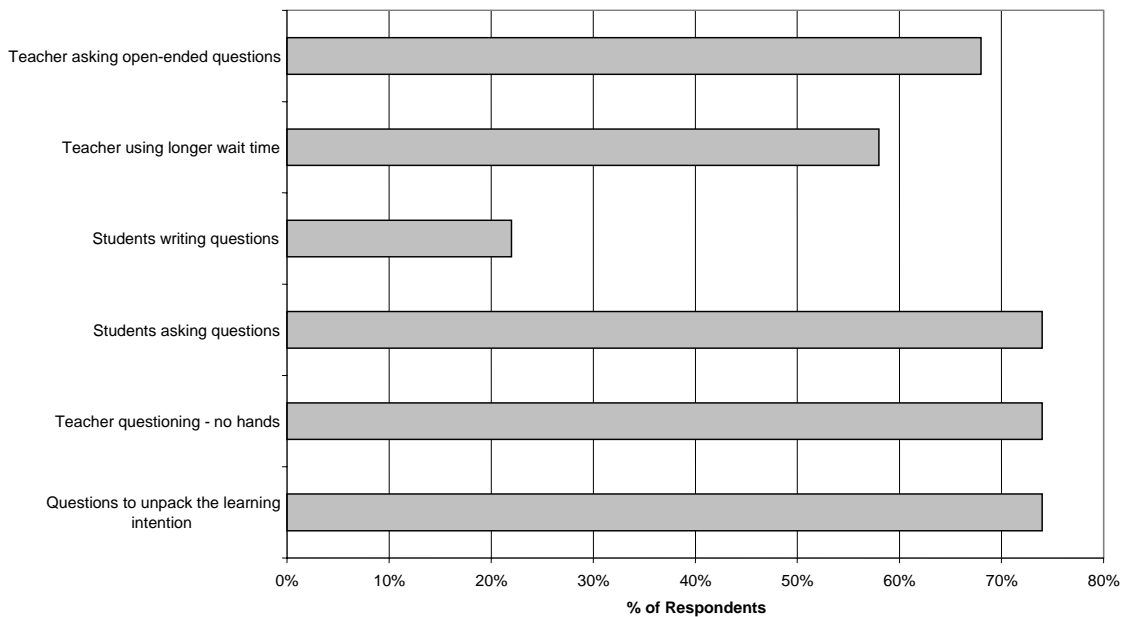
Figure 1. Most frequently used strategies



Using questions

Teachers reported with equal frequency (74%) their use of longer wait time while questioning, of employing open-ended question strategies, and of encouraging students to ask questions during learning. The more structured or formal approach of having students engaged in writing questions to unpack the learning topic was least frequently employed at just 22%. The level of support for the practice of using questions to unpack the learning intention (68%) indicates that in many cases the sharing of the learning intention was not merely functional and perfunctory, but that it was used as a moment of scrutiny of the learning topic. The low level of support (22%) for a methodology in which the students engaged in writing their own questions as part of the exploration of the topic is indicative of a traditional, teacher-led classroom environment.

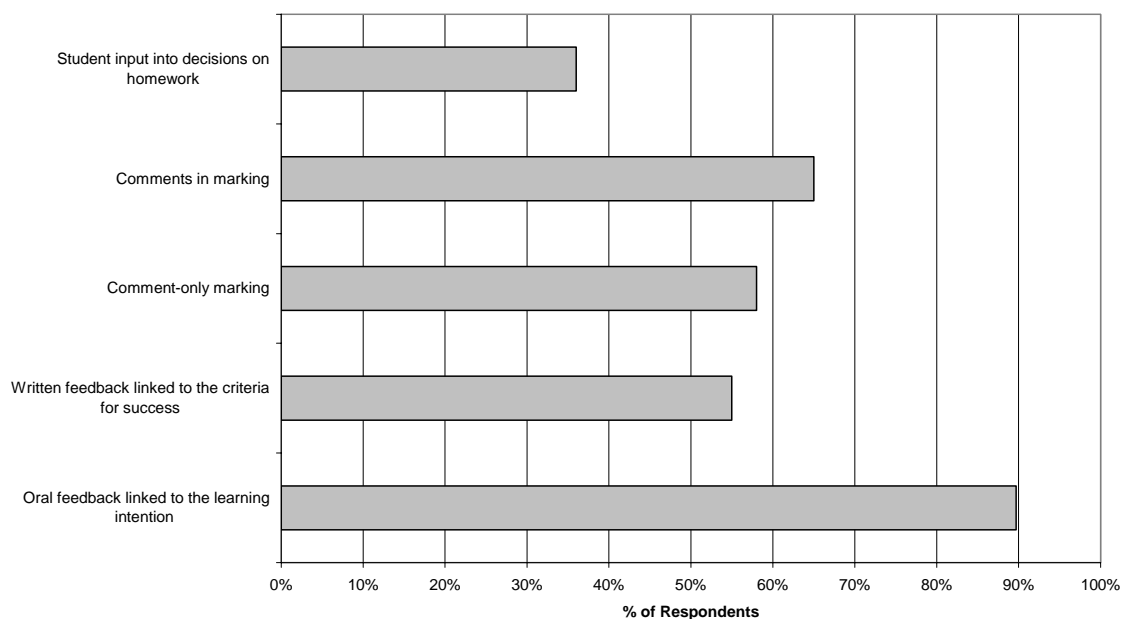
Figure 2. Use of Questioning



Giving feedback to learners

As already noted, 90% of the participants linked the oral feedback offered to students to the learning intention. Training and ongoing support during phase 1 of the initiative had placed considerable emphasis on comment-only marking as the most effective way of giving written feedback to learners. Introductory sessions for phase 2, although stressing the significance of comment-only marking as an effective methodology, place less emphasis upon its use and the feedback questionnaire reflected this through the introduction of a second category, 'comments in marking'. As indicated in the table below, 58% of teachers said that they used comment-only marking and the use of comments in marking was supported by 65%. Clearly this indicates a varied practice in this area and some teachers remarked during discussions that they used comment-only marking for some classroom and homework assignments, and that they supported test and examination grades by explanatory commentary that highlighted the gaps and next steps for the learner. In this way they approached some aspects of summative tests with a formative intention. However, the sense of being at variance with common practice within their schools remained a significant barrier for teachers who wished to make changes to their own marking approaches. It is not likely that definitive findings in relation to this issue will emerge without the involvement of a whole-school approach to a changed marking policy.

Figure 3. Use of Feedback

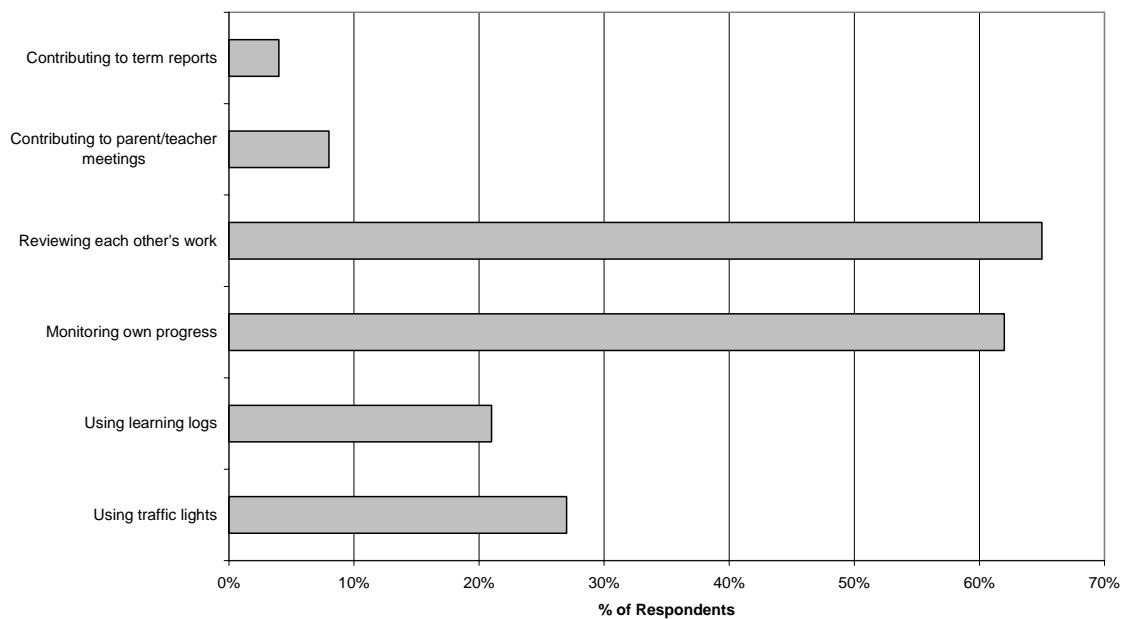


Student self-assessment

Although just 27% and 21% of the teachers reported that their students made regular use of the traffic lights¹ method and personal learning logs to monitor their own progress, participants were generally of the opinion that these approaches were of value. Over 60% stated that their students engaged in some form of self-monitoring and a minority of the teachers provided detail on the form this took. The most frequent approach adopted by teachers to encourage self-review was to have students monitor each other's work. On some occasions this student self-assessment or review did result in formal input into either term reports or parent-teacher meetings.

¹ This refers to students using a form of colour-coding to represent their understanding of a topic.

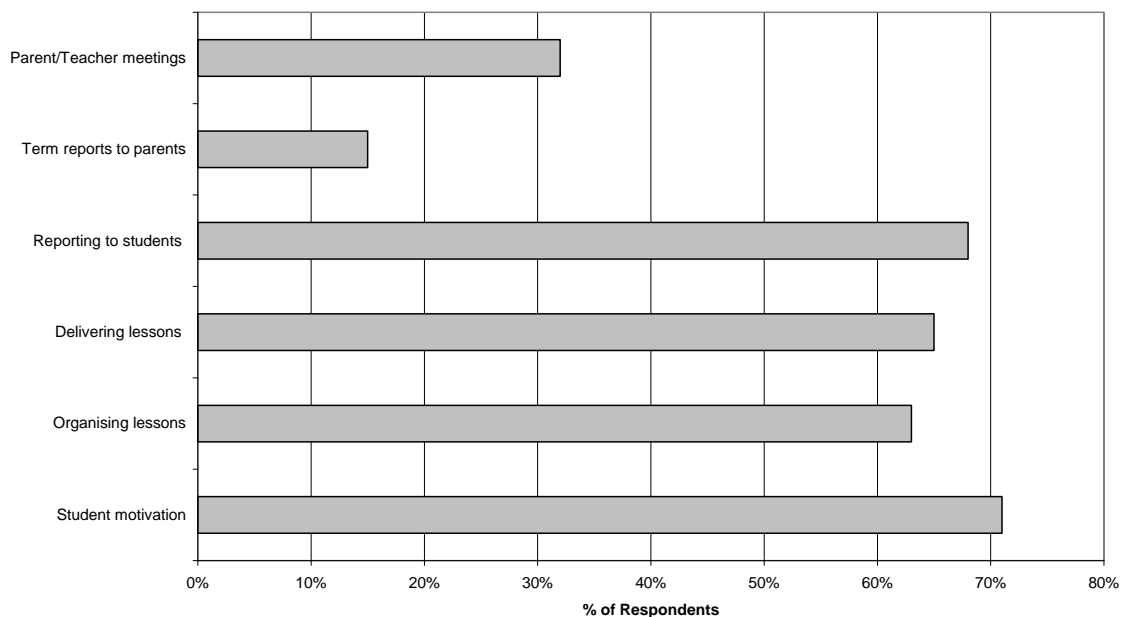
Figure 4. Student Self-Assessment



AfL has supported...

Responses of the teachers in this area indicate that assessment for learning approaches provided considerable support in the following areas: the motivation levels of learners, the organisation and teaching of lessons, and focused feedback to students on their learning. It is significant that in this section teachers reported least positively on the extent to which AfL supported term reports and parent-teacher meetings. That said, AfL has provided a greater level of support for parent-teacher meetings than for term reports. The teachers observe higher motivation levels in the students and confirm that their reporting to students is more focused and complete. This is consistent with the findings of phase 1 of the initiative. Yet, the improved student-teacher relationship and the greater clarity about student achievements and learning needs do not appear to have led to an improvement in the quality of reporting to parents. This raises some questions about the nature and scope of the reporting procedures used in schools. An approach to reporting which relies upon summative test scores and generalised comments does not sit easily with the approaches and orientation of formative assessment. As we shall see later on, teachers expressed some misgivings about the methods by which schools typically report to parents.

Figure 5. AfL has supported:



Reporting to students and parents

The final section of the review questionnaire invited the teachers to outline briefly what they considered to be most important in reporting. While doing so, the teachers also used this opportunity to give their views on some aspects of current practice which they understood to be inadequate or of limited usefulness. This section of the report provides a general overview of the feedback offered by the teacher group and does not attempt to chart the views of individual schools or of school types on the matter. The aim is to highlight areas of commonality in the views expressed. Seventy teachers completed this section. Most of the teachers confined their observations to two kinds of reporting—the term report and the parent/teacher meeting—but some referred also to the one-to-one feedback that a teacher might offer to individual students.

Progress and clear targets

Over half of the comments offered (51%) indicated that showing evidence of progress made since the previous report and setting clear targets for improvement were the most important functions of reporting on achievement to students and parents. Teachers found differing ways of articulating this priority:

Progress made since last report. Achievement of targets set. Guidelines for future achievement using test results and comments.

Students need an objective to work towards and showing them the goal posts can motivate them to succeed. It is obvious what they are trying to achieve and so everybody can contribute to it.

Indicate small practical steps that can be taken to improve achievement a small amount, e.g. how students approach homework/study on a daily basis. Provide concrete, achievable suggestions on how to improve.

[When reporting to students]...stress efforts made by students to improve at the level they operate, individually. Verify good pieces of work by students orally, visually or written. Indicate simple routes to further success. [When reporting to parents]...stress the positive especially the individual skills of the student. Make improvement accessible to parents by indicating ways to make a 5% or 10% improvement in homework, listening, presentation, involvement in the immediate future.

The emphasis placed upon clearly identified targets for progress, as articulated in the above comments from the teachers, questions the value of the traditional 'must-work-harder' language of term reports. More importantly, the term report that makes no reference to previous reports and consequently scant reference to progress made from one report occasion to the next cannot provide such specific guidance.

It is important to report on what they know, what they don't know and what it is important to know.

Looking for the positive

There was broad agreement (mentioned by 26%) that being positive and supportive were worthwhile approaches to adopt. In all 22% suggested that reports should focus more sharply on the quality of effort being made by the student rather than on the marks or grades achieved.

Accentuate the positive. Stress what the student has achieved in every facet of the learning process. Suggest ways this can be built on.

It is very important to focus on the positive things achieved when reporting to students and parents. Informing students of what they have done right gives them a sense of achievement. Success breeds success. Praise and encouragement of students gives them belief that they can do well, can improve.

When reporting on achievement to students and parents, I think it is very important to convey the effort and work that have gone into achieving a particular grade. This reflects on the student's overall ability and, while the grade is important, it's whether the student is working to the best of their ability that is the focus.

Reporting more frequently

More information for parents on a more regular basis

The frequency and timing of term reports varies from school to school, with some schools reporting twice a year and others sending reports home twice a term. In one case students in their final year receive monthly reports. The importance of frequent and regular reporting to parents on the progress made by the students was stressed by some 14% of the teachers.

Giving constant, focussed feedback on student achievement gives the student a stronger sense of pride and ownership in their work. If they are assured by the feedback that their progress is respected they will progress more consistently.

In the opinion of some of the teachers an additional benefit to be derived from this greater frequency is that a shared picture of the student's progress is made possible.

There should be a shared vision of student's goals so that parents are aware of the student's expectations. There should be a clear understanding between the parent and teacher and student, a three way relationship. Parents should understand that grades should be read in conjunction with comments and learning goals.

Realistic goal setting, short term and long term... helps when student is present, can be a forum for discussion more than just imparting information to the parent.

Some teachers viewed the kind of sharing of goals and expectations as a necessary precursor to giving students a stronger sense of "how they manage their own learning... [of]...student responsibility in their own learning."

Term reports and parent/teacher meetings

Some of the teachers' priorities for reporting—setting clear targets, reflecting progress made, frequent reporting—are included in the sections above. There were, however, some negative reflections upon current practice, such as the following:

- **Concern about the prevalence of computer-generated reports**

Computerised reporting is limited but adequate.

Very few of the teachers considered the use of computer-generated reports to be an unqualified improvement upon 'pen-and-ink' reports that included teacher hand-written comments. The computerised reports were praised for being more efficient, contributing to more effective storage of information, providing greater clarity, and so on. However, the teachers generally

found them to be impersonal and 'cold', the pre-prepared comment lists seeming to under-value the judgements behind them.

Quality of comments is very important. Data-base system is inadequate, too cold. Individual students meet with teacher, discuss progress, and give encouragement. Effort of the student is very important. Grade should not be the most important outcome.

Concern was expressed that the feedback offered by the school might not be adequately referenced to standards and expected outcomes. Some teachers were of the view that parents could not support their children's learning if they themselves were not aware of some at least of the criteria for success in a particular subject area. A grade might give information about progress but it does not, in itself, offer any insight into what has been achieved and what remains to be addressed.

Guiding their work towards improvement and explaining the criteria for success [are important]. This relates to revision work as well as class work/homework and focuses the time spent into more productive work by the students. Parents can help the student when they know, or at least have some understanding, of what is important in each subject area.

▪ **Parent/teacher meetings**

Meeting with parents is more effective than writing reports. The report forms used in this school are at present not useful in terms of assessment for learning.

Not surprisingly there was general consensus that the parent/teacher meeting is a more meaningful vehicle for reporting on student progress than the term report. Teachers remarked on the importance of the face-to-face contact with the parent for conveying messages that, in the view of some of the teachers, are not easily captured in written reports – things like 'how the student participates in class' and offering 'positive comments on students with learning difficulties'.

It is important that parents are encouraged to attend PT meetings so as to get a whole picture, overview of the child not just the mark on the Christmas/Summer tests.

One teacher commented on the potential of the parent-teacher meeting to contribute to a sense of shared endeavour between teacher and parent, but drew a distinction between the structured meetings and the one-off 'individual' meeting between teacher and parent.

PT meetings are useful in helping parents and teachers to feel they are on the same side. The Parent/Teacher meeting can be something of a polite exchange of views which doesn't identify problems. Individual meeting with parent is most useful, but training is needed for teachers and parents on how to get the most useful information from such meetings.

Two of the participating schools operate a parent-student-teacher system where the student is present during the meeting and contributes to the discussion. One teacher described the nature and benefit of this process in the following way:

[It supports]...realistic goal setting, short term and long term. Helps when student is present, can be a forum for discussion more than just imparting information to the parent.

There was further support for this idea for senior cycle students:

In senior cycle, I feel the student being present at PT meetings is appropriate and would greatly enhance the motivation level and learning outcome for each student.

As preparation for such three-way encounters one teacher commented on the formative impact of involving the students in the process.

Get the students to state where they think they are working well and ways that they could [need to] work to improve, how they could improve in those areas.

Teacher reflections on changes in classroom practice

This section of the report notes some of the insights that teachers offered into their own classroom practice during the discussion sessions of the feedback process and, in particular, draws attention to small but significant changes they had made in the light of their experience of implementing the assessment for learning approaches. They are presented here as, on occasion, short reminders of good practice and, at other times, questions or challenges which AfL presented to teachers and learners.

- ***Giving feedback to 'struggling' learners:***
 - Focus on the positives
 - Pick out one area to concentrate on
 - Try peer teaching
 - Link with previous learning (the bigger picture)
 - Comment-only marking supports this strategy
 - Vary the approaches as much as you can

- ***Working with mixed ability groups:*** how do you establish separate targets for the more and the less able? Project work helps. In my subject, setting facilitates more focused teaching – I try a problem-solving approach based on visual shapes.

- ***Literacy is an ever greater challenge...***yet...they adjust. We take it slowly. We expect that they have lots of skills they are hardly conscious of, and when you look back at their laboratory copies, for example, you see the progression from very tentative (almost baby) writing to more mature and confident stuff.
- Getting the students to try ***explaining things to others***: to a younger person or to a deaf granny (!) is a good strategy.
- ***A shared sense of the standard***: the examination is the reference point and your subject association. Some of the teachers keep banks of exemplars from year to year as models for learners
- ***Questioning and brainstorming*** were time-consuming, but as a result of questioning it emerged that the students had confused understanding of concepts and I adjusted my teaching accordingly.
- In Science I found the approaches beneficial – the ***learning logs*** were suitable, giving students a chance to make connections and opened up the learning for them. It did not slow things down but helped to summarise the learning and gave a clear sense of the differences between learners.
- The ***input of the students into a project on a topic*** was a good preparation for assessment in English in that it acted as way of ***having them articulate the criteria for success***. Once they had established the criteria, though, they wanted a grade for their work so that they could be reassured that their criteria and those of the teacher tallied.
- The AfL group within the school had begun to think about the importance of putting together ***a glossary of key terms for each subject*** – the interdisciplinary nature of the AfL group had brought this about.

- ***Student self-assessment:***
Traffic lights approach was used continually and was very successful. There were two different forms of this approach in use:
 - for the teacher to indicate areas that were unclear and to inform teaching
 - for students to aid revision

- ***Sharing the learning intention:***

- Now I always write the LI on the right hand side of the board. When reviewing the lesson students automatically refer to this.
 - Helps me narrow down the focus of the lesson.
 - I have begun to bring in examples of students' finished work.
- **Questioning:**
- The big area for me has been the area of longer wait time, giving a chance for more students to put up their hands has given students greater confidence; otherwise, brighter students dominate.
 - I use teacher questioning no-hands when creating mind maps and brainstorming. All answers are acceptable and students like having their ideas taken on board.
 - When doing a test the students are invited to write questions in the margins and the teacher makes use of these questions when giving feedback on the test.
- **Feedback:**
- Since taking on AfL I have used oral work much more in class. This gives students and teachers instant feedback on understanding and mastery, e.g. make classroom into a street, give directions in French – if they are unclear you will walk the person into a wall!
 - Use of comment-only marking has become more widely used with the students being asked to review the comments prior to moving on to the next piece of work.
 - Students like some input into homework decisions and I have introduced some flexibility – student usually selects an appropriate way to do homework
 - When it comes to providing feedback to students on achievement and for parent-teacher meetings you know the students better.
- **Student self-assessment:**
- I involve students in preparation for parent-teacher meetings when the students write down an area of difficulty, one they would like to improve in. This has worked well for 2nd and 5th year students but less so for 1st years. I also use examples of student work during parent-teacher meetings.

Concerns emerging through feedback from teachers

The teacher feedback gathered through the Review Questionnaire (See Appendix 1) has been recorded above. However, some of the school visits generated open-ended discussion through which teachers recorded particular frustrations and priorities in their management and delivery of the classroom approaches. This section of the report details those issues that have a wider implication for the promotion of assessment for learning in schools.

▪ ***The individual teacher and the school***

The vast majority of the participating teachers would have viewed their implementation of the AfL approaches as innovative practice. In this context, working as individuals or as members of a small team, they were conscious of the social or environmental pressure of their workplaces. This was referred to frequently as the way in which 'the system' conditions the expectations of everybody within it, teachers, parents, and students. The pressure to conform to these expectations was articulated variously as:

- the need to record student progress as marks or grades
- the pressure to 'move forward' in order to cover the course
- the fear of de-motivation in students when novel approaches are tried

These pressures, combined with the dominant position of textbooks in the classroom, make it difficult, some argued, for teachers (especially those working in isolation from the main group within a staff) to innovate.

▪ ***Content-based syllabuses***

Teachers view the over-lengthy courses for their subjects and the limited time allocation (number of teaching periods per week) as militating against the more discursive and democratic approaches to teaching and learning that they see implied in AfL. They would like to explore topics in greater depth and to foster self and peer assessment, but feel that the time constraints are too great.

▪ ***Preparation for the terminal examination***

While teachers welcome the continuing presence of the Junior Certificate examination, viewing it as an important milestone in the lives of their students, they feel that it brings with it a culture of summative evaluation, a reliance on marks and grades. The students and their parents, and the teachers too, look to the results of tests and examinations (marks and grades) for verification of progress. Teachers feel that their comments on student learning are valued but only in conjunction with this 'harder' information.

▪ ***The need for whole staff involvement***

Teachers argue that the outcomes of such innovation would be considerably more important if they reflected the experience of a whole school staff. This perspective was supported in feedback during a recent LDS/Microsoft seminar² in which the NCCA initiative in assessment for learning was a case study.

² *Learning to Lead Change: Building System Capacity*, Dublin, April 2005

Conclusions

▪ ***Support for teachers***

Assessment for learning promotes innovation in classroom organisation and management. It favours approaches to assessment that are characterised by collaboration between teacher and learner. It encourages teachers to adjust their teaching in the light of their observation of the work of their students, to introduce greater degrees of differentiated teaching and to develop strategies that promote self-assessment in students. As mentioned earlier in this report, compared with the first phase, lower levels of initial training and support were provided for the teachers participating in the second phase of the initiative. This resulted in greater variation in the approaches taken by the teachers to implementing AfL in their classrooms. Nonetheless, feedback from teachers indicated a high degree of engagement with the ideas and approaches, and a willingness to continue their involvement in the initiative.

▪ ***A whole staff dimension***

Support for a whole school staff involvement in assessment for learning was recommended strongly by teachers and others during the second phase of the initiative. It was felt that the validity of the classroom approaches would be tested more effectively in this scenario. Currently, one of the participating schools has engaged in promotion of assessment for learning across a wider staff group as part of the curricular dimension of its school development planning. Two teachers from this school have been involved in the NCCA initiative from the start and they have taken responsibility for the dissemination of AfL among their colleagues. The NCCA has managed its initiative in a context that has involved liaison with two education centres and a number of support services. Given the kind of in-school development described above, much in the way of broader dissemination might be achieved by collaborative work involving schools, the education centre network, support services and other agencies.

▪ ***AfL and the autonomous learner***

Teacher feedback indicates that AfL heightens student motivation effectively and that it promotes student self-assessment. Teachers participating in the initiative stated that they encouraged students to review their own and other students' work on a regular basis. The autonomous learner is one who records and reviews his/her own learning and pays critical attention to progress made. The classroom approaches of AfL promote these positive learning habits. Ongoing ESRI research in post-primary schools reveals that student engagement with the learning process relates directly to the classroom approaches of teachers rather than the specific content of courses.

- ***AfL and reporting to students and parents***

Teachers participating in the assessment for learning initiative prioritised the following functions of reporting to students and parents:

- showing evidence of progress made since a previous report
- setting clear targets for improvement and indicating the steps students should take to move closer to those targets
- focusing on positive achievements of learners
- reporting more frequently
- linking reports to standards and expected outcomes

Generally, teachers felt that parent-teacher meetings were of greater value than term reports, which tended to be limited and impersonal, especially given the increasing popularity of computer-generated reports. Teachers involved in the type of three-way conference made possible by the parent-student-teacher meeting identified this as a very good opportunity to indicate learning targets, to comment on achievement to date, and to address questions of learning styles and strategies.

Next steps

It is no coincidence that Assessment for Learning bears the title that it has (it is not called Assessment for Teaching, for example) because it focuses on the learner, on how the learner benefits from the clarity that emerges when the teacher shares the learning intentions and the criteria for success, and in particular how learning is sharpened when the teacher gives constructive feedback based on those criteria. Extensive research in this area offers conclusive evidence that this approach to teaching and learning supports learning and enhances student achievement. In assessment for learning, then, a central focus is on the value of teacher judgements to support learning. Teacher judgements should be grounded in clear learning outcomes, relate to specific learning intentions and criteria for success, and should indicate how successful the student has been in terms of the criteria for success, how the work falls short of the criteria, and the steps the student needs to take to close the learning gap.

Support for teacher judgement

Exemplification of student work with accompanying teacher commentary is a key way of supporting teacher judgements and is a feature of initiatives in assessment for learning internationally. The NCCA is currently working to extend its web-based support for teachers and students. A key element in this support will be the provision of an extensive database of exemplars of student work, arranged on a subject by subject basis. Each exemplar will be

accompanied by a commentary designed to assist teachers in making judgements about the standard of students' work and in providing feedback to students on the next steps they can take in their learning, all in the context of the assessment for learning classroom. The database is planned to be available on the NCCA website in late 2005. In furthering this aim the NCCA is drawing upon the expertise of teachers from the Cork and Sligo school networks, who have been implementing AfL approaches in their classrooms as part of the initiative. An information and training seminar was held for participants on September 23rd and working groups for the following subject areas have been established: art, CSPE, English, geography, history, home economics, physical education, science, and technology. Each group will generate a range of student work from junior cycle year groups (1st, 2nd, and 3rd years) with introductory material and commentary. The first phase of this work is due for completion in early November.