NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

NCCA

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

INTERIM REPORT ON THE DEVELOPMENTAL INITIATIVE IN ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING IN JUNIOR CYCLE

APRIL 2005

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1.   Nature of the initiative

Plans for the developmental initiative in assessment for learning arose from the consultative process undertaken as part of the review of junior cycle. The initiative aimed to provide support for teachers in formative assessment and for schools and teachers in reporting to parents on students' progress. The initiative had three strands: web-based support, liaison with a range of support services, and through the development of a small number of teacher networks. This report summarises the scope and outcomes of the work in 2003 – 2004.

2.   Initial Research

- A literature review was carried out and an overview of formative assessment was assembled. This overview informed the major elements of the web pages.

- A visit to LEAs in the UK sought evidence of comparable projects in primary and post-primary settings. In particular, this visit focused on practical application of formative assessment techniques in the classroom.

- A brochure for circulation to post-primary schools, education centres and support services was prepared and distributed in March 2003.

3.   Liaison with Support Services

NCCA provided briefings and workshops for members of a number of subject and programme support services. These included
- Second Level Support Service
- Teaching English Support Service
- Social Personal and Health Education Support Service
- Junior Cycle Physical Education Support Service
- School Development Planning Initiative

The purpose of these meetings was to introduce the support services to assessment for learning methodology, to provide information on the NCCA developmental initiative and to explore ways in which members of the support service might apply assessment for learning in the context of their cluster inservices and their work within schools.

4.   Teacher Networks

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.

Table of participating schools

Cork Region	Sligo Region
Carrigaline Community School	St Mary's College, Ballysadare
Coláiste Choilm, Ballincollig	Ballinode College, Ballinode
St. Angela's College	Ursuline College, Sligo
St. Coleman's Comm College, Midleton	Mercy College, Sligo
Clonakilty Community College	Jesus & Mary Sec School, Enniscrone
St. Vincent's Secondary School, Cork	St Attracta's Comm School, Tubbercurry

Although an initial indication of their willingness to participate in the initiative was given by each of the above schools, two schools found themselves unable to commit to the process.

4.1   Introduction to schools and professional development support for teachers
- Contact with the school principals was made in May 2003 and an initial meeting in each area was held (Sligo – 9th May and Cork – 23rd May). The Directors of the Education Support Centres attended.

- Initial training sessions for the participating teachers were held in Cork on September 9th and in Sligo on September 11th. The focus of these training sessions was on the broad outline of assessment for learning practice in the classroom.

- A two-day residential seminar for participants from Cork and Sligo was held in Athlone on November 13th and 14th 2003. Training sessions on this occasion centred on the menu of in-class approaches from which the participants might choose and on the manner in which they would report on the outcomes of their work with students.

- Meetings to review progress were held in Sligo (February 11th, 2004) and Cork (February 26th, 2004).

- Final review and evaluation meetings of the networks were held in Cork (May 20th) and Sligo (May 21st, 2004).

5.   Main outcomes of the teacher networks

The outcomes of the main phase of teacher/student involvement can be categorised under the following headings:

Completed class templates with the following elements for each session:

- Learning intention/s
- Learning outcomes
- Assessment instruments
- Lesson narrative
- Teacher's reflections

Examples of teacher and student output:

- Student work, showing teacher commentary
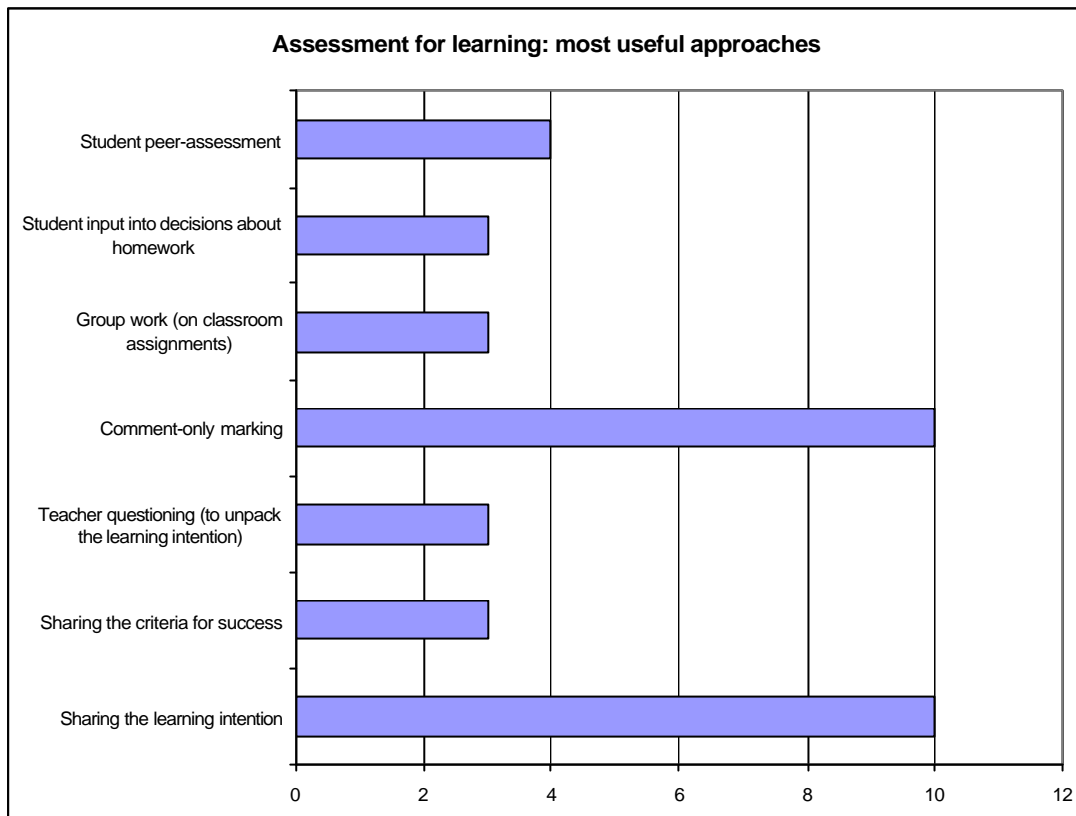- Teachers' classroom diaries
- Student learning logs

These materials will feed into the extension of the assessment for learning section on the NCCA website.

In addition, the work provided a range of qualitative evidential judgements related to the effectiveness of assessment for learning approaches in an Irish classroom setting. Feedback from the February and May 2004 meetings indicated the following trends emerging. *(Tables refer to the data gathered in May 2004. Quotations are taken from teacher review forms from February and May 2004.)*

5.1 Variation in the application of techniques

Teacher reports confirmed some variation in the application of techniques and approaches indicating that the teachers were 'making their own' of the practices. Although sharing the learning intention and unpacking the criteria for success so as to prepare the ground for focused feedback to learners are indispensable to the formative process, teachers felt that they did not all proceed in the same manner and that they could fine-tune these elements, as it were, to suit the contexts of differing classrooms. In addition, they felt that they could be flexible in their approaches to questioning, to peer and self-assessment, and in marking and reporting policy. The existence of such variation confirms the intuitive nature of the recommended approaches; teachers did not feel that they were straitened by a rigid system and welcomed the contribution that assessment for learning made to their pedagogy.

While a wide variety of approaches was used those most consistently applied were sharing the learning intention and comment-only marking. The following table indicates the classroom approaches most frequently adopted.

Assessment for learning: most useful approaches

Approach	Value
Student peer-assessment	4
Student input into decisions about homework	3
Group work (on classroom assignments)	3
Comment-only marking	10
Teacher questioning (to unpack the learning intention)	3
Sharing the criteria for success	3
Sharing the learning intention	10

5.2 Emergence of the 'voices' of the students

The voices of the students are heard in the examples of student learning logs submitted by the teachers. These simple templates were designed to provide some informal record of the learner's monitoring of learning. In addition, however, the greater involvement of the learners in the teaching and learning cycle is evidenced in the teachers' descriptions of shared endeavour.

> *The making of the wall chart allowed the less motivated students to become very active and they welcomed the chance to see their work displayed.*

> *The students showed enthusiasm when given an opportunity to discuss how homework might be presented.*

5.3 Greater clarity in feedback to learners

Teachers reported that the assessment for learning approaches provided a clearer learning scaffold or framework for the students. Sharing the learning intention and unpacking the criteria for success provided for "less one-sided assessment orientation". Assessment is more supportive of learning and not as overtly judgemental.

Assessment is becoming more a process involved in student learning rather than teacher driven – more democratic, transparent and worthwhile. When students know what is expected they are more confident and able. Criteria are like props and scaffolds to 'hang the learning on' and, as a result, help to eliminate confusion and lack of clarity for the student.

One of the key aspects I have taken from AfL is sharing the learning intention and assessment instruments and criteria. All levels of ability have improved/increased their motivation when they are aware of what's going to be taught and how it's going to be assessed. The comment-only marking has improved levels of homework.

Comment-only marking was used by all of the participating teachers in the feedback process and was found to be helpful to learners, a motivational incentive and a means of encouraging the learners to review their work. Some teachers reported that it provided them with a more rounded profile of each student, which they found useful during parent-teacher meetings.

Teachers have remarked that the practice of comment-only marking has been challenged by the more able students, in particular, who 'demand' to know how they are getting on by reference to grades and marks. On occasion the teachers have given marks/grades alongside their comments even though they felt that the grade would almost certainly cancel out some or all of the formative impact of the commentary. More frequently the teachers have assigned marks to student homework but have 'held them back' for use in compiling end-of-term reports.

Many of the participating teachers have remarked on the difficulty of finding a sufficient number of assessment-rich tasks for learners of this age group (first-year). Some who have tried approaches such as comment-only marking with senior cycle students have found the outcomes to have been more tangible and beneficial. In this context, teacher to learner feedback has promoted more meaningful teacher-learner dialogue.

5.4 Impact on Learners

The majority of class groups taught by the participating teachers were mixed ability groupings. Teachers reported a generally positive impact on the involvement and motivation of learners as a result of the differing assessment climate in the class. Learners appreciated the clarity provided by shared learning intentions and were enthused by the more frequent opportunities to contribute to in-class decision making. In relation to its potential to contribute to student independence, there was quite a high level of support for the notion that such approaches to formative assessment would have a greater impact on learners in senior cycle because, in the eyes of the teachers, these students would be capable of greater levels of monitoring and reflection regarding their own learning.

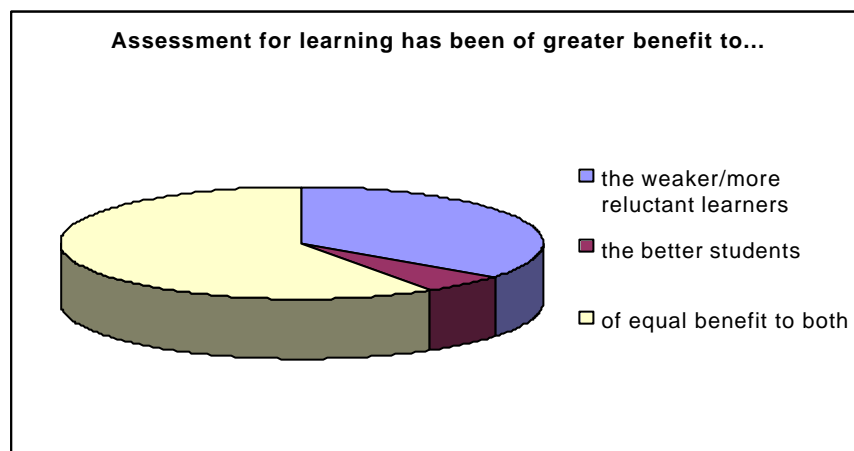**Assessment for learning and the student (n=17)**
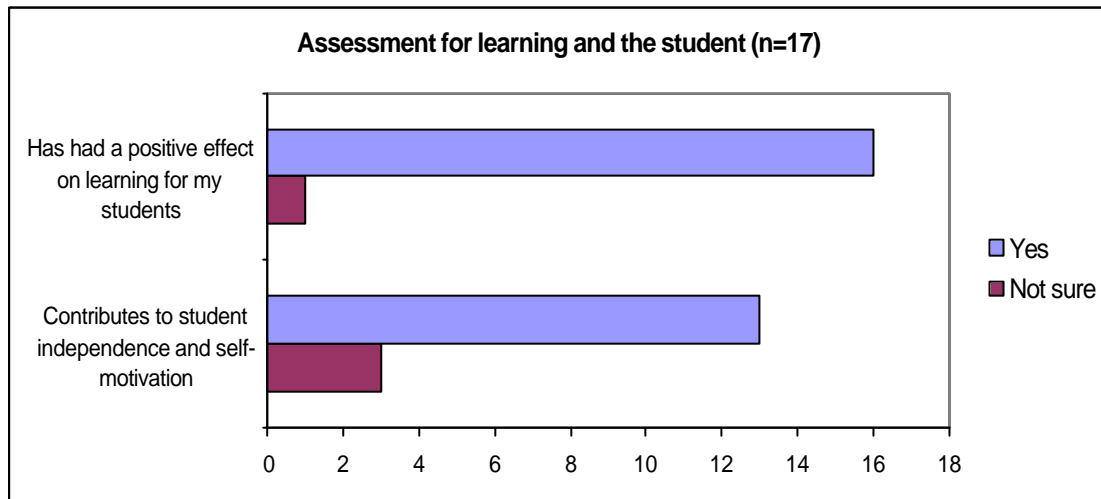
The students are now involved in their own homework. They feel more autonomous with their increased decision-making power and have responded very positively overall.

Comments and student participation helped develop self-esteem for them and thus enhanced motivation for all – teacher and students.

I found it worthwhile for the weaker students especially. In some cases I think it caused the weaker student to relax.
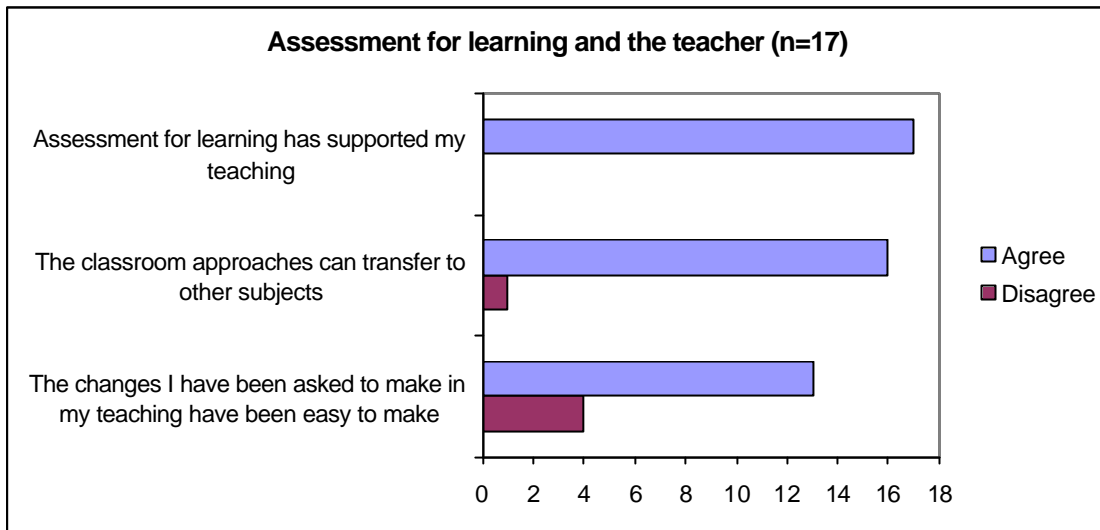
A positive impact upon learner engagement and motivation, including hitherto reluctant learners, was generally noted by the teachers. Although the majority of teachers remarked that formative assessment was of equal benefit to all student groupings, a more significant minority believed that it is beneficial for the more reluctant learners than for the 'better' students. As with areas such as comment-only marking, the teachers agreed that the formative approaches would be of proportionately greater benefit in a more assessment-rich environment, which would be more likely to pertain for students in senior cycle.

Assessment for learning has been of greater benefit to...

- the weaker/more reluctant learners
- the better students
- of equal benefit to both

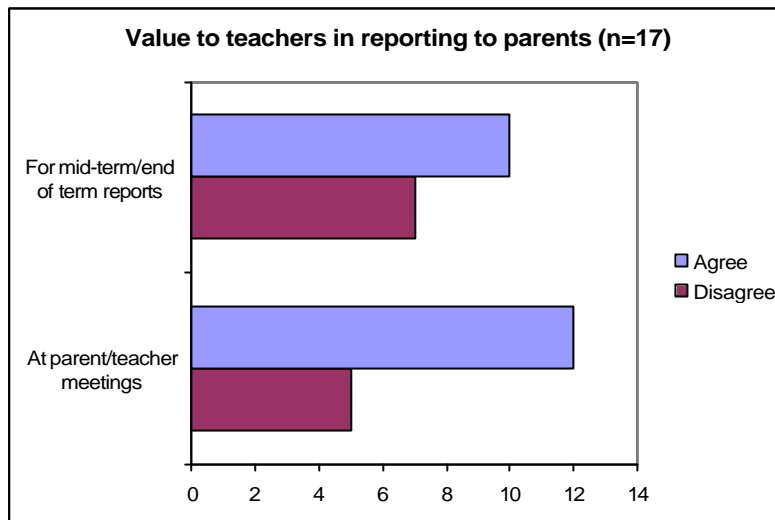### 5.5   Teachers are more reflective

All teachers indicated that involvement in the assessment for learning initiative has been positively supportive of their teaching. A key contributory factor here has been the positive impact on the student/teacher relationship in a classroom where supportive assessment has been to the forefront.

Engaging in formative assessment has encouraged teachers to reflect upon and make changes to their practice. These changes have been, in the main, easy to make and have transferred easily to other subjects and to other year groups.

Assessment for learning and the teacher (n=17)

Statement	Agree	Disagree
Assessment for learning has supported my teaching	17	0
The classroom approaches can transfer to other subjects	16	1
The changes I have been asked to make in my teaching have been easy to make	13	4

It has made me more conscious of my teaching and particularly of the student learning. I have become more aware of learning outcomes, rather than covering the course. It has made me stop and think more about the students' individual progress.

With regard to reporting on student achievement (mid/end of term reports and parent/teacher meetings) the initiative to date has not yielded results that are entirely conclusive. While the majority of respondents indicate that the assessment for learning classroom has provided them with richer data as a basis for such reporting, some reservations remain as to the extent to which this data has been appropriately recorded and transmitted. The fact that the participating teachers were involved *as individual teachers* from their schools is of some significance here. Reporting on student achievement is part of the broader culture of the school and further work is needed to investigate current practice and the potential of formative assessment to contribute in this area.

Value to teachers in reporting to parents (n=17)

A horizontal bar chart showing Agree and Disagree responses.

For mid-term/end of term reports: Agree = 10, Disagree = 7

At parent/teacher meetings: Agree = 12, Disagree = 5

Legend: ■ Agree ■ Disagree

X-axis: 0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14

5.6 Impact on methodology

Brainstorming, pair-work and peer assessment are significant features of the assessment for learning classroom. Teachers have focused more on the manner in which material is presented to learners and on different possibilities for engagement with content.

I am more focused on breaking material down into sizeable pieces to digest as a unit within a class, rather than rolling from one page to the next, each class having its own objective.

I have got to know the individual needs of my students more <u>quickly</u> than I would have previously.

I used to give a lot of traditional written homework. However, I have changed and homework is more varied involving drama, sketches, radio reports.

It has made me think about what I was trying to achieve during each class (after over 30 years I was waffling a bit!). Having such an objective made me focus on content and methods and so sharpened up my teaching to make it more effective.

It has given me strategies that allow for differentiation in teaching without damaging the self-esteem of the less able student.

5.7 Teacher perception of the supports for the initiative

Generally teachers reported that they received a satisfactory level of training and support for their involvement in the initiative. They were confident in application of the classroom approaches based upon the initial overview and the short residential seminar. They found that their teaching was adequately supported and that the pedagogical changes required were relatively easy to make. The website was of least support to them because the materials contained in its pages replicated, for the most part, the more 'hands-on' training they received at the seminars.

Supports for initiative
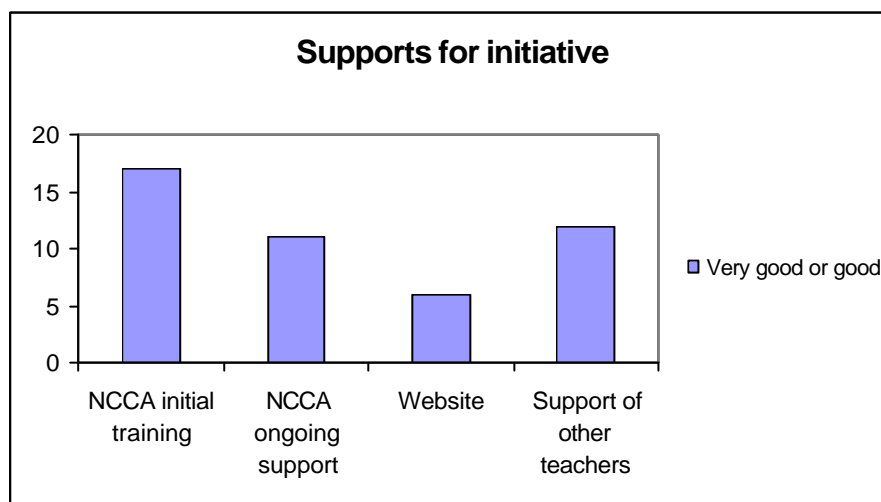
6.   Conclusions

In summary, the following are the key conclusions that can be drawn from Phase 1 of the assessment for learning developmental initiative:

- The assessment for learning approaches recommended to the teachers who participated in the NCCA initiative are intuitive and flexible and can be adapted easily to a range of subject disciplines in an Irish context.

- The application of assessment for learning techniques described in this report can make a positive contribution to learner motivation and performance.

- Assessment for learning enhances the teacher/learner relationship and so prepares the way for high quality reporting on student progress and achievement.

- The more democratic classrooms achieved through the recommended approaches acted as significant motivators for all learners, including those who would otherwise be considered to be reluctant students.

- The assessment for learning classroom extends to a significant degree the professional insights of teachers into their own and learners' contributions to the teaching and learning cycle.

- Assessment for learning has potential to contribute significantly to the nature and quality of how the school can report to students and their parents. Further work is required to research its exact potential in this area.

7. Phase II of the initiative

Phase II of the initiative, which began in September 2004 and will continue into the 2005/2006 school year, involves a total of 18 schools in the Cork and Sligo regions. Six teachers from each of the participating schools are applying assessment for learning approaches and methodologies in their classrooms. The teachers come from a wide spectrum of subject disciplines. During this phase, the project team is focusing, in particular, on the links between assessment for learning and reporting to students and parents, and on the development of web-based support for the initiative. Central to the web-based support will be the provision of an extensive database containing 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. The website will also provide supporting materials for reporting to parents.

In addition, NCCA continues to provide support for schools who wish to consider the implications of assessment for learning on their own programmes of teaching and

learning, but who do not, in the first instance, wish to make a specific commitment to the initiative.

Liaison is ongoing with the Support Services, and with the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). NCCA is seeking to strengthen its involvement with the Education Support Centre network in general in relation to the promotion of assessment for learning in schools.