

Assessment in th

Responding to your questions

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning... If this sounds familiar to you it's probably because it is one of the most frequently quoted lines from the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). But like many teachers, you might be wondering, *what exactly does it mean?* If so, this might just be the article for you.....

As primary school teachers, we are constantly gathering information about how well children are doing in their learning. But as many teachers noted in Phase 1 of the NCCA's review of the Primary School Curriculum, we are often not so good at using the information we gather to benefit children's learning. Thankfully, the last ten years have seen huge developments in what is now known about **how** assessment can actually help to make learning more enjoyable, more motivating and overall a more positive experience, and that's not just for children but for teachers as well. Interested in learning how? Read on

Re-thinking assessment

If you've had an opportunity to read *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* which should have arrived in your school last term, or if you have browsed assessment articles in previous editions of *info@ncca*, you'll be familiar with two of the current buzz phrases in assessment:

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

You might indeed find yourself asking, *'what do we mean when we use these terms and what are the kinds of classroom activities covered by them?'*. Together, AfL and AoL capture the very essence of what primary school teachers do:

- AfL – teachers gather, interpret and use information—from what children say, do and make (and

don't say, do and make!)—to make learning relevant and meaningful for children.

- AoL – teachers record and report information on children's progress and achievement to the children themselves, their parents, other teachers, and other professionals. Teachers also use this information to take stock of their teaching—to consider the methodologies, the resources, the differentiation strategies and so on.

Why focus on assessment now?

As you know, the *Primary School Curriculum* provides general information on assessment. At the time the curriculum was developed it was intended that further information and advice would be provided for teachers. Then in the first phase of the review of the curriculum (NCCA, 2005), teachers throughout the country highlighted again the need for this additional support in assessment.

Not just another set of guidelines...

In a nutshell, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* answers questions teachers asked in the curriculum review. These focus on

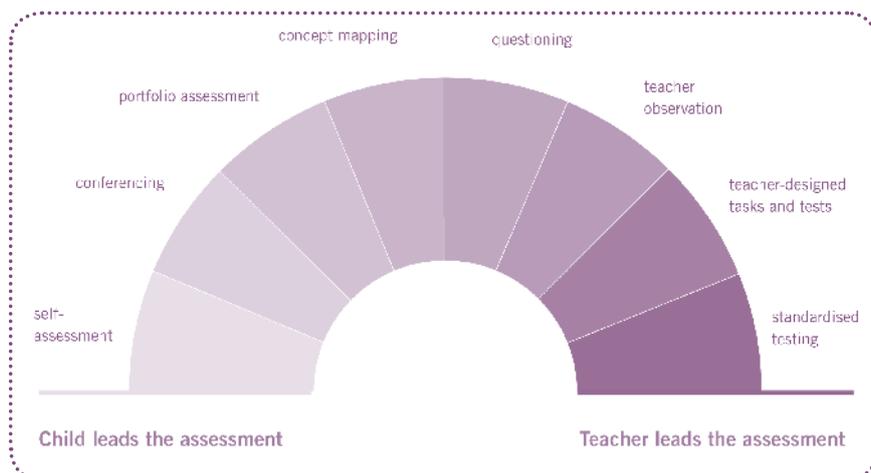
- Assessment in the classroom – *how can I as a teacher use assessment to extend and enrich children's learning?*
- Assessment at a school level – *what assessment processes and arrangements can we put in place across the school to benefit all children?*

In responding to the first question, the guidelines present a continuum of eight assessment methods which teachers can and do use, and in addition focus on the benefit of using a combination of methods when working with children.

Adopting a practical approach, the guidelines show what assessment can look like in classrooms of different sizes, different class groupings and different abilities and when focusing on different subjects. Essentially, the guidelines describe assessment 'in action' through examples from practice referred to as *sample activities*.

The guidelines also provide advice on developing an assessment policy. Legislative requirements are a key consideration here. However, this doesn't mean that you have to source, study and try to interpret the various Acts. The work is done for you, as the guidelines set out the relevant implications for recording and reporting information about children's progress and achievement.

A continuum of assessment methods



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....and classroom approaches for post-primary teachers

The second part of this article showcases some of the practical suggestions for using assessment in your classroom. You'll find these and much more in the guidelines.

Delving deeper into the guidelines ...

Assessment literature and practice highlight that children learn best when they

- know what's expected of them when they are learning
- get feedback on how well they are doing in their learning
- understand what they can improve on and how they can do this.

Good common sense really. But how can this be done? The guidelines explore self-assessment as one method teachers can use to help children learn. Yes, self-assessment, and yes, even for junior infants! Self-assessment basically involves children looking at their own work in a reflective way, identifying parts that are good and parts that perhaps are not so good and could be improved, and then deciding how they might do the work differently the next time in order to improve it. The teacher can use many different tools to help children develop self-assessment skills. One of these is rubrics.

So, what is a rubric and how does it work?

A **rubric** describes varying levels of quality in a piece of work. It has two main features:

- (1) a list of criteria, giving the important elements of the work
- (2) a set of statements which describe different levels of quality in the work.

The combination of these two elements of the rubric helps to build up a picture for the teacher and the learner of what

success will 'look like' in the activity or piece of work.

The two sample activities from *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (pp. 15 and 25) shown on the next two pages describe teachers using rubrics with two different class groupings and with two different subjects.

Rubrics can also be used with younger children. In this case, faces or other symbols might be used to show 'levels of satisfaction'. Young children can be helped to assess their own work by talking about what they have done, saying whether they are pleased with it, what they like or don't like about it, or what they would like to do better in it next time.

What types of learning suit rubrics?

Rubrics can be used to assess many kinds of learning such as a piece of art work, a science project or a project presentation to the class, a poem, a piece of drama, or a musical performance. Over time children themselves can be involved in identifying the important elements of their work, and in creating suitable rubrics in collaboration with the teacher.

What's in here for post-primary teachers?

Teachers working in one sector can be acutely aware of how little detail they actually get about what goes on in other sectors. When it comes to assessment it is too easy for the post-primary school teacher to imagine that there is no assessment happening in primary schools because there is no examination there. Equally, it can be tempting for the primary school teacher to imagine that there is no assessment happening in the post-primary school apart from the examinations. Of course we know that neither of these simplifications is

correct and a quick look through the assessment guidelines for primary schools can serve as a useful reminder that there is much in the way of shared practice across the sectors.

Once again...Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning...

Certainly, a lot of a post-primary teacher's time and energy can go into the preparation of students for examinations – for tests that will be carried out by others, in fact. But there is so much more to assessment in the post-primary school than this. And, if the levels of interest and response to articles on Assessment for Learning in recent issues of **info@ncca** are anything to go by, there is a growing interest among post-primary teachers in classroom approaches that use assessment information to support students' learning directly, to keep their learning on track. Indeed, the outcomes of the NCCA review of post-primary junior cycle are remarkably similar to those of the first phase of the primary curriculum review, in that teachers prioritised assessment as an area in which they would appreciate further support.

Assessment for learning is centrally concerned with the ways in which teachers use their judgements about the work produced by students to give feedback in support of further learning, and a very good way of doing this is by setting out clear criteria for success and sharing these with the learners. This is why, among many other useful approaches, the use of rubrics in *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* will be of interest to teachers in post-primary schools.

How do rubrics support learning?

One way of thinking of this is to consider what frequently happens

when a person is learning a new skill, like an action in tennis or swimming, or how to strike a ball effectively with a hurley, a golf club or a hockey stick. Coaches often employ a process of mental imaging to model the correct outcome for the learner, to create a clear image in the learner's mind of

what success 'looks' or 'feels' like. Looking back at either of the rubrics from *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* it is very easy to see how listing the key areas for achievement (the features) and the graded range of possible levels of achievement together build

up just such an image of success at a particular task or activity. Helping them to see clearly what success looks like is an important first step in supporting learners; it fosters feelings of capability, literally promoting a positive academic self-image!

Sample activity 2.1

Using a rubric for self-assessment

Curriculum area	Arts Education
Subject	Visual arts
Strand	Construction
Strand unit	Looking and responding
Curriculum objective	The child should be enabled to look at and talk about his/her work and the work of other children.
Class level	Third and fourth classes

The children in Mr. Byrne's third and fourth classes are given the task of building a model of a bridge. They have learned about many kinds of bridges over a few lessons. Mr. Byrne wants them to show that they understand the essential functions of a bridge, its construction, and its features. The children have to show the plan they have drawn of the bridge, and they have to tell why the bridge is built in this way. They can use any kind of suitable materials to make it. The teacher has discussed the important elements in planning and building this model with the class. The following rubric is used after the model is built.

A sample rubric

Feature	1	2	3
Plan	I made out a plan for my model with a few details.	I made out a plan of my model with quite a few details.	I made out a very detailed plan for my model.
Design	I didn't show the important features of the bridge.	I showed some of the features in my model.	I showed a lot or all of the features in my model.
Materials	The materials I used to make the bridge were not suitable.	I used some suitable materials.	All the materials I used were very suitable.
Why the bridge was built like this	I didn't explain this.	I partly explained it.	I explained it very well.
Appearance	My bridge looks OK.	My bridge looks good.	My bridge looks great.

The children complete the rubric by ticking or colouring the appropriate level of quality they judge their model to show. Differentiating according to the children's ability, Mr. Byrne helps some children use the rubric by reading the statements and talking to the children about what they think of the quality of their bridges.

Variations on this rubric include extending the range of quality to perhaps four levels. For example, for children who have more experience of using assessment rubrics this could include familiarising the children with the expected standards or levels of quality before beginning the model work, and demonstrating what such levels would look like by showing similar work done by other children.

Curriculum continuity

Students, especially in their first year in post-primary school, find a sense of continuity with their work and experience in primary school to be especially important in reinforcing positive expectations of their new school lives. This can make a lasting

impact on their engagement with their school work. The practical approaches to classroom assessment contained in *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* apply equally to the post-primary classroom and have the potential to provide that kind of continuity even where the content of subject lessons

moves on, or even where completely new subjects are encountered.

For more information, have a look at *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Teachers* on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie/publications.

Sample activity 2.6 Using an assessment rubric as part of conferencing

Curriculum area	Language
Subject	English
Strand	Competence and confidence in using language / Writing
Strand unit	Writing: developing competence, confidence and the ability to write independently Competence and confidence in using language: developing competence, confidence and the ability to write independently
Curriculum objectives	The child should be enabled to write, without redrafting, on a given or chosen topic within certain time constraints. The child should be enabled to observe the conventions of grammar, punctuation and spelling in his/her writing. The child should be enabled to help others in editing their writing.
Class level	Fifth and sixth classes
Strand	Receptiveness to language / Writing
Strand unit	Writing: creating and fostering the impulse to write Receptiveness to language: creating and fostering the impulse to write
Curriculum objective	The child should be enabled to receive and give constructive responses to writing.
Class level	Fifth and sixth classes

Sixth class children use the rubric below to assess a story they have written. The particular elements in the rubric are based on what makes a good story as discussed and agreed by the children and their teacher beforehand (the criteria for success in writing the story). Another rubric might be used in subsequent writing to assess punctuation, for example the use of quotation marks, exclamation marks, and so on.

Sample rubric

Feature	I didn't do well	I made a good effort	I made a very good effort
Structure and plot	My story doesn't have a clear beginning, middle and end.	My story has a structure and plot but some of it is not clear.	My story has a clear structure and plot.
Paragraphs	I have too many (or too few) paragraphs, or they are not beginning in suitable places.	Some paragraphs are in the right places, but some aren't.	My paragraphs begin at change points in the story and help the reader to follow the story better.
Interest	My story is not that interesting.	My story is fairly interesting.	My story is very interesting.
Characters	I have described no strong character in the story.	I have described at least one strong character in the story.	The characters in the story are described well.

Each child's reflection on his/her own piece of writing helps to develop his/her skills of metacognition (reflecting on one's own learning). A key outcome of each conference is that both the teacher and the child can understand something more about the child's learning and the next steps that need to be taken in supporting learning. In addition, the individualised nature of the conference means that the teacher can differentiate support appropriate to each child's abilities and needs.

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