

# Primary Assessment in the Republic of Ireland

## *Conflict and Consensus*

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### Background, Research Focus and Theoretical Framework

Educational assessment, accountability, measurement, and comparative analyses of educational achievement have been a characterizing feature of most western and many developing countries over the past two decades. Ireland is not an exception. In Ireland, several official reports, commissioned reviews and academic studies have referred to the need to update curriculum policy and assessment, to bring assessment policy into line with other European countries, to provide more information on standards and achievement for key parties in the educational enterprise, and to facilitate more effective progression in children's learning (Curran, 1996; Department of Education, 1985a, 1985b, 1990, 1992, 1995a, 1995b; INTO, 1986, 1989; NCCA, 1993; OECD, 1991). While, as elsewhere, assessment has always been a feature of life in Irish primary classrooms, its rationale, purpose, format and usefulness are currently under scrutiny and review in the light of changing understanding of how children learn (e.g. Resnick, 1989; Wood, 1992), contemporary thinking regarding the impact of different philosophies of assessment on learning (e.g. Gipps, 1994, 1999; Shepard, 1992) and the democratization of education through, for example, the greater participation of parents in their children's education. The remainder of this section describes the current policy context of assessment in Ireland, explains why it is important to investigate the conceptions of assessment held by key partners in the policy-formation and implementation process, and outlines the theoretical basis underlying the empirical component of the study.

The basic structure of educational provision in Ireland has not changed substantially since the late 1960s when the primary school ceased to be controlled by public examinations. At both primary and secondary levels the content of the curriculum is centrally prescribed, although primary teachers have, since the early 1970s, enjoyed considerable autonomy over matters of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. In contrast, assessment in secondary education continues to rely almost exclusively on public examinations and this, together with the competition for university places, determined by points obtained in the Leaving Certificate Examination, exert a powerful backwash effect on the culture of secondary, and latterly even primary, provision. Against this background a revised curriculum, incorporating principles and guidance on assessment (DES, 1999), was introduced into the primary school in 1999. Its introduction is intended to be gradual—only

one subject, English, was the focus of implementation in its first year. The most telling feature of this curriculum is the word 'revised': it is not a 'new' or a radically different curriculum to the child-centred one preceding it (DoE, 1971) and there is more continuity with the past than change for the future.

The approach to assessment is informed by the work of the government advisory council, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (e.g. NCCA, 1993). Assessment in the revised curriculum is described as 'central to the process of teaching and learning' (DES, 1999: 17); the areas to be assessed are diverse: cognitive, creative, affective, physical and social, as well as academic (p. 18); assessment approaches are to include informal tools such as teacher observation, classwork and discussion, as well as more formal tools such as diagnostic and standardized tests. Projects, portfolios and curriculum profiles are also mentioned. A most significant statement is the following: 'It is intended that in planning teaching, learning and assessment procedures, schools and teachers will select those that best meet their needs at a particular time' (p. 18). Of note, therefore, is that there is no national system of assessment involving mandated external assessments and there are no national standards specified for particular stages or age groups. There is no specific mention of 'performance-based' assessments.

While there are several acknowledgements of the importance of assessment for informing learning and teaching, guidance on formative assessment along the lines of contemporary assessment theory (e.g. Black and Wiliam, 1998; Gipps, 1994; Sadler, 1989) remains rather vague and ill-defined and the policy designers seem unaware of the complexity of implementing formative assessment (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Torrance and Pryor, 1998). There is evidence that Irish teachers are unfamiliar with a range of contemporary, task-based assessment approaches (Shiel and Murphy, 1998) and it is highly likely that without a radical programme of teacher development, the above policy, so reliant on both teacher knowledge of and teacher willingness to use good assessment procedures, will remain aspirational. An inadequate implementation strategy is, in our view, a major weakness of the current assessment policy. A more detailed conceptual evaluation (Hall, 2000) of assessment policy and the decision-making process in Ireland demonstrates that official policy lacks clarity and suffers from epistemological weaknesses in relation to the different purposes and forms of assessment. In addition, policy reports since the early 1990s have assumed that there is an automatic and simple link between diagnostic assessment and the capacity to promote learning. They have assumed that since teachers are already engaged in teacher assessment for formative purposes, through such informal means as observations, teacher-set tasks and tests, classroom interaction and the like, they are doing it well, and therefore, further guidance is unnecessary.

Some groups in Irish society, particularly parents, are urging the government to institute a more formal and transparent system of school accountability. Of significance is that as far back as 1990 the National Parents' Council produced a 'reservation' in an appendix of the *Report of the Review Body* on the primary curriculum (DoE, 1990), suggesting their need for more assessment information. The NPC also expressed their reservations in relation to the NCCA's 1993 statement on assessment, claiming it did not go far enough in making assessment information public, but this reservation was not published. As an electoral group parents are beginning to exert considerable influence (Walshe, 1997) in Ireland and it is likely that their power will increase rather than diminish in the near future.

Several interest groups, including teachers, politicians, school inspectors and parents, continue to seek to influence the shape of assessment policy. Depending on how much

influence a particular constituency manages to exert in that process, so particular perspectives on assessment are endorsed and implemented and pupils' lives and learning are influenced accordingly. How these various interest groups conceptualize assessment in relation to the primary school has not been the focus of investigation and it is this gap that we explore here. The extent to which understandings are shared across these groups and the extent to which these coincide with contemporary, theoretical perspectives on assessment and learning are considered significant in terms of (a) the type of assessment policy to be endorsed at national level and (b) the continuity between policy and implementation in due course.

We seek to answer three key research questions: (a) How do Irish teachers, parents and policy-makers (at national level) understand assessment in primary education and what ideas underpin their understandings? (b) To what extent is there a consensus across these groups in relation to their attitudes towards and understanding of assessment? (c) What might be the implications for policy and practice of their views?

We make the assumption that the way influential groups understand the purposes and forms of assessment will bear both on the policy that is designed and on the nature of its implementation. Policy implementation can be viewed as a continual process of bargaining with individual actors (McLaughlin, 1987) and as such it is important to be concerned with the values and beliefs of those actors. Taking the view of policy as a process, rather than an instruction for unequivocal implementation, and accepting that policy writers cannot control the meaning of their texts but that meaning has to be subjected to interpretation and recreation in the process, it follows that how different interests and views get prioritized or marginalized merits close investigation (Ball, 1994; Bowe et al., 1992). But what these different interests and views are, in the first instance, needs to be examined in the Irish context. Contemporary literature on assessment, including more recent work on the sociocultural dimension of assessment (Filer and Pollard, 2000; Gipps, 1999) and on assessment *for* learning (formative assessment) (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Gifford and O'Connor, 1992; Sadler, 1989) provide a frame for interpreting the agendas of the different interest groups.

## Research Design

Since we were interested in understanding constructions of assessment we opted to interview a small number of key people in some depth. These included teachers, policy-makers and parents. We designed a semi-structured interview schedule to probe the thinking of our target groups. This included a range of topics for discussion as well as opportunities for interviewees to pursue their own particular interests in relation to the topic. While schedules for the different groups had several themes in common, they were designed to enable all participants to explore their values and interests on the subject.

We interviewed 10 primary teachers from 10 different schools and parts of the country, who were selected on the basis that they represented a range of settings in which primary teachers work (e.g. urban, rural) and a range of teacher characteristics (age, experience, gender, status in school, level taught). We also conducted what we termed four *elite* interviews with national representatives or key members of important national bodies. These included the then Spokesperson for Education for the opposition (Shadow Minister for Education), Mr Richard Bruton, the Chief Executive of the National Parents' Council (NPC), Mrs Ann Kilfeather, a senior inspector at the DES, responsible for assessment,

and a senior official at the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The NCCA's role is to advise the government about policy and to support its implementation once decisions have been made, though it is the ministers and other politicians who actually initiate policy. The NPC, established in 1985, offers parents a mechanism whereby they can contribute to the formulation and implementation of educational policy. These people, though they neither enjoy nor exercise equality of influence, have power to exert considerable influence on the shape of assessment policy; they sit on a variety of national bodies and make, interpret and monitor the implementation of policy.

We also sought an interview with the Minister for Education, Dr Michael Woods. He did not participate. He responded by letter to the request for an interview, saying that his views were already in the public domain through the policy documents on assessment associated with the revised curriculum. He said that the sections on assessment in these documents provide answers to the specific questions of the research. Obviously we were disappointed with this response and took it as a denial of the contested and complex nature of assessment policy in primary education in Ireland.

Although we were able to secure the official parental position on assessment from the Chief Executive of the NPC, we decided to explore the parental perspective further with five parents representing men and women from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Since random samples of teacher and parent participants were not selected, nor were sufficient numbers included to guarantee statistical representation of the target groups, we are not suggesting that their views are necessarily representative of those in the wider society. We were more interested in probing understanding in some depth, so, practically, interviewing large numbers of participants was ruled out.

Most interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Exceptions included two interviews with parents who did not wish to be audio-recorded and the interview with Mr Bruton that took place over the phone. In these cases detailed fieldnotes were made during and immediately after the interviews. Transcripts of interviews and, in the case of those not audio-recorded, detailed fieldnotes were returned to participants for checking and validating. The qualitative data were interrogated in line with qualitative procedures (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The next sections present and analyse our evidence.

We were able to assure the parents and the teachers of confidentiality and anonymity. In the case of the policy-makers, however, we were not able to guarantee this as, given their status and role, they are easily identifiable. This was discussed with each one and all four said they had no difficulties with their real names being used and that we could decide whether to use their real names or pseudonyms. Since using pseudonyms for two of the policy-makers would have been meaningless we have used their real names. These are the Spokesperson for Education/Shadow Minister for Education, Mr Richard Bruton, and the Chief Executive of the NPC, Mrs Ann Kilfeather. We have used pseudonyms for the remaining two. Ms Brennan is an inspector at the DES with responsibility for assessment and we refer to the assessment member of the NCCA as Ms Black.

## Different Assumptions about Assessment Purposes

Significant groups in Irish society hold quite different views about the purposes of assessment and, as a result, hold different views about the kinds of assessment they expect pupils to experience in school. While there is some continuity across and within the groups, the differences stem from holding either outmoded or more contemporary notions of assessment and, in turn, learning. Teachers and some policy-makers are more likely to reflect

the latter while parents and politicians are more likely to reflect the former. However, as will be demonstrated, this simplifies the picture. Some respondents showed confusion regarding assessment issues, while even within the views of single interviewees, contradictions and inconsistencies were in evidence. More fundamentally, there is a tendency for each group to interpret assessment purposes in relation to its own needs and to under-rate the role and direct value to those being assessed—the learners.

### Assessment for Informing Teacher Decisions

For teachers the single most important purpose of assessment is to provide information about pupil learning so future learning steps can be effectively planned. All 10 teachers interviewed elaborated on how assessment is for pinpointing the stage of learning their pupils have reached and for offering clues as to how their teaching should proceed. For some this constituted its only purpose: 'Formative assessment is the most important role of assessment—the only reason I assess is to find where we are and then where to go.' Similarly, another teacher claimed that all his assessments are of a formative nature and this helps him decide what sort of teaching methods to adopt: 'I assess to evaluate what I am doing and then plan for the next stage. I need it to make sure we are heading in the right direction. If I am not achieving my goals then I have to amend my plans to gain that achievement. I go back, revise or teach differently.' From monitoring progress regularly, an infant teacher claimed she can see 'what types of teaching strategies and methods suit the children best' and as a result she changes her methods regularly to 'make learning easier' for her pupils, perhaps doing more 'oral work and using concrete materials'.

Most teachers (8 out of the 10, across all levels in the primary school) distinguish between assessment and formal testing, seeing the former as broader than the latter in terms of purpose and format. Assessment, for teachers, tends to mean the full range of activities undertaken in the classroom to establish information about what children know, understand and can do; it includes such diverse activities as teacher–pupil questioning, observation, classroom tasks and informal classroom tests. Testing tends to be seen as referring to the use of commercially produced, standardized, norm-referenced, attainment tests and these in turn are seen as relating only to specific curricular areas, namely, English reading, English writing, mathematics and Irish language. Some see assessment and testing as having different functions. For one: 'Assessment is for diagnostic purposes by which I mean telling me about a child's strengths and weaknesses while testing just tells me about outcomes, it is more suited to providing say parents or other teachers with a snap shot of where children are.' Most teachers expressed a dislike of tests because of the *distorted view they give* and favour informal, day-to-day classroom assessment for teaching and learning purposes. These teachers argued that assessment, because of its regular and ongoing nature, yields more valuable information about a pupil's progress. Teachers were aware of the need to assess their pupils using a variety of modes and in a variety of contexts.

### Assessment for Informing Learner Decisions?

However, despite teachers' endorsement of assessment for learning and teaching purposes, their accounts of their assessment practices did not suggest that learners themselves play a significant role in the process. For example, teachers did not talk about sharing success criteria with pupils or helping pupils become aware of how their work is judged and there was little or no emphasis on pupil-self or peer assessment or ipsative assessment—features considered essential by the theoretical research on formative assessment (e.g. Black and Wiliam, 1998; Sadler, 1989). Although they value assessment for

formative purposes, we would argue that teachers place more emphasis on furnishing information that informs their teaching decisions than information that informs individual pupils' learning decisions. Adding weight to this claim that their assessments are mainly for their own teaching decisions is their approach to assessment evidence. The collection, recording and reporting of assessment evidence, though not entirely absent, did not feature strongly in their discourse of assessment. The assessment evidence recorded and reported on in a systematic way tends to be derived from standardized, norm-referenced, attainment testing. We conclude that much of the assessment conducted by our 10 participating teachers appears to be intuitive and impressionistic rather than systematic and detailed; that much of the assessment information resides in the teachers' heads and, therefore, is not grounded in evidence that can be easily shared with other people, including parents and learners themselves.

### Assessment Information for System Accountability

The national policy-makers differ considerably among themselves and differ from teachers in how they conceptualize the purposes of assessment. Richard Bruton, the Shadow Minister for Education, demonstrates, not unsurprisingly, a strong concern about resource issues and the implications for those children needing extra support. Those charged with the task of designing and writing national policy documents (e.g. Ms Black) and of overseeing the monitoring of the assessment policy (Ms Brennan) exhibit a nuanced and rich conception of assessment functions and formats.

Richard Bruton sees assessment as a means of providing objective information on which to make decisions on the allocation of resources, a means of providing evidence about levels of achievement in basic curriculum areas, and ultimately a means of holding the school system to account. Assessment for him is about objectively identifying those who are under-achieving within the education system. The information made available from such a process, he argues, should be used to target resources at those most in need:

Research has shown that the top 80% of pupils are alright and do not need much motivation and that it is the bottom 20% that need to be targeted. They are the ones who need remedial help or they are the ones who drop out of school early. If we are to avoid problems later the sooner these groups are targeted the better for all.

He spoke of education being the 'boiler-house to economic development and success'. He tends to see education more in relation to the needs of society than the needs of the individual and this in turn has implications for what he sees as the purpose of assessment. For him 'a further step along the line in this policy [the economic development agenda] is to assess and report routinely'. His own website calls for 'systematic literacy and numeracy testing according to a common national standard in all schools' ([www.richardbruton.net](http://www.richardbruton.net)).

In addition, he regrets what he sees as the resistance of the teacher unions to the greater involvement of other agencies in education, saying:

... the teacher unions should drive a quality agenda—well paid, well trained and strong professional development. But instead they react to this quality improvement agenda with a short-sighted view and a 'keep out of our classrooms' attitude.

It is worth briefly explaining to an international audience at this point something of the context of policy influence (Ball, 1994; Bowe et al., 1992) within which current education

curricular policy formation in Ireland is set. By the mid-1970s all teachers had begun to occupy a more prominent place in the policy process in Ireland (Ó Buachalla, 1988) and by the late 1990s came to occupy an even more prominent one, largely through union representation on key committees (Hall, 2000). The Fine Gael party tends to be more critical of the relative power that the primary teachers' union exerts in policy decision-making and would appear to be much less conciliatory than the current government (Fianna Fail) in its attitude towards the concentration of power in the hands of the teachers. Fine Gael's own website testifies to its position on this issue—it wishes 'to shift the focus of education from the provider to the recipient'. A reading of their policy documents reveals the extent to which they endorse the notion of parents and pupils as consumers and teachers as providers ([www.finegael.com/pftn/](http://www.finegael.com/pftn/)).

Moreover, the DES inspectors and the NCCA representative intimated in interviews that, should there be a change of government, they expected changes in the current assessment policy, with the likelihood of a new emphasis on making assessment information public.

### Assessment as Complex and Multi-Dimensional

The DES inspectors and the NCCA representative see assessment in more comprehensive terms than either Richard Bruton or the teachers. Ms Brennan, the DES inspector with an evaluation and research brief in the Evaluation Support and Research Unit, prioritizes assessment for formative purposes:

The most important function of assessment is that it provides us with a complete picture of how a child is learning at school—what he or she has learned in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. That in turn should inform every professional activity in the classroom . . . It is also important that assessment should be a celebration of a child's strengths and achievements. Relaying this information to parents/guardians and others (class teachers, support teachers etc.) is as important as relaying those aspects of the curriculum that a child may have difficulty with. Children also need to be affirmed in what they have achieved at school.

Currently in Irish primary schools, standards are monitored nationally by testing a representative sample of pupils in literacy and mathematics. Ms Brennan anticipates that the accountability function of assessment will play an increasing role in the future and she supports this purpose of assessment also:

School surveys and national surveys will become more prevalent and will involve national sampling of other curriculum areas because the public have a right to know how schools are performing . . . Considerable money is allocated to education from our national budget and numerous questions are asked in the Dáil on how our children are doing in literacy and numeracy. So results of standardized tests combined with teacher vigilance or observation and other forms of assessment e.g. pupil portfolios could provide information on how our children are doing.

What is being endorsed here is system accountability rather than individual teacher accountability. She rejects the compilation and publication of league tables and claims that the Minister shares this perspective:

We will not have a system or situation like league tables because standardized test

results are crude measurements of children's achievements and of the achievements of the school but they cannot and do not represent the overall picture. We have to look at the total picture. Results alone do not give an accurate picture of teacher effectiveness as they do not account for all the other schooling factors which impact on learning and teaching. A huge range of factors collectively influence learning—context of the school, age of the children, prior attainment of children, absenteeism etc. There are a plethora of other factors and all have to be taken into account. Results alone do not pick up these aspects . . . We will not go down the road of league tables. I disagree with the publication of test results in any shape or form. Our Minister of Education is also of the same view has also clearly said 'no' to the whole idea of league tables. This is definite department policy. In terms of results our practice in national results and national sampling will obviously be in the public domain but that is all. But league tables are definitely not part of the new curriculum programme (*referring to the Revised Curriculum*).

According to Ms Black, NCCA advice is to put more of an emphasis on informal approaches to assessment and on assessment for formative purposes. Assessment, she says, 'is more than just concerned with the product of the learning but is also concerned with the process of the learning and the development of higher order thinking skills and problem solving skills in all curricular areas'. In highlighting the formative role, the NCCA official referred to Vygotsky's notion of 'the zone of proximal development' and equated it with 'taking the child from where he or she is at, to where he/she needs to go, and supporting the learning. This is what assessment is about—pin pointing and then moving forward.'

The following extract shows the NCCA's uncertainty regarding the possibility of league tables in the future:

VK: Are you confident that the NCCA policy on assessment, recording and reporting is acceptable to the government and all the related interest groups and are all these groups in agreement with this policy?

PB: Yes, in that it is acceptable to the current government but if there is a change of government I would not be so sure. I do not think that the current policy might be acceptable. There might be more of an emphasis on assessment for accountability. There would probably be a greater demand for publishing the results of standardized tests in certain areas.

Both Ms Brennan and Ms Black emphasize the need to assess pupils in a variety of ways and in a range of contexts. They see assessment as complex and multi-dimensional, just as learning is complex and multi-dimensional. A major role of assessment, according to their perspective, is to provide insights into the learning process—it is not only a means of determining what learners know but how they know. In addition, they recognize the need for assessment to be multi-purposeful: it should inform learning and teaching—in their view the main purpose—and it should indicate how well the education system is performing.

### Assessment Information for Parents

The overarching message that emanates from the interviews with the parents can be summarized with reference to their concern and belief in objective testing and in the desire to render teachers and the system as a whole accountable. In this respect their views are



quite different from the teachers and less balanced arguably than those of some of the policy-makers. They are, however, more in line with the views of Mr Bruton. The Chief Executive of the NPC, Mrs Ann Kilfeather, recognizes the problems of invalidity associated with standardized testing but her desired solution is for the development of tests for all areas of the curriculum:

To me at the moment standardized tests appear to have been developed only for the areas of the three R.s. I know that it is not easy to standardize everything but if we focus on the three R.s we are giving a message about what is important. If we only develop and do standardized tests in the traditional areas only, then it is the message for parents, teachers and children that this is what we value.

She fully supports the use of informal, classroom-based observation and other everyday means of assessment and sees the importance of the formative function of assessment:

We sometimes look at assessment too as terminal assessment rather than something that should be part and parcel of the curriculum. Assessment must feed back into the curriculum for the benefit of the individual child and the benefit of the whole class.

However, like the parents she represents, her faith in standardized tests and her technical view of school improvement push her to prioritize system and school accountability:

... nobody wants a system like the league tables in England but we need to work together to find out what strategies work because definitely schools within the same catchment areas achieve significantly different results. If there is some particular strategy that works this must be shared and maybe an avenue that we should go down would be the sharing of information like this between schools for the benefit of the child.

She appears to be unaware of the tension between assessment for formative and assessment for accountability purpose. Even though she recognizes that 'the picture [of a child's learning] is much more complex than just looking at the raw results [of tests] she still argues that ultimately the results really do matter for the points system'. So, finally, the measurement of achievement matters to parents and in this they show undue faith in the power of tests. Because of the prominence of and expressed faith in standardized tests in the discourse of all groups, it is necessary to examine this aspect in detail.

### Serving the Needs of All Interest Groups

In our view a key issue emerging from the interview data is how purposes of assessment are so frequently interpreted in relation to the needs of the interviewee or the interviewee's group (teacher, parent, politician) rather than the direct needs of learners. Parents see assessment largely as being about providing reliable information for them; teachers emphasize assessment information that directs their teaching; the politician sees assessment in relation to his task of allocating resources and monitoring the system as a whole—all of which are undoubtedly important. However, insufficient emphasis is placed on information for the learner, on communicating directly with the learner about what s/he must do next to improve. A critical and comprehensive review of the existing assessment research base demonstrates conclusively that the kind of assessment that promotes learning is characterized by attending to the learners' understandings, learning strategies

and dispositions to learn, by attending to the learner's responses in relation to her/his expectations and assumptions about the classroom process and learning context, and by attending to how the learner interprets the assessment tasks set and the criteria for success (Black and Wiliam, 1998). The attention to the learner that this perspective would suggest is important is not a major feature in most of our interviews.

## Faith in Standardized Testing and the Accessibility of the Learner's Mind

The faith that many participants appear to have in standardized tests testifies to a simplistic attitude towards the accessibility of the learner's mind and this attitude is worth exploring in some depth since it represents an outmoded notion of assessment and one that acts as a constraint to embracing more contemporary and valid approaches.

Teachers in upper primary classes tend to use standardized, norm-referenced tests regularly—typically once per year in the areas of mathematics and reading. More importantly, given the theme of this section, they have a great deal of confidence in the results of such tests, believing them to be an objective indication of achievement, or in some cases, ability. Of the seven teachers who use these externally designed tests, most claimed to use them as a check on their own judgements based on more informal methods, as a means of checking if the class is operating at the right level and as an 'objective' indicator of achievement for parents, themselves and other teachers.

A senior teacher says that he can only be confident in his own informal assessments because 'they are so well reflected in the standardized test and because the standardized test results then tell us if our own standards are comparable to national standards'. He adds that, without the assistance of standardized tests, teachers would not know if 'standards would be too low or challenging enough for the children'. The following two extracts from two different teacher interviews were typical of their responses:

Yes I definitely lean very heavily and rely a lot on them. I might have expectations of a child in English or in Maths but the standardized test tells me how the child is in comparison with the rest of the class and with the rest of the country. So it is a better test at the end of the day because if I am comparing within the class my own teacher-designed test could give a result that would be biased or might have my own viewpoint only and might test only what I thought was important.

The results of the standardized tests are there in black and white and cannot be disputed by the parents if the child is weak.

A more typical response from those teaching junior classes was the following:

To choose between formal and informal assessment I would pick the informal/teacher assessment. My own assessment fulfils the requirements for teaching and learning and accountability to parents. It has done so and has served me very well down through the years.

However, it is noteworthy that the evidence suggests that the difference noted between teachers at the junior and senior phases of the primary school would appear to stem from the actual phase taught rather than the individual teacher. At least two of the junior teachers commented that if they were in the senior classes they too would use standardized,

norm-referenced tests more than they do now in their current classes. One response of a junior teacher reflecting this is as follows: 'I would use more formal assessment in the senior classes. The written test would become much more important as the children could write so much more and express themselves so much better.'

Teachers communicated with parents in particular ways, depending on their faith in the results of standardized tests as an indicator of their pupils' learning. What we term the *pragmatic* teachers see their role in relation to parents as *information givers* where the information in question is seen as not mediated—they like to *tell it as it is*, as one of the above extracts suggests. They talked about *the facts* and *honesty being the best policy*. Four of our 10 teachers fell into this category. The *professional* teachers, on the other hand, seem to be more aware of their role as mediators of assessment information and were somewhat more aware that assessment evidence is contestable and situated. The five teachers we so describe exhibited more scepticism about the merits of tests. One of our teacher interviewees, whose attitude we describe as *protective* showed an overriding concern for the preservation of the learners' self-esteem and the prevention of the detrimental effects of labelling, so, although she used tests and accepted their results as an accurate indication of achievement, she did not pass on this information to parents.

Because of the way Mr Richard Bruton views the purpose of assessment, he downgrades formative assessment and is critical of the use of informal or teacher assessment, believing that 'informal assessment is of no use because it cannot be compared and because it has no level of moderation'. He says:

The standardized test is better at representing what the child can do as it is an absolute score and does not need moderation and does not contain bias. If the teacher has to do informal assessment as well then there is a huge burden of paperwork on the teacher. The standardized test is more practical and easier to administer and control.

Ms Brennan and Ms Black agree that standardized testing gives a crude measurement. Ms Brennan said: 'we must remember to line up our own observations and vigilance side by side with the results of formal tests and then make judgements'. But despite her point that 'on their own [tests] render an incomplete picture', she suggests that 'they give you a true measurement provided that they are up to date'. Although she favours teacher assessment, Ms Black recognizes that standardized assessments are valuable for summative and accountability purposes:

At present they are strongly recommended for subjects such as language and mathematics and other subjects where they are available to be used judiciously—to be used preferably and ideally for end of year summative approaches to assessment, and also in conjunction with formative approaches to assessment.

But overall these two policy-makers argue for standardized testing as one method among several for assessing pupils.

Mrs Kilfeather, in contrast, is impressed by what she sees as the objectivity and accuracy of the standardized tests as she says, 'life is like that, people want exact measurements'. In agreement with the other parents interviewed, the Chief Executive of the NPC expresses considerable faith in the objectivity of standardized tests in the academic areas of the curriculum. She asserts

... that the vigilance of the teacher is very important and this is what forms the comments on the school reports. Through observation they can assess attitudes, experiences, skills, cooperation and teamwork—all the things that are becoming so important ... But the formal tests are the checking balances.

The five parents we interviewed seek objectivity for the academic areas and see standardized testing as the vehicle for achieving this objectivity. One parent's response (Brigid) is not untypical when she says that the more formal testing situation of the written test is needed *to test knowledge* and she believes that 'the informal assessment is more about assessing character than academic based'. Max also sees tests as providing objectivity and being suitable for accountability purposes. Fieldnotes made during the interview with Max explain his position:

Tests are the only way to see how good a teacher is. If the children are doing well in their tests then she must be teaching them something. But if the children are doing badly then there must be something wrong somewhere.

Parent Tom also shows very little faith in the teacher's informal judgements, and, like Brigid, is 'sceptical of comments even for giving information about the development of character' and regarding the objectivity of the written tests he believes they are better than the teacher's informal assessment because they are 'more proof of what a child can do or how good he is'. Tom would like to see the use of graded scales (fair, good, very good) abandoned as 'it completely cuts out the biased judgement of the teacher and the child cannot deny the result'. Tom also believes that the objectivity of the standardized tests is needed more in the smaller schools because he says in

... smaller community bias and malice are more noticeable and so the standardized test is a sort of guide or moderator. The teacher can be so familiar with the pupils and with their families they might need objective results to either confirm their preconceived ideas or to prevent them from labelling children because of others in the family.

The faith of parents in standardized testing suggests the possibility that their experience of discussing their children's progress with teachers hinges around teacher comments and judgements that are not grounded in evidence that they, the parents, have access to. One might speculate that, for whatever its faults, the standardized test produces evidence—a score or a grade or a reading age—and that this provides parents with some evidence of achievement. If the alternative, in their experience, is teacher commentary and judgement without any accounts of evidence (say samples of the child's work marked and annotated according to explicit criteria for success) then their desire for test outcomes is understandable. Further (ideally observational) research will have to determine more precisely the nature of the evidence teachers share with parents when informing them of their children's progress.

## Conclusion

What the evidence overall reveals is the need for the various interest groups to clarify the purposes of assessment and to recognize that different purposes may require a different

mode of assessment. For instance, it is arguable that the kind of assessment needed to inform *next steps* for learners or what in England is termed as *assessment for learning* requires a different approach to assessment aiming to serve accountability purposes. The latter arguably needs to be reliable and the assessments (whether tasks or tests, teacher or externally set, or some combination) need to maximize consistency in the administration and marking so judgements about learners' achievements can be considered comparable, thus maximizing confidence in the results. The main purpose of this kind of assessment is to provide parents and other agencies with some indication of the standards achieved at a certain point in the learners' schooling. Assessment for learning, on the other hand, is about providing information to learners, teachers and parents so the next steps can be determined and so the progression in learning can be facilitated. This kind of assessment may be informal and impromptu in style—it may not require the same attention to issues of consistency and reliability (Harlen and James, 1997). However, validity is crucial here—it is important that pupils are assessed in all the areas of the curriculum. The main point here is that the type of assessment should be decided on the basis of the consequences of the results: i.e. how the results are intended to be used (William and Black, 1996). The evidence from the interviews points to a lack of clarity and some confusion regarding such consequences or purposes, with some prioritizing or ignoring or downgrading important purposes. What is needed is further discussion and informed debate among the various interest groups.

Although descriptions of assessment in the new revised curriculum are largely in line with contemporary theory on assessment, the empirical evidence suggests that teachers will need considerable professional development in order to implement these approaches effectively. As McLaughlin (1987) notes, the policy text on its own cannot mandate what matters. While the scale of this exploratory study means the findings based on it cannot be considered to represent all the various interests and interest groups in Irish primary education, the findings identify a theme that is ripe for debate and further research.

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