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*The Education and Training  
Inspectorate*

*Issues from Inspection No 6.*



*Assessment in Secondary Schools*  
*Findings From District Visits*  
*1997-1998*



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# 1. FOREWORD

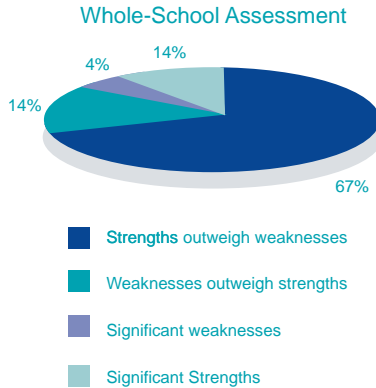
- 1.1 This report presents the Inspectorate's findings on the procedures and practice of assessment within schools in the secondary sector. The report is based on evidence from visits to the 50 secondary schools listed in Appendix 1.
- 1.2 In the main, the evidence for the report was gathered by District Inspectors (DIs) during planned district visits; in a few schools, the information was collected during a general inspection (GI). Almost all of the district visits took place during the second term of the 1997/98 academic year; during the visits, Inspectors held discussions with the principal, members of the senior management team (SMT) and teachers; they observed a number of lessons and examined a sample of the pupils' work.
- 1.3 The district visit is becoming an increasingly important part of inspection activity; it enables the Education and Training Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) and the schools to evaluate aspects of provision as one way of contributing to raising standards.
- 1.4 As part of the Inspectorate's commitment to its programme of review and continuous improvement, the participating schools were asked to evaluate the usefulness to them of the district visit procedure. A copy of the evaluation form is included as Appendix 2. Almost all of the returns indicated that the schools valued the district visit; they reported that it helped them to reflect on their assessment procedures and practice and provided a good opportunity to develop further their links with the DI.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

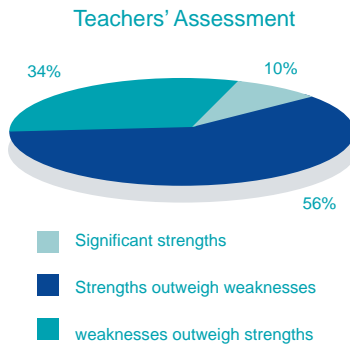
- 2.1 In coming to a view about assessment at whole-school level, the Inspectors considered the quality and effectiveness of the school's policies for assessment, how well the school's records provide an account of the pupils' academic progress and also their other achievements, the clarity and effectiveness of the communication to parents about their children's progress, and the use made by the schools of assessment outcomes to evaluate and review the teaching approaches used and the standards being achieved.
- 2.2 In coming to a view about the teachers' assessment, the Inspectors considered the quality and consistency of the marking of the pupils' work, the appropriateness of the assessment strategies used, the effectiveness of the communication to the pupils in relation to what they have achieved and how they could improve this achievement, and the use of information gained from assessment to inform future planning for teaching and learning.
- 2.3 1996-1997 was the first year of statutory assessment in English, mathematics and science at key stage 3 (KS3). This statutory assessment is managed by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). The report provides evaluative comment, based on evidence from the schools visited, on the introduction of the new elements of statutory assessment and on how this assessment is affecting teaching and learning.

# 3. ASSESSMENT

3.1 The schools' assessment procedures and practice had significant strengths in seven of the schools; in 33 schools, the strengths outweighed the weaknesses; in seven, the weaknesses outweighed the strengths; there were significant weaknesses in two schools.



3.2 The teachers' assessment procedures and practice had significant strengths in five of the schools; in 28 schools, the strengths outweighed the weaknesses; in 17, the weaknesses outweighed the strengths.



### 3.3 ASSESSMENT POLICIES AND GUIDANCE

3.3.1 Almost all of the schools had a written policy on assessment. In over half of these schools, the policy gave detailed and appropriate guidance to teachers and departments about the purposes of assessment, stated which information should be included within each departmental policy, and gave guidance on how assessments should be carried out, including the organisation of routine tests and examinations. In over one-third of the schools, the policy and practice for assessment was being reviewed or had been identified as a priority for review as part of the school development plan. This review had proved to be particularly effective in those schools which had evaluated and recognised the good ideas and practice for assessment which existed within their school and, subsequently, sought to adapt and apply this provision on a whole-school basis. In one example, the whole-school assessment policy and practice was reviewed in the light of the work done by the mathematics and science departments on end-of-unit testing, including classwork and homework, monitoring the pupils' performance, sharing with the pupils the assessment criteria used and developing pupil-peer assessment.

3.3.2 In almost half of the schools, there were departmental policies for assessment which were aligned well with the whole-school policy; such policies specified the nature, focus and frequency of assessments and promoted a suitable range of assessment strategies. Other useful features included in some departmental assessment policies were:

- appropriate guidance on the marking of the pupils' work;
- suitable reference to the setting and marking of homework;
- clear direction on the systematic recording of the pupils' progress;
- planned developments in assessment for the department.

In under one-seventh of the schools, the departmental assessment policies were either generally poor or non-existent.

## 3.4 MARKING

3.4.1 The quality of the marking of the pupils' work was consistently good in just under one-fifth of the schools; it was generally poor in a similar number of the schools. Where it was strongest, marking was carried out with rigour and sensitivity; it highlighted strengths and identified areas for improvement. In over three-fifths of the schools, there was an undue variation in the quality of the marking across and also within departments. The quality of marking of the pupils' work in English was good in over one-third of the schools and poor in only a few schools; in mathematics, the quality of marking was good in one-quarter of the schools and poor in one-tenth; conversely, in science, the quality of the marking was poor in one-quarter of the schools and good in one-tenth. Examples of the best practice observed included:

- in an English class, there was clear feedback by the teacher to the pupils on their performance, the pupils added their own comments to demonstrate their understanding of what they needed to do to improve and there was substantial evidence from their books that improvement had been made;
- in a sixth-form geography class, small groups of pupils made presentations on aspects of their course, which were judged by the other members of their class. The teacher prepared the class well in respect of appropriate criteria for assessment and expected standards. The pupils gained in confidence and consolidated their knowledge through the experience.

3.4.2 Only a few schools implemented a common marking policy, for example, with an agreed approach to the marking of errors in spelling or grammar.

3.4.3 In under one-fifth of the schools, the principal or members of the SMT monitored the pupils' work in a systematic manner; for example, in one school, clear criteria for evaluating the standard of the work and the quality of marking were agreed and the departments which chose to participate in the process

received a useful report from the SMT on their assessment practice. The marking of the pupils' work was identified as a major priority for improvement by just under one-quarter of the schools.

### *3.5 HOMEWORK*

3.5.1 The quality of policies and procedures on the setting, marking and monitoring of homework varied amongst schools, but in the one-fifth of the schools where best practice was reported, some of the good features noted were:

- a homework information pack had been prepared and sent out to parents;
- clear guidance had been provided for pupils on the expected standard of homework, including presentation, guidelines for grammar, punctuation and spelling within the school's study skills programme;
- the pupils' homework planners were effectively monitored; there were examples of positive and swift responses by the pupils and/or their parents to this monitoring which, in turn, promoted improvements in the standards being achieved;
- evaluative comments on the standard of homework were included in the pupils' written reports.

### *3.6 RECORDING AND REPORTING*

3.6.1 In over one-third of the schools, there were efficient procedures to maintain a useful record of the progress of individual pupils. Features of this effective monitoring of the pupils' work included early intervention by the school in the case of poor work and positive reinforcement in the case of good or improved work. In over one-sixth of the schools, this information was being used by the

departments and in a few schools, by the pupils, to identify appropriate departmental or individual targets for future improvement. The completion of the Record of Achievement (ROA) for each pupil has provided an opportunity for comment on a wide range of academic and non-academic performance which many of the pupils reported they valued greatly. In one school, for example, the pupils commented that the compiling of their documents for the ROA enabled them to reflect on their involvement in the life of the school and on their out-of-school interests; they saw the ROA as potentially useful in their move into employment, training or university. In under one-quarter of the schools, the procedures for the collation of the ROA were well integrated with the programme for pastoral care and the pupils' academic experience.

- 3.6.2 In over one-third of the schools, there was an effective system of reporting to parents about their children's performance. In these schools, the written reports provided useful and concise information about the pupils' strengths and weaknesses over a range of achievements, academic and non-academic, and attitudes and behaviour. In schools where practice was weaker, the written reports provided an assessment only of performance in terminal examinations.

## 3.7 *REVIEW AND ANALYSIS*

- 3.7.1 All schools engaged in moderation procedures as part of GCSE, GCE A level or other public examinations as part of their practice to promote consistent standards of assessment. Almost one-quarter of the schools have developed similar standardisation procedures as part of their internal assessment practice in school examinations and tests; for example, through the development of an agreed format and style for internal examination papers, together with common strategies for setting and marking, which are consistent with the external examinations taken.

3.7.2 In just over one-quarter of the schools, the SMT has made a particularly detailed analysis of the school's external examination results (at GCSE and A level) including a comparison with the respective Northern Ireland average performances and has been monitoring the change in standards over time within subjects in the school. The analysis has been supported by the Computerised Local Administration System for Schools (CLASS) or other computer packages and enabled the SMT to have an informed view of the school's examination performance in each subject; this information contributed to the management's curricular planning and review. In other schools, the analysis of such data was less evident and in approximately one-sixth of the schools, there was little systematic consideration of the school's examination results and the teachers had an uninformed and, on occasions, inaccurate view of their pupils' achievements; in a few of these schools, the information requested for the district visit prompted the school to investigate the use of CLASS to provide comparative examination information.

### *3.8 LINKS WITH PRIMARY SCHOOLS*

3.8.1 In almost one-third of the schools, there was poor communication with the feeder primary schools about the achievements of transferring pupils in the statutory KS2 assessment or the pupils' general performance. In just under one-eighth of the schools, this communication was very effective; for example, in one school a clear profile of each pupil in the Year 8 intake was gathered from the primary schools; this profile was given to all relevant teachers, used as a basis for teaching, and the general profile of the year group was analysed by the senior management to inform the organisation of the Year 8 classes. In almost one-fifth of the schools, the pupils underwent additional initial assessment, for instance, in English and mathematics, to provide information which was used only to determine class groups; in these instances, insufficient use was made of the information available from their feeder primary schools.

## 3.9 STATUTORY ASSESSMENT ARRANGEMENTS AT KS3

- 3.9.1 The administrative arrangements for statutory assessment at the end of KS3 are finding acceptance in the large majority of schools. The personnel involved, including teachers, heads of English, mathematics and science departments, assessment co-ordinators and principals, understand the demands and are familiar with the necessary procedures.
- 3.9.2 Many of the schools report that the administrative burden has been considerably reduced from the previous year (1997) to a manageable level, particularly through the greater use of the CLASS system. A minority of schools report that the time spent by teachers on administrative tasks is still unnecessarily time-consuming.
- 3.9.3 The majority of schools which had sought additional information from CCEA on administrative matters related to statutory assessment reported that rapid and helpful feedback was given. A few schools reported that they would appreciate more subject-specific information from CCEA, for example, more detail on how their pupils had performed in particular parts of the assessment. At the time of the district visit, a number of schools had received from CCEA an analysis of their KS3 results in comparison to other schools with similar socio-economic indicators; without exception, these schools reported that they found this comparative data both very useful and challenging. There was evidence that, with their increasing access to comparative information on KS3 results, SMTs, and the subject departments, are beginning to analyse KS3 results in a more critical and reflective manner and considering whether any changes are necessary to their teaching programmes. In the schools visited, the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) was providing useful advice and valuable resources targeted specifically at KS3 assessment.

- 3.9.4 The extent to which arrangements for statutory assessment at KS3 are having a beneficial influence on teaching and learning varies greatly, with a more positive picture in English and mathematics than in science. Over one-third of the English departments and under one-quarter of the mathematics departments were adjusting their teaching programmes in the light of KS3 results. In science, only one-seventh of the departments were analysing the KS3 results in any systematic manner and considering any necessary modification to the teaching programmes. The outcomes of the teacher-assessed component which gauge the pupils' achievements in the individual attainment targets are analysed systematically in only a small minority of schools; opportunities were rarely taken, for example, to analyse the data on the pupils' achievements in investigative and experimental skills in science.
- 3.9.5 In previous years, CCEA has published assessment units (AUs) focused on the testing of specific levels of the attainment targets of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC). The large majority of schools use AUs systematically as part of their KS3 assessment procedures and state emphatically that they find them useful, both for testing and for diagnostic purposes. AUs were used extensively by over four-fifths of the mathematics departments, by over seven-tenths of the English departments and by three-fifths of the science departments. The majority of schools would welcome the production of more AUs.
- 3.9.6 In the absence of external moderation, schools are responsible for the moderation of the teacher-assessed components of statutory assessment. The large majority of schools set aside time for this and there is much evidence that the procedure is carried out in a careful and professional manner. Where practice is strongest, the individual teachers work to common, agreed procedures and are consistent in their judgements on the pupils' work. The need to consider a variety of types of assessment evidence when awarding NIC levels is clearly stated in the guidance on moderation provided by CCEA; however, in a

majority of science departments, and to a lesser extent in English and mathematics, the range of evidence used to assign levels for the teacher-assessed component was too narrow. There was, for example, an over-emphasis on written test results, tightly focused on particular attainment targets and levels, at the expense of other indicators of progress such as classwork and homework.

- 3.9.7 Many teachers report an increase in their confidence in awarding of the NIC levels of attainment to their pupils in the teacher-assessed elements. However, in over one-fifth of the schools, the English departments expressed concern about the discrepancy between the outcomes of teacher-assessment and the level awarded from the test.
- 3.9.8 A minority of schools, mostly non-selective schools, use the KS3 tests as well as end-of-year examinations in English, mathematics and science. This practice puts an additional burden of assessment on pupils and teachers, the added benefits of which should be evaluated carefully by the relevant schools.
- 3.9.9 All of the schools visited informed the parents about their children's achievement in KS3 assessment. In just under one-fifth of the schools, additional valuable information was provided to explain these results to parents including, for example, the meaning of "levels" attained. In one-sixth of the schools, the additional explanation provided by schools to parents to explain KS3 results was minimal and not sufficiently helpful.
- 3.9.10 There are differences in the systems of reporting achievement of pupils at KS3 and at KS4; at KS3, NIC levels are awarded against level descriptions whereas at KS4, grades are awarded based on GCSE grade criteria. This divergence means that teachers, pupils and parents need to understand and work with two sets of assessment criteria and this requirement has implications for continuity of experience from KS3 to KS4; schools generally reported the difference in the systems as unhelpful.

3.9.11 In under one-eighth of the schools, the pupils displayed a good awareness of their attainments at the end of KS3. The large majority of pupils and teachers expressed their strong support for an external assessment at the end of KS3. The main reasons given were the motivation shown by pupils in response to statutory assessment, the additional experience of external examinations prior to GCSE, and the co-operation within and across subject departments in preparation for KS3 assessment.

# 4. PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

- 4.1 This report indicates that there is much sound practice in schools with regard to assessment and that, for many schools, aspects of assessment are a major priority in their development plan. Much time and effort are invested by teachers and schools in monitoring their pupils' progress in respect of both statutory and internal assessment procedures. There is, however, room for improvement in a number of important aspects of provision and practice in assessment which, if addressed, offer the prospect of significant improvement in the quality and appropriateness of teaching and learning and, ultimately, in higher achievement by the pupils.
- 4.2 CCEA and the ELB CASS service should reflect on the extent to which they can support schools to take action on
- a review of assessment procedures and the dissemination of identified good practice across the school;
  - greater use of the outcomes of assessment, including statutory assessment, to inform and modify, where necessary, the planned teaching programme;
  - greater monitoring of the quality of the marking of the pupils' work, particularly in science, and the development and implementation, where appropriate, of whole-school approaches to marking;
  - broadening the range of evidence used to assign levels for the teacher - assessed component of all three subjects, but particularly science;

- more systematic analysis of the pupils' performance in external assessments, including at KS3, and the application of this analysis to improve performance at individual, departmental and whole-school level;
- more effective communication with the feeder primary schools with regard to the standards attained by transferring pupils at the end of year 7, and the application of this information (including that provided on the pupils' ROAs) to provide a teaching programme in year 8 which is matched to the needs of the pupils.

# APPENDIX 1

Ballyclare Secondary School  
Belfast Royal Academy  
Campbell College, Belfast  
Carrickfergus Grammar School  
\*Coleraine Academical Institution  
Coleraine Girls' Secondary School  
Comber High School  
Crumlin High School  
Dean Brian Maguire High School, Carrickmore  
Dominican College, Belfast  
Downshire School, Carrickfergus  
Duke of Westminster High School, Enniskillen  
Dunclug College, Ballymena  
Dunluce School, Bushmills  
Enniskillen High School  
Erne Integrated College, Enniskillen  
Faughan Valley High School, Cross  
Friends School, Lisburn  
Hunterhouse College, Belfast  
La Salle Boys' School, Belfast  
Laurelhill Community College, Lisburn  
Lumen Christi College, Londonderry  
Lurgan Junior High School  
Meanscoil Feirste, Belfast  
Newtownhamilton High School

Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Belfast  
Our Lady's Grammar School, Newry  
Priory College, Holywood  
\*Rathfriland High School  
Shimna Integrated College, Newcastle  
St Aloysius' High School, Cushendall  
St Colm's High School, Draperstown  
St Colmcille's High School, Crossgar  
\*St Comgall's High School, Larne  
St Dominic's High School, Belfast  
St Joseph's High School, Coalisland  
St Joseph's High School, Plumbridge  
St Mary's Christian Brother's Grammar School, Belfast  
St Mary's College, Portglenone  
St Mary's Secondary School, Irvinestown  
St Michael's Grammar School, Lurgan  
St Patrick's & Brigid's High School, Claudy  
St Patrick's High School, Banbridge  
St Catherine's College, Armagh  
\*St Joseph's Convent Grammar School, Donaghmore  
St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen  
St Mary's High School, Londonderry  
St Patrick's Academy for Boys, Dungannon  
\*St Patrick's High School, Dungiven  
Strathearn School, Belfast

\* Identifies General Inspections

# APPENDIX 2

## SCHOOL DISTRICT VISITS IN ASSESSMENT (1997/98)

Name of School: \_\_\_\_\_

Reference Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you feel that:

1. The purpose of the District Visit was clear?  
Yes   
No
  
2. The requests for information created reasonable demands on the school?  
Yes   
No
  
3. Assessment was an issue of sufficient importance for the District Visit?  
Yes   
No
  
4. The District Visit was helpful to you as a way of reviewing aspects of your school's work?  
Yes   
No
  
5. The time spent on the District Visit was valuable to the school?  
Yes   
No



