A DECADE OF ASSESSMENT REFORM IN IRELAND: CONTEXT, COMMON FACETS, AND CULTURE

An exploration of the Primary Curriculum Framework (2023) and the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)

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Abstract

Assessment policy and practice is a key cornerstone of education and a significant influence on teaching and learning, and on learner outcomes. This paper provides insights into recent assessment reforms in Ireland which have sought to reposition assessment in both primary and lower secondary education as part of broader curriculum change. It provides an overview of the prevailing assessment landscape prior to these reforms and explores the associated assessment culture that has evolved over time thereby providing a rich picture of the context for these reforms. Taking the two core policy documents at the heart of the reforms, the *Primary Curriculum Framework (2023)* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*, it identifies four common facets that underpin assessment, before then providing insights into the process of developing education policy advice and how this is shaped not only by research but also by the key education stakeholders. Based on the lived experience of these recent reforms, this paper identifies some key factors that have been identified as contributing towards and conspiring against the successful implementation of a new vision for assessment. The paper concludes with a reflection on assessment policy as a driver of education reform.

Keywords: Assessment, teaching and learning, conducive conditions, policy development, stakeholder engagement

Résumé

La politique et la pratique de l'évaluation sont une pierre angulaire clé de l'éducation et ont une influence significative sur l'enseignement, l'apprentissage et les résultats des apprenant·es. Ce texte offre un aperçu des réformes récentes de l'évaluation en Irlande qui ont cherché à repositionner l'évaluation dans l'enseignement primaire et secondaire inférieur dans le cadre d'un changement de programme d'études plus large. Il fournit un aperçu du paysage d'évaluation prévalant avant ces réformes et explore la culture d'évaluation associée qui a évolué au fil du temps, fournissant ainsi une image riche du contexte de ces réformes. En s'appuyant sur les deux documents de politique clés au cœur des réformes, le Cadre du Programme Primaire (2023) et le Cadre pour le Cycle Junior (2015), il identifie quatre facettes communes qui sous-tendent l'évaluation, avant de fournir des aperçus sur le processus de développement de conseils en politique éducative et comment cela est façonné non seulement par la recherche mais aussi par les principaux acteur·rices de l'éducation. Basé sur l'expérience vécue de ces réformes récentes, ce texte identifie certains facteurs clés qui ont été identifiés comme contribuant à et conspirant contre la mise en œuvre réussie d'une nouvelle vision de l'évaluation. Le document se conclut par une réflexion sur la politique d'évaluation en tant que moteur de la réforme de l'éducation.

Mots-clés : évaluation, enseignement et apprentissage, conditions propices, développement des politiques éducatives, engagement des décideur·ses

1. Introduction

In their 2011 exploration of assessment reform, policy, and practice, Berry and Adamson (2011) posited that the role of assessment in any given education system is considered to reflect its priorities, its vision for learning and ultimately, what is valued. It can also be said that in recent years, the landscape of assessment in contemporary education has evolved and that there has been a shift towards the development of more sophisticated, authentic, muti-faceted, and culturally-responsive assessment processes. Education systems must therefore also evolve to align with this shift, and this was one of the challenges facing the Irish education system over the past ten years as it embarked on significant reform of both primary (5-13 years) through the development and introduction of the _Primary Curriculum Framework_ (Department of Education, 2023) and of junior cycle (lower secondary 13-16 years) through the development and implementation of the _Framework for Junior Cycle 2015_ (Department of Education and Skills, 2015).

This paper will detail these two seminal education reforms in Ireland which focus on the compulsory stage of education. It will begin by providing an overview of the overarching assessment landscape through exploring the context and basis for the reforms. It will then detail four common core facets of these reforms, exploring how they provide a basis for a shift in assessment practice before then navigating some of the journey of these reforms and the approach to education policy development in Ireland. The paper will also identify some factors which can contribute towards and conspire against assessment policy evolution with a particular focus on the significance of culture before concluding with a reflection on both policy documents and the vision for assessment enshrined therein.

2. Assessment landscape, context, and basis for reform in Ireland

Education for children and young people in Ireland is provided across early years, primary and post-primary education, with the post-primary phase divided into upper and lower secondary (see Figure 1). The purpose and practice of assessment has both similarities and differences at each phase, and these are discussed in greater detail later in this section. Policy advice on curriculum and assessment in Ireland is provided by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (Education Act, 1998, section 41.1). The concepts of alignment, continuity and progression are central to this work.

Figure 1
The Irish Education System 0-18 years (Figure developed by the authors)
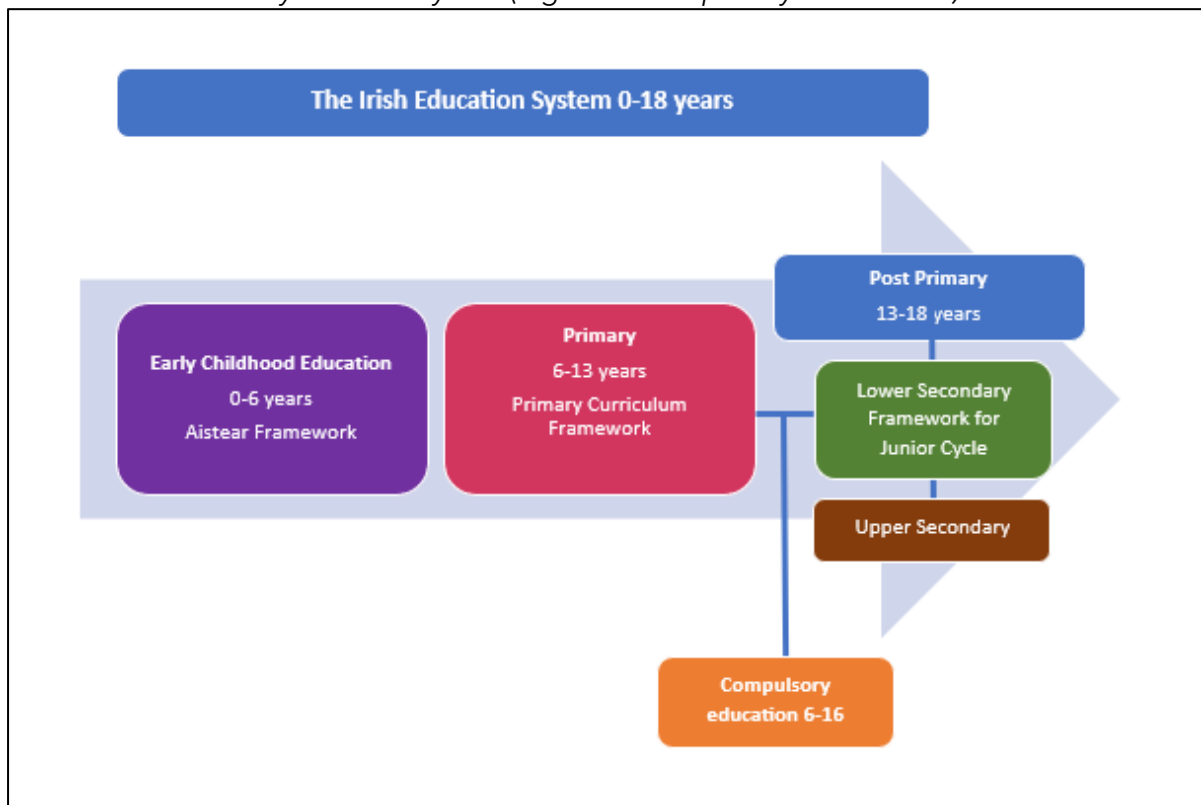
This paper will focus in particular on two aspects of NCCA's work - the reform of primary and post-primary (lower secondary) education which form part of the compulsory stage of education in Ireland. The next section will examine the context for these reforms and reveal some of the challenges in shifting assessment practice and reframing assessment policy at both primary and lower secondary.

2.1   Assessment in primary education

Assessment had long been framed as a central principle underpinning teaching and learning at primary level (Government of Ireland, 1999; Department of Education, 1971) but the role played by assessment within the triad of pedagogy-curriculum-assessment in practice has long been questioned, and for some considered an absent component (Hall, 2000). Since the publication of the Primary School Curriculum in 1999, a number of policy

developments have sought to strengthen this link within this common triad. One of the most significant shifts at primary level came through the introduction in 2006 of policy-mandated standardised testing at two stages during primary school with a commitment to the provision of accompanying teacher professional development. This development was greeted with a degree of reservation by educators (Looney, 2006) and was preceded by a number of unsuccessful previous attempts (National Education Convention, 1993). Further policy development in this area soon followed with introduction of 'Assessment for primary schools: Guidelines for Schools' (NCCA, 2007) focusing on a range of effective assessment approaches in schools and was broadly welcomed by the sector. However, as with many other Irish educational policy initiatives introduced at that time, aspirations to strengthen the status and practices of assessment at primary level were impeded by the ensuing global economic crisis, resulting in a paucity of momentum and progress in this space (Sheehan, 2016).

In 2011, momentum for assessment reform was somewhat regained when the *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life - the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young people 2011-2020* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) outlined a number of policy imperatives to improve and enhance education across a range of areas including assessment. Such changes included the requirement for mandatory reporting of standardised assessment results to parents at three stages across primary education, building on the previous mandating of testing children at two stages. However, this was not without unintended consequences, and studies examining assessment practices in subsequent years increasingly point to a growing focus on high-stakes assessment and, in some cases, to questionable test-preparation practices amongst teachers in the absence of timely and appropriate teacher professional development (e.g., McNamara, 2016; O'Leary et al., 2019).

In 2016, an extensive review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum commenced resulting in the publication of a new *Primary Curriculum Framework* in 2023. In the intervening years, there has been a renewed focus on assessment, with NCCA engaging in widespread consultation and engagement with stakeholders, as well as commissioning a rich bank of research to inform and shape developments, including research specific to the area of assessment. This particular research sought to examine definitive principles and theories of assessment that might underpin a redeveloped curriculum (Lysaght et al., 2019), to explore contemporary perspectives on assessment and to extrapolate empirical evidence of assessment approaches and applications within an integrated curriculum (Burke & Lehane, 2023). Most recently, research from the Children's School Lives longitudinal study, exploring the lived experiences of children in Irish primary schools, has cast a spotlight on assessment (Devine et al., in press). Amongst the findings, the level of test anxiety exhibited by children in 4th class was noteworthy, with almost two thirds of children reporting to experience anxiety "sometimes" or "usually/always" in the lead up to and following the completion of tests. Additionally, the same study pointed to concerns expressed by school principals as to "the over emphasis by parents on standardized test results" (Devine et al., in press, p. 85). All such research has provided a sound base upon which to reconceptualise the role of assessment in the redeveloped primary curriculum. Accordingly, the new *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education, 2023) posits assessment and progression as one of eight overarching principles "that convey what is valued in primary and special education and what lies at the heart of high-quality learning, teaching, and assessment in the primary curriculum" (p. 6). This places a strong emphasis on the status of assessment, and on the important part assessment plays in supporting children's learning in particular. In this light, the role assessment plays in the moment to moment interactions that take place within the primary classroom is affirmed by presenting

assessment along a continuum, ranging from 'intuitive' to 'planned interactions' to 'assessment events' (Department of Education, 2023, p. 22), encapsulating the breadth of assessment activity in the primary classroom. Importantly, the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education, 2023) provides an important foundation upon which to build on existing guidance and support for schools in the coming years thereby supporting teacher practice and enhancing the experiences of children.

2.2 Assessment in lower secondary education

Assessment for certification purposes has been a key feature of assessment in secondary education and formal certification of lower secondary education in Ireland began in the 1920s with the introduction of the Intermediate Certificate and later the Group Certificate for vocational purposes. The Intermediate and Group Certificates continued to be awarded to students for over sixty years placing a strong focus on the purpose of assessment at this phase of education as being for certification purposes.

In 1989, a unified Junior Certificate replaced the Intermediate and Group certificates. The intention within the Junior Certificate was to provide greater continuity with the existing primary school curriculum and to provide students with breadth and balance throughout the junior certificate programme. Central to this was the intention to "employ the widest possible range of assessment methods in order to achieve congruence with the aims and objectives of the programme" (NCCA, 2004, p. 6). However, this vision was not realised, and an overarching focus on terminal examinations dominated the student experience which was 'at odds with' the espoused vision for breadth and balance (NCCA, 2004, p. 6).

Independent reviews of the Junior Certificate programme further highlighted this mismatch between the re-designed curriculum and the end-of-cycle examinations. A post-primary longitudinal study which was conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) captured student experiences over their six years of second level education raised questions about the nature of the Junior Certificate focusing in particular on the high stakes nature of the examination and the almost solitary focus on terminal examinations. The data emerging from this study also showed that the Junior Certificate model caused substantial amounts of disengagement among learners, particularly in their second and third years of the programme (Smyth, 2006) as the teaching and learning was focused too heavily on the state examinations (McCoy et al. 2014; Smyth & Banks 2012). This was seen as particularly problematic as this is considered "a key period in students' longer-term engagement with schooling" (Smyth, 2009, p. 2) and disengagement was disproportionally higher amongst male students and those from lower socio-economic classes (Smyth, 2009, p. 3). Other studies around the Junior Cycle also highlighted the need to replace the current structure of high pressure, state examinations with a more student-centred approach in order to improve overall learning and reduce the backwash influence of the terminal examination on teaching and learning as seen with the introduction of standardised testing at primary level. It was felt that the examination-heavy focus 'set the tone' for the student experience and in some cases led to significant student stress (Smyth, 2009 p. 3).

Further evidence of this negative backwash was revealed in the impact of a sustained focus on high stakes examinations on the school climate and student-teacher relationships (Byrne and Smyth, 2010) while students were assuming little responsibility for their learning, believing that preparation for the terminal examinations was primarily the responsibility of the teacher (NCCA, 2011). A significant change in retention rate statistics for progression to upper secondary education (senior cycle) in Ireland indicated that 85% of students

remained in education post-junior cycle (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) thereby reducing the emphasis on the Junior Certificate as a school-leaving examination. There was therefore broad agreement across the system that the three-year Junior Certificate programme needed reform and that assessment in particular would need to be reviewed and redeveloped.

Arising from this research and a review of the Junior Certificate programme the current *Framework for Junior Cycle* was published in 2015. An earlier iteration of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* published in 2012 (Department of Education and Skills, 2012) highlighted the need for "fundamental changes to curriculum and assessment" (2012, p. V). This proposed shift in policy was the subject of much discussion and protracted industrial relations negotiations, with teacher unions strongly "supporting the retention of externally set and administered examinations" (MacPhail et al., 2018 p. 12), perhaps reflecting the prevailing cultural understanding of the purpose of assessment, particularly at this age and stage of learning. Consequently, the 2012 Framework was renegotiated but the focus on assessment supporting student learning was retained and remains at the core of the updated Framework.

The vision set out within the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* reflects the three international trends in modern day curriculum development identified by Priestley and Biesta (2013) as it places a renewed focus on constructivist and student-centred approaches, underlines the role of the teacher as a central agent in curriculum development, and places a strong emphasis on student competences and capacities through the interweaving of a set of student key skills and a focus on the development of knowledge, understanding, skills, and values in the learning outcomes set out in the subject and short course specifications. In the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*, assessment is framed as supporting student learning while also fulfilling the function of measuring student achievement. This dual approach, which is also echoed in the redeveloped *Primary Curriculum Framework* reduces the focus on externally assessed examinations as a means of assessing students and increases the prominence given to classroom-based assessment and formative assessment thereby acknowledging that "students learn best when they are supported by teachers in understanding how their learning can be improved" (Department of Education and Skills, 2015, p. 7).

3. Common facets of assessment reform

The brief contextual overview provided in the previous section has outlined the assessment landscape in Ireland at primary and lower secondary and has also provided some perspective for the development of the two key policy documents discussed in this paper. These two documents, the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* are designed to provide a cohesive vision for education including teaching, learning and assessment. This section of the paper will now explore some key facets of the reforms which are central to the vision within both policy documents.

From an assessment perspective, both policy documents outline a shift to assessment approaches that focus on the needs of learners in the 21st century, and present learners, teachers and parents/guardians with a much broader picture of learning, development and progression (Darmody, 2016). These approaches support the positioning of assessment as a tool to improve learning in addition to being a means of measuring how much learning

has taken place (Wiliam, 2017), and situate assessment as a key and integral element of teaching and learning.

Four common facets (see Figure 2) that espouse this positioning of assessment can be identified within both the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015,* and these clearly reflect the priority afforded to this broader vision of assessment within the curriculum-pedagogy-assessment triad. Within both Frameworks, assessment is positioned as a central element of teaching and learning and is framed as having the potential to serve various purposes, to collaborative processes while also placing a renewed focus on learner voice in the classroom. These four facets, also identified by Lysaght et al. (2019) will now be explored in somewhat greater detail and with reference to the two Frameworks outlining how they are evidenced in both policy documents.

Figure 2
Common facets of assessment across the Primary Curriculum Framework and the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 (Figure developed by the authors)
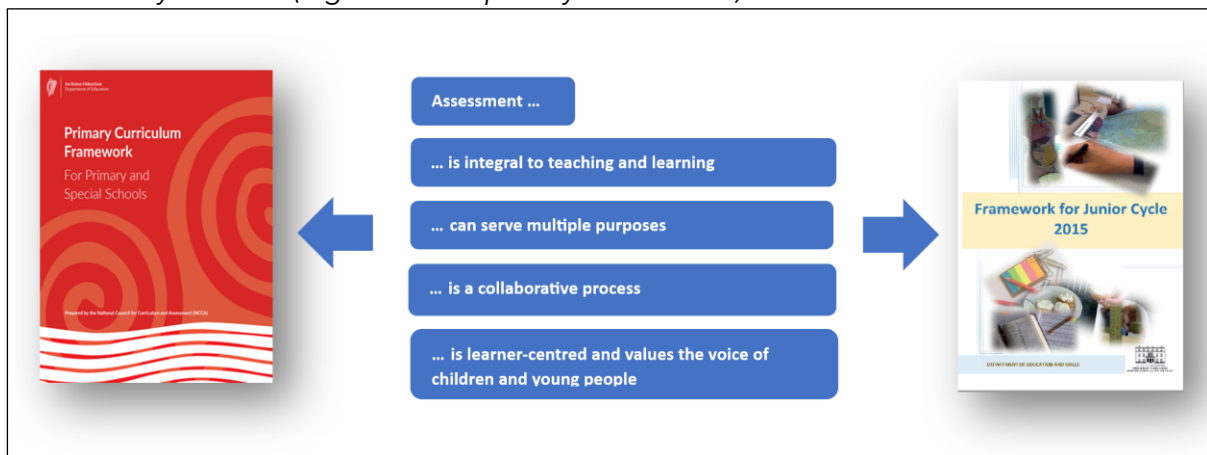
3.1   Assessment is integral to teaching and learning

Much of the discourse around assessment argues that it should serve a core purpose of supporting learning (Black & Wiliam, 2012) and when thoughtfully applied, can bridge the gap between teaching and learning, offering critical insights to enhance education and the learning experience (Wiliam, 2011). Both the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* position assessment as a core component of the process of teaching and learning. These frameworks promote a rounded approach to assessment to facilitate 'engaged learning and better outcomes for students' (Department of Education and Skills, 2015 p. 35) and seek to uphold the primacy of the child as the key stakeholder in assessment so that they can "identify where they are in terms of their learning, and what they need to do to progress beyond that point" (Department of Education, 2023, p. 21).

The centrality of the role of the teacher (Goodson, 2001) in integrating assessment is reflected in both the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* where teachers are positioned to adapt and tailor learning experiences on a moment by moment basis, responding to the information they gather through ongoing intuitive assessment practices that can support a responsive pedagogy, offering students multiple means for progression, and as a result enhancing learning. This framing of assessment as being a core element of teaching and learning is also reflective of Boud et al.'s presentation of assessment as a "socially-situated interpretive act" (Boud et al., 2018 p. 1109) which shifts

the focus onto the process of assessment rather than the traditional view of assessment as a product or artefact thereby repositioning assessment as a key cornerstone of teaching and learning.

3.2   Assessment can serve multiple purposes

Across all curricula in compulsory education, assessment is recognised as a flexible and multifaceted tool that exists along a continuum. This perspective underscores that assessment can take on various forms, serve diverse purposes, and employ a range of approaches. These multifaceted assessments provide rich opportunities for learner empowerment, enabling students to showcase their knowledge, understanding, and skills beyond traditional examinations (Broadfoot & Black, 2004). Both the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* recognise that assessment information can be used in multiple ways to serve multiple purposes with both documents underlining the potential benefit of such information to significantly enhance learning. The *Primary Curriculum Framework* (highlights the importance of teachers exercising their professional judgement and agency through knowledge of the curriculum and children's prior learning. It identifies three broad types of assessment depicted in Figure 3 representing a balance of visible and invisible assessment and the myriad of ways in which assessment information might be used including to advance learning and to measure achievement at a point in time.

Figure 3
The continuum of assessment in the Primary Curriculum Framework (Department of Education, 2023 p.22)
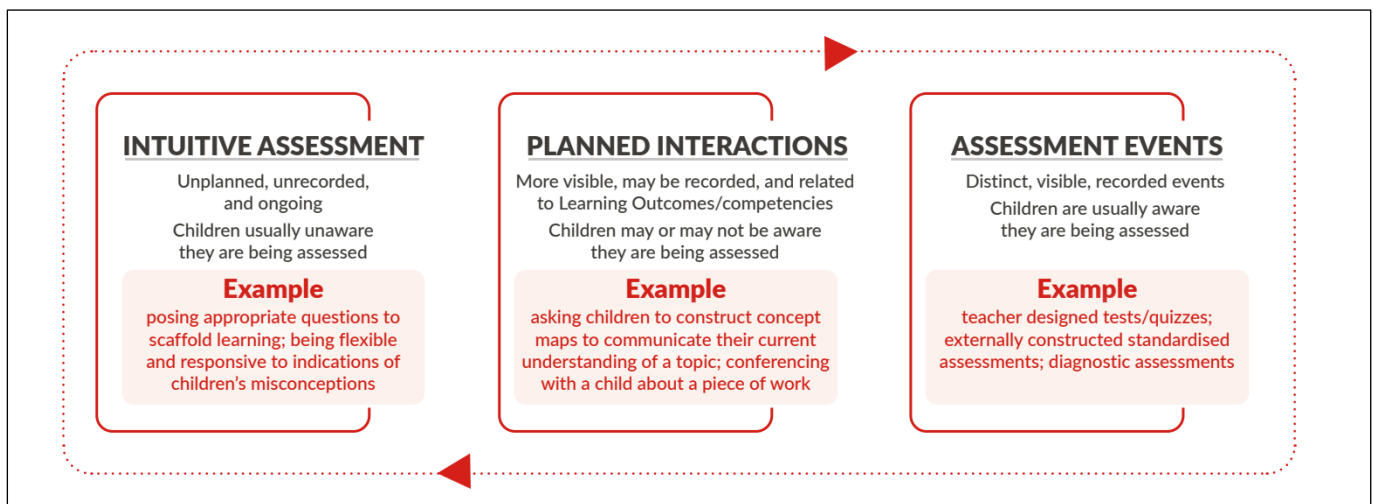
The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* introduced a dual approach to assessment (Figure 4) involving ongoing classroom-based assessment and externally-assessed examinations. The introduction of these multi-modal Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) in all subjects and short courses in the junior cycle programme are intended to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate knowledge, understanding, skills and values beyond the confines of the written examination and are rich in student voice (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). While CBAs and written examinations can be said to be summative assessment moments which provide information about student learning 'at a point in time' (Dolin et al., 2018) and are for the purpose of reporting, the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* also highlights the value of formative assessment and using assessment information to support
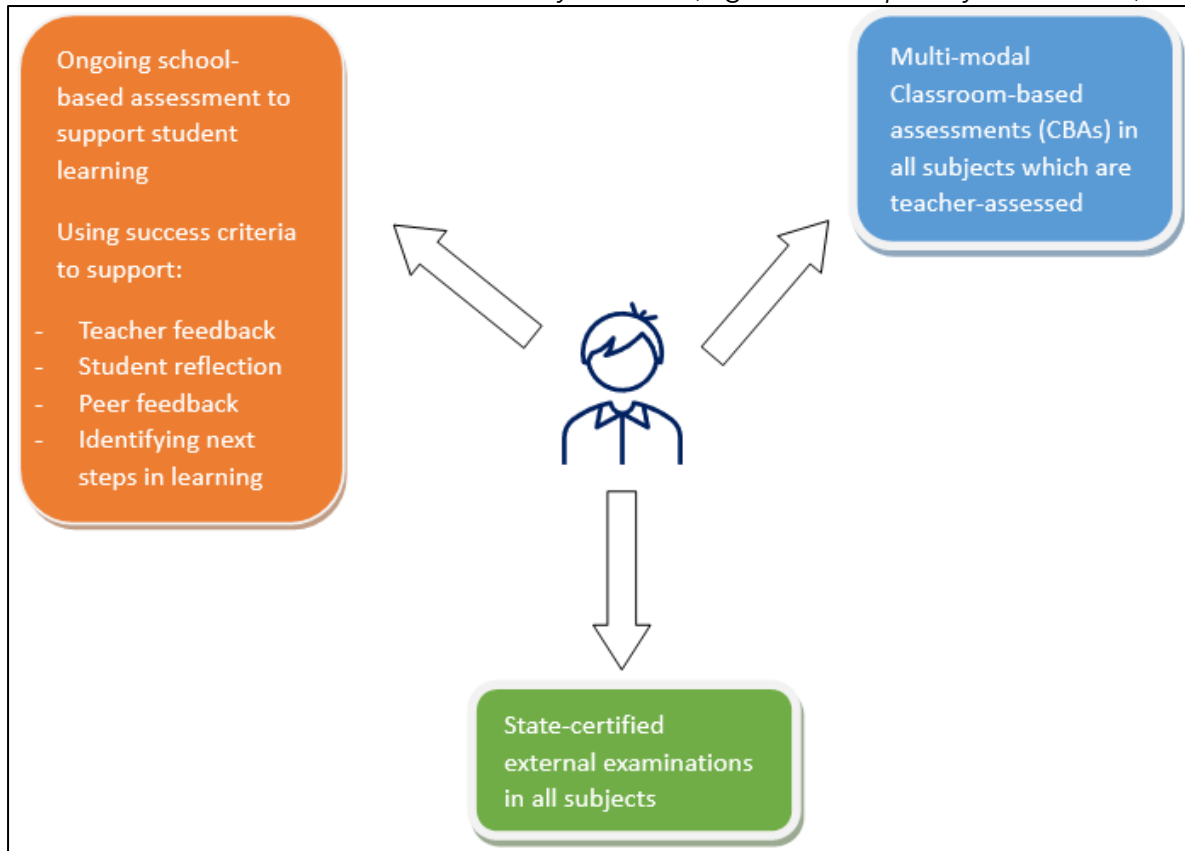
student learning with a focus on the power of teacher feedback and student reflection and the formative use of assessment evidence.

Figure 4

Assessment in the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 (Figure developed by the authors)

Across both Frameworks, teachers are encouraged and empowered to exercise professional judgment to select appropriate assessment methods and complementary approaches to construct a comprehensive view of learning thereby creating the richest picture of student attainment and helping to identify how to maximize progress and future achievement and the relationship between formative and summative assessment can be best described as dimensions rather than a dichotomy (Dolin et al., 2018) where the focus is on using assessment information for a range of complementary purposes including both advancing learning through feedback and evaluating learning for summative purposes.

3.3   Assessment is a collaborative process

Both Frameworks characterise assessment as a shared and collaborative process reflecting how learning, teaching and assessment are inherently socio-cultural activities (Lysaght et al., 2019). Across primary and junior cycle education, assessment information is shared and used by teachers and learners working together to inform learning and shape teaching.

The renewed focus on peer assessment and other forms of collaborative learning as part of Classroom-Based Assessments at junior cycle further emphasises the potential of collaborative approaches to assessment. These learner-centric approaches reflect an evolving understanding of the learning capabilities of children and students and

encourages the development of resilience, resourcefulness, and reflective skills (Claxton, 2007).

Collaborative and inclusive approaches to assessment also extend beyond the classroom, involving parents and guardians in the assessment process to enhance their understanding of their child's progress (Harlen, 2006). In Irish primary schools, assessment information is regularly shared with parents and transferred to post-primary school through the child's Education Passport. At junior cycle, social moderation through Subject Learning and Assessment Review meetings also serves to contribute to a more collaborative assessment culture where teachers collectively discuss examples of student work and the criteria used to assess the work, thereby clarifying their interpretations of qualitative descriptors, and developing shared understandings of their meaning (Smaill, 2018), all of which can contribute to an enhanced understanding of assessment to support learning.

Consequently, arising from this collective and collaborative focus, it can be argued that the vision for assessment outlined in both Frameworks serves to empower schools and educators to not only understand but also actively engage with assessment policies (Willis et al., 2019). It encourages them to adopt a proactive agentic approach (Lockton & Fargason, 2019) and embrace learner-centric approaches to assessment.

3.4 Assessment is learner-centred and values the voice of children and young people

The impetus for child and student participation in aspects that affect their lives is enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and has become increasingly evident across a wide range of policy areas. Child and student voice have become particularly significant in macro-level education policy development where students are increasingly active participants in decision making, and also at micro-level in the classroom where learner-centred approaches position the active participation of students in discussions about their learning as a key cornerstone of classroom interactions thereby fostering authentic voice and engagement (Leitch et al., 2007).

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education, 2023) was developed with the aim of best serving children and places the child at the centre of the learning process with the aim of ensuring that all children can achieve their potential. It recognises that assessment provides information for various stakeholders, the most important of which is the child. The involvement of children in meaningful assessment approaches is a key principle of teaching, learning and assessment with a focus on the importance of recognising each child's prior learning and the funds of knowledge they bring to their learning. Positive interactions between teacher and child enable learning to be a "shared endeavour" which involves "teachers and children working together" (p. 21) to inform teaching and learning.

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* also explicitly "places the student at the centre of the learning process" (DES, 2015 p. 2) and details the power of a range of assessment approaches to support student learning, achievement, and progression. A renewed focus on assessment for formative purposes provides feedback for students and a clearer picture of their strengths and areas for improvement. The introduction of CBAs provides enhanced and extended opportunities for student choice and voice where they have multiple

opportunities to choose areas of learning within individual subjects and short courses for further exploration and can also chose to present their work in a variety of formats.

Through placing this focus on child and student agency in assessment, both Frameworks acknowledge learners "as actors who make choices, and whose actions shape assessment practices in both anticipated and unexpected ways" (Adie et al., 2018 p. 2).

Having considered these four facets as cornerstones of assessment reform at primary and lower secondary levels in Ireland, the next section of this paper will now explore education policy development in Ireland and will focus in particular on the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), as a statutory body of the Department of Education advising the Minister for Education on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools and on assessment procedures used in schools including the development of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*.
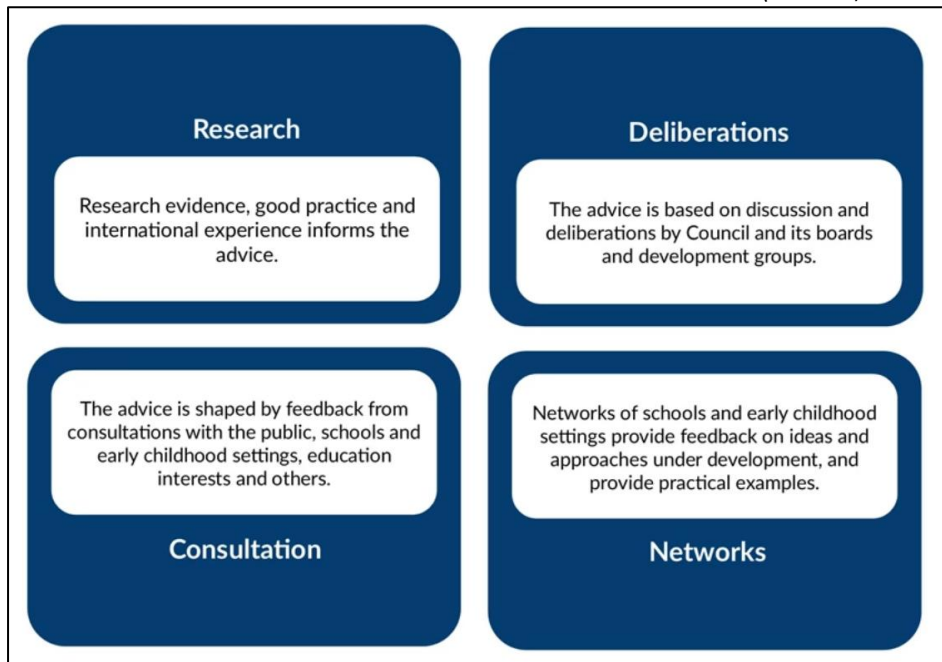
4. The policy development process

Policy development in recent years has been marked by a shift from hierarchy to heterarchy (O'Leary, 2015) as new policy-making paradigms emerge. This is particularly visible in education where stakeholder and citizen engagement in the policy making process has taken on greater importance across the European Union and the countries within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020). In Ireland there is a long history of such engagement, evidenced through the social partnerships models of the 1980s (Gleeson, 2023), and more recently, direct citizen involvement in policy direction through the deliberative processes of the citizens' assemblies on topics ranging from drug use (ongoing), biodiversity (2023) and gender equality (2021), with an assembly on education due to commence in 2024.

The domain of education traditionally involves multiple stakeholders and ultimately, multiple perspectives (Tighe et al., 2013) which can pose challenges for policy development and reform. NCCA has embraced the opportunity to shift towards inclusive and collaborative policy development, actively engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, citizens, and even the youngest members of society, children, and students in its consultative and deliberative processes (NCCA, 2022). This is evident in the structure of NCCA's Council, founded upon a partnership model, comprising 26 nominees who represent teachers, early childhood educators, students, school managers, parents, business interests, trade unions, Irish language organisations, special education, and other education interests. In generating their advice on curriculum and assessment matters to the Minister for Education, the Council are informed by the four dimensions of research, consultation, work with schools and settings, and deliberative processes (Figure 5).

Figure 5
Dimensions of NCCA work in curriculum and assessment (NCCA, 2023 a)

These four dimensions which underpin NCCA's overarching philosophy of curriculum and assessment policy development have framed and informed the development of the assessment reforms set out in the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*. The four dimensions of this approach are now explored further to provide further insights into the development of *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*.

4.1   Research

In developing the assessment advice set out in both the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* NCCA engaged with a range of research including drawing upon existing effective practice in assessment, the assessment experience in a range of jurisdictions and assessment-related academic research, all of which strategically combine to effectively inform "advice, discussion and debate on teaching, learning and assessment" (NCCA, 2022, p. 14). This includes research carried out in relation to specific aspects or areas of curriculum development across early childhood, primary and post-primary education, and more overarching research into teaching, learning and assessment processes.

In terms of the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, influential studies have also been progressed on a longitudinal basis documenting children's lived experiences of primary education in the *Children's School Lives Study* (Devine et al., 2020; Devine et al., 2023; Sloan et al., 2021; Sloan et al., 2022; Symonds et al, 2020). In post-primary education the aforementioned research conducted by the ESRI helped to gain valuable insights into the impact of assessment while a current study from the University of Limerick (McGarr et al., 2023) provides insights into the lived experience of assessment reforms at junior cycle. The influence and impact of these research activities is leveraged through extensive dissemination and interrogative processes in the form of stakeholder events during which stakeholders collectively make sense of and interpret the research for the Irish context. This is a key aspect of education policy-making which allows for consideration of societal

relationships and norms and the complexity of the education landscape (Burdett & O'Donnell, 2016) and provides rich opportunities for policy learning.

4.2   Networks

Engagement with primary and post-primary schools and settings is a core feature of NCCA's developmental work and provides further opportunities to consider the myriad of contextual factors at play in education. Engagement with networks in the context of developing policy advice is characterised by schools and other education settings providing feedback on ideas and approaches under development in addition to becoming a rich source of practical examples from the classroom demonstrating new assessment practices in action. In recent years, schools have become more central in shaping the curriculum, evidenced at primary level in the establishment of the Schools Forum in 2018. This group meets throughout the school year to work collaboratively and share ideas, experiences, and suggestions for the future directions for a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum. This engagement attempts to ensure a balance is stuck across developments between the "aspirational" while also considering "the societal and educational context in which it will be implemented" (Walsh, 2016, p. 11). Engagement with a network of schools also formed part of the introduction of the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* with a diverse cross-section of schools contributing to curriculum development and informing discussions. These networks also provide valuable opportunities for mutual learning (Hargreaves, 2009) and are essential in 'bridging the gap' between practice and policy aspirations (Handelzalts et al., 2019) during policy implementation.

4.3   Consultation

The consultation aspect of NCCA's policy advice development provides further opportunities for engagement with a range of stakeholders. In recent years attention has turned towards supporting the inclusion of a range of 'seldom heard voices' in consultation processes. Traditionally termed 'hard to reach', it is recognised that consulting communities that may not otherwise exercise their voice in consultation processes is an important aspect of education policy development. It can be argued that children and young people are one such group who while having a right to a say in matters that effect their lives enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), are often not afforded the appropriate level of space, voice, audience and influence to impact on policy developments (Lundy, 2012). As part of ongoing developments and expansion of its consultation processes NCCA continues to be innovative in this area, including working with babies, toddlers and young children in a recent consultation commissioned to gather feedback on changes to update *Aistear - the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (O'Toole et al., 2023). Children's voices have also informed the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum (Kiely et al., 2022) and are a consistent feature of developments at post-primary with a focus on developing an embedded culture of listening, and a strategy to support a sustainable structure to include and respond to student voices (Flynn & Hayes, 2021).
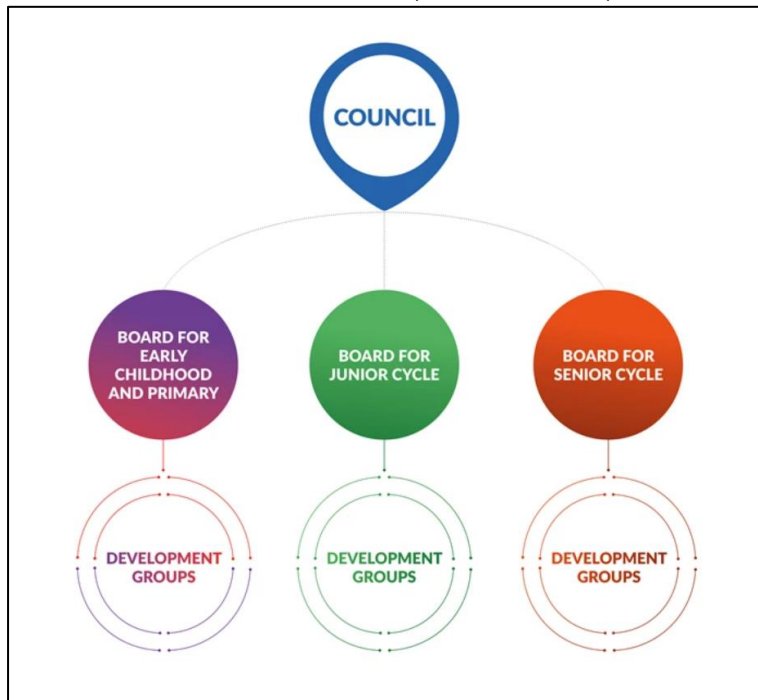
4.4   Deliberation

Opportunities for extensive and robust deliberation are also a key aspect of NCCA policy advice development. This is facilitated through the representative, deliberative structures

including subject development groups, boards and Council (see Figure 6) and helps to further develop and foster a culture of evidence-informed education developments and policy evolution. These deliberative processes have informed and enriched assessment discourse and the development of both the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*.

Figure 6
NCCA's deliberative structures (NCCA 2023 b)

Deliberation provides an opportunity for key stakeholders to develop consensus through communication and discussion, to consider the complexity of the education policy landscape where policy changes are always interlinked and to explore unintended consequences that might impact on the implementation of the policy (Stark et al, 2021). The deliberative structures detailed above also provide an opportunity to strike a balance between 'top down' and 'bottom-up' approaches to policy development (Priestly, 2023).

The next section of this paper will explore some of the factors that have been identified as supporting and challenging assessment reform in Ireland, focusing on those most relevant to the introduction of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*.

5. Factors supporting and challenging assessment reform

Change in education is not without its challenges as acknowledged by Hargreaves and Fink (2006) and changing assessment policy and practice is a particularly complex process. Reflecting the sensitive and nuanced nature of assessment culture as discussed by Holcar et al (2021), and the contextual landscape outlined earlier in this paper, stakeholders in the Irish system possess deeply held assumptions, beliefs and practices associated with assessment that have been ingrained over time, thereby making change a challenging and

contested process. Unearthing and challenging such ideas and predispositions requires awareness and acknowledgement of the prevailing context in which they were developed. The following section will outline three key and inter-related factors that have been identified as supporting and challenging the assessment reform envisaged within the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* namely professional development, collaborative sense-making and prevailing culture.

5.1   The need for professional development

The key role played by professional development in supporting change in education is widely acknowledged as teachers in particular can find change in education challenging to their identity (Guskey, 1986; Olsen, 2011) particularly where reform demands changes to long-established practice (Orafi & Borg, 2009). Professional development can provide space and time for sense-making and to develop an understanding of the principles underpinning reform. Proceeding with reform in the absence of timely and effective professional development can in fact be counterproductive as demonstrated by the previous example a lack of support for teacher assessment practice following the publication of the "Assessment for primary schools: Guidelines for Schools" (NCCA, 2007). In the absence of such professional learning, the enactment of the guidelines was curtailed, and responsibility fell on individual teachers and school leaders to advance assessment practices and assessment literacy in their schools in the absence of an opportunity to discuss and engage with both purpose and implications for practice while considering the barriers to and drivers of change (Priestly & Drew, 2019).

Research conducted by McGarr et al (2023) indicates the significance of sustained professional development in supporting the implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*. Teachers participating in the research 'welcomed the opportunity to share and discuss practice' (2023, p. 60), both within their own schools and with colleagues in other schools while also welcoming practice support in the form of resources and examples from real classrooms. This study also highlights the need for teachers to have a clear shared understanding of the rationale for change which can be achieved through opportunities for collaborative sense-making and fostering a shared sense of purpose and community (Supovitz, 2002).

5.2   The importance of collaborative sense-making

As discussed earlier in this paper, a key feature of the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* was a shift in the purpose of assessment. The dual approach signalled an enhanced role for formative assessment, with Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) providing structured opportunities for feedback on student work and for students to complete multi-modal assessments facilitating the demonstration of knowledge, understanding and skills not usually assessed by summative written examinations. The assessment of these CBAs is school-based, and teachers are supported in forming judgements on student work by using features of quality, measured against a national standard. Crucial to the success of this process has been the provision of time for the aforementioned Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings at school level, where professional conversations are facilitated to support teachers' judgements about students' levels of attainment while fostering collaborative approaches and learning about assessment.

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* also envisages a move towards a model of assessment with a renewed focus on feedback based on comments and dialogue. For some, this represented a significant change in culture and practice in the Irish context, where feedback in the form of marks, grades and percentages had been an embedded practice due to the influence and status of external assessment. Teacher engagement with the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* and significant investment in professional development and allocations of professional time has led to greater levels of professional collaboration and enhanced levels of assessment literacy, with the SLAR model emerging from research as a positive feature from the perspective of teachers (McGarr et al., 2023). This may be attributed to the fact that teachers in post-primary education tend to transact on daily basis within individual subject silos which can, over time, foster norms of privacy (Little,1990) and may hinder opportunities for collaboration and professional growth (Trust et al., 2017). It can be argued that opportunities for meaningful collaboration with colleagues such as those provided by SLAR meetings may help to address this and support the development of social capital (Fullan, 2013) while providing opportunities for personal professional development.

At primary level, the appetite for assessment development gradually emerged over the last decade. In a survey conducted in 2012 on the priorities for primary education, assessment was raised by stakeholders as a priority for development, with a call for a greater focus on assessment for learning (NCCA, 2012). More recently, research to support curriculum development at primary level (Burke & Lehane, 2023; Lysaght et al., 2019) has provided an important basis to lever change, with a rebalancing of assessment priorities required to position assessment as an integral part of learning and teaching.

The publication of the new *Primary Curriculum Framework* carries with it an opportunity for schools to reflect on current positioning. Providing space for schools to interrogate and position themselves alongside the new vision and conceptualisation of assessment, contained within the framework, enables teachers to reflect on their current understandings of the function, purpose, scope, use and forms of assessment. Furthermore, the new Framework provides an important platform for curriculum development in the years ahead, within which assessment will be an integral part, serving multiple purposes and thereby necessitating a shift in assessment culture.

This focus on creating spaces and dedicated time for conversation and sense-making supports collaborative practice and facilitates exploration of the prevailing assessment culture. The significance of culture is explored in the next section.

5.3   The significance of prevailing assessment culture

Early insights research conducted by the NCCA to gather student and teacher perspectives on the enactment of the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* including the dual approach to assessment and on the introduction of CBAs in particular indicates that many students welcome the diversity of assessment including project work and presentations (NCCA, 2020). However, a longitudinal study on the implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* also uncovers some challenges, revealing that students have found the 'moment in time' assessment model of CBAs to be stressful, often citing the number of assessments as a concern. Students also note that the fact that achievement in their CBAs does not count towards the overall grade for subjects in the terminal state examination as a demotivating factor (McGarr et al, 2023).These findings may echo the cultural attachment to marks, graded and percentages in the Irish education system where assessment is seen as chiefly fulfilling a qualification function (Biesta et al., 2015), with parents, in particular, being used

to this model from their own experience of school and assessment. It is clear therefore that the prevailing assessment culture is a key factor in determining the success of proposed reforms.

Assessment culture refers to the values, beliefs and assumptions held by systems, societies or individuals viewed as important in terms of assessment (Holcar et al., 2021). Situating culture within a context of the complex education eco-system, Holcar et al (2021) put forward three actions in order to change assessment culture:

- align understanding and values of high-quality learning and teaching with those of assessment
- recognise the change in assessment culture in the context of which it exists
- appreciate and protect the distinct contexts in which assessment cultures exist and to take an international, rather than global, perspective (Holcar et al., 2021)

These proposed actions highlight the need to provide space and time for teachers and other education stakeholders to engage with proposed reform such as that set out in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*. To facilitate this, NCCA held a number of seminars linked with broader redevelopment of the primary curriculum. Such seminars were attended by a wide range of stakeholders in the system, with conversations centred around research and input from expertise in a variety of areas. In the case of assessment, the paper *'Aligning Assessment, Learning and Teaching in Curricular Reform and Implementation'* (Lysaght et al., 2019) was presented, discussed and debated by participants. This approach provides a vehicle for collaborative sense-making through problematising (Nordholm, 2015) and supporting stakeholders to determine critical responses (Biesta & Tedder, 2006) while also supporting agency and sense of ownership.

This approach was further supported through the development of *'Supporting Systemwide Primary Curriculum Change'* (NCCA, 2022), a document that is intended to foster collaborative decision-making and action to support and guide curriculum change. Drawing upon research, consultative seminars, stakeholder consultation, work with a school network and an advisory panel, it proposes three over-arching conditions as key elements of developing an environment conductive to change: a shared vision, teacher and child agency and collaborative sense-making. These conducive conditions are intended to be sufficiently flexible and agile so that they can be applied to all levels of the education system and are intended to support the implementation and enactment of the vision espoused within the *Primary Curriculum Framework*.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored two key policy documents – the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*, both of which set out a vision for change which includes assessment reform. Despite focusing on different phases of education, both documents position assessment as a dynamic instrument for driving educational reform and changing practice, as well as being an object of reform (Looney, 2006). Both Frameworks also provide a coherent platform for more authentic, multi-faceted and culturally-responsive approaches to assessment across the curriculum.

This examination of the development and implementation of both Frameworks highlights the significance of considering both context and culture when seeking to develop and

implement change. The identification of the key facets which are relevant to both phases of education underline the potential and power of assessment across the continuum of learning and highlights the importance of correctly positioning assessment within education policy.

However, as discussed within this paper, it is the implementation and enactment of such policy that yields dividends for children and students, and this can only be achieved through a shared understanding of the role and power of assessment to support learning. Developing this shared understanding takes time and resources (Fullan, 2016) and must be fostered during both policy development and policy implementation to ensure successful outcomes for children and students, and to fully reflect the vision for learning and what is most valued in education (Berry & Adamson, 2011).

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