

A photograph of a classroom scene outdoors. A teacher, seen from the back, is wearing a dark green suit and holding a large globe. A young boy in a light blue shirt and dark tie is looking up at the globe with a smile. The background consists of dark green foliage.

## **SECTION 3**

# **A CLOSER LOOK AT AFL AND AOL**

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## A closer look at AfL and AoL

This section compares and contrasts the two approaches to assessment (presented in Section 1), **AfL** and **AoL**, according to the activities included in the definition of assessment in Section 1 and below. As outlined in Section 1, these activities overlap and often happen simultaneously.

Assessment is the process of **gathering, recording, interpreting, using, and reporting** information about a child's progress and achievement in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Samples of classroom practice are included in this section along with references to the assessment methods described in Section 2. Discussion begins with the first assessment activity, *gathering assessment information*.

### 1. Gathering assessment information

Gathering information for **AfL** is generally part of the classroom routine, and does not break the flow of teaching and learning. To the child, a question and answer session with the teacher can be a conversation, but the skilled teacher can glean valuable assessment information from it about what and how the child is learning. A learning support teacher for reading explains, *I am constantly observing and listening to the children and I regularly make changes to my plans to take account of what I have seen and heard*. In the following examples teachers describe how they gather assessment information unobtrusively, and use it to further children's learning.

*During the second lesson on the notation of tenths as decimals I asked the children to shade in point five on their worksheet figure. When I had reviewed a selection of attempts I realised that the majority of the class had not grasped the concept. I proceeded to revise the basic concept using labels applied to coloured cardboard strips. This was much more effective, as I discovered from later questioning.* (Teacher, Third class)

*In reading the children's written English work I noted some grammatical errors that were being made by a number of children. I planned a series of activities aimed at correcting these errors, targeting one error each week.* (Teacher, Fifth class)

*Noticing the poor nutritional quality of some children's lunches, I planned a series of lessons integrating SPHE and Science—designing and creating a healthy snack.* (Teacher, Senior infants)

**AfL** also involves the learner actively. The teacher can share the learning intention with the children, which involves the children discussing with the teacher what it is that they are about to learn. In addition, the child can consider with the teacher what the learning criteria are. For example, they might identify the key elements of good story writing using a rubric. These elements of **AfL** offer ways of involving the child in reflecting on and assessing his/her own work.

By contrast, **AoL** generally takes place at the end of a learning period. The teacher can use a variety of assessment tools including spelling tests or standardised tests. The teacher can also use methods such as questioning and observation of a child's learning. The teacher leads the assessment and the child is aware that he/she is being assessed. Below, teachers describe some ways they gather information through **AoL**.

*After a series of lessons on the Normans I brought my fifth class to visit our local Norman castle. We had prepared for the visit and looked for some of the main details in the building. When we returned to class I asked the children to draw their impression of the castle, showing as many of these details as they could recall.* (Teacher, Fourth class)

*Tar éis sraith ceachtanna ar an saol sa chathair d'iarr mé ar na daltaí cur síos a dhéanamh ar phictiúr den sráid chun a gcumas labhartha a mheas.* (Múinteoir, Rang a sé)

*When we had worked with long multiplication for some weeks I set the class a number of problems requiring them to use the operation. It showed me that, while the majority of the class had a sound understanding of the use of long multiplication, their computation needed more work.* (Teacher, Fifth class)

### 2. Recording assessment information

The purpose of an assessment determines what and how information is recorded. The teacher can make immediate use of much of the information gathered from **AfL** in structuring and supporting the child's learning. The teacher can judge what assessment information is important for recording in his/her notes. For example, the teacher would not record the minutiae of a class discussion but might note the unexpectedly enthusiastic contribution of a child who rarely participated. Similarly, the teacher is unlikely to note detailed errors in mathematics work but might record that much of the class showed evidence of requiring additional support in computation skills. The child too can record information about his/her progress in learning, for example as part of portfolio assessment.

In the case of **AoL**, the results of tests at the end of a learning period are usually recorded by the teacher, used to write reports, and stored in the child's Pupil File. Examples of assessment information recorded in this way include standardised test results and children's scores on teacher-designed tests.

### 3. Interpreting assessment information

The teacher's knowledge of the children in his/her class informs his/her interpretation of information from **AfL**. The teacher decides what information is valuable and how it can be used to enhance the child's learning. Information gained from **AfL** can yield a detailed picture of the child's learning and enable the teacher to make more informed decisions when planning for differentiated learning.

Children and their parents can also contribute to the interpretation of assessment information. Skills of self-assessment should be developed in all children so they can assess how well they have mastered skills and knowledge. (See Section 2, pp. 14-22). When the teacher's feedback emphasises criteria for successful learning it helps the child to assess his/her own work, and gives the child direction for future work. Parents can also help build a more complete picture of the child as a learner by talking to the teacher about how the child learns at home and about interests the child pursues outside school. It can also be useful for the teacher to know the nature of homework support provided by parents.

The interpretation of information from **AoL** can depend on the nature of the particular test or assignment. In standardised tests of literacy and numeracy, for example, meanings are attached to the scores that children achieve. Statistical tables rank the individual child's score relative to national norms, or to class-related or age-related norms. The teacher uses technical knowledge to interpret these norms, as well as his/her professional judgement. In interpreting the information, the teacher makes valid and reliable judgements based on sufficient evidence. (See Section 2, pp. 60-65.) For instance, a child's score that is strongly at variance with the child's previous general performance in that subject merits closer inspection. The teacher can also seek the views of colleagues in interpreting test scores. Helping parents to understand the information is another of the teacher's professional responsibilities.

### 4. Using assessment information

The principal use of information from **AfL** is to improve the child's learning on a daily basis. When the teacher notes a child's difficulties as they occur, or gains insight into a child's preferred ways of learning, the teacher can use this information to adapt his/her teaching to suit the child, as illustrated below:

*I find that when I watch the children at work I learn something about their learning. It may be that Ciara opts out when I set groups to work, or Shane's question tells me he hasn't understood what I have just taught. I might plan to spend more time with Shane during a follow-on activity in the next lesson.*  
(Teacher, Second class)

**AfL** should actively involve the child as well as the teacher. In addition to sharing the learning intention and sharing the learning criteria, the teacher also provides feedback to the children. Feedback that focuses on the learning or task in hand indicates next steps, points to achievement and challenges, and has a positive impact on children's learning.

*When I get my work back from Mrs Ryan she always marks something good I have written, but as well, she tells me some way I can make my writing better the next time. I like to know how I can improve my work.* (Cathy, Fourth class)

Developing the skills of self-assessment in children is a gradual process that can begin at an early age. When the teacher asks children in an infant class what they like about their work or the work of other children he/she is taking the first steps in developing the children's assessment skills.

All assessment information should lead to improvement in the child's learning. Just how the information is used is related to the original purpose of the assessment activity. The purpose of **AoL** is often used to determine the extent to which curriculum objectives have been met. The teacher can use this information in different ways in planning the next steps in the child's learning. For instance, the assessment information may indicate that revision of content is required in a particular mathematical concept, or that greater emphasis needs to be placed on comprehension skills. This information is useful to the teacher when it is gathered during the course of the school year. Information gathered at the end of the year is also useful to the teacher in planning the programme for the next year. Aggregated information from standardised testing can inform whole-school planning in literacy and numeracy. A principal comments:

*I reviewed the results of the standardised tests carried out in maths along with the staff member who has responsibility for the Mathematics Curriculum. It was clear that computation skills were not strong across the school so we invited in the Cuiditheoir who helped us as a staff to formulate strategies to improve the situation. We are implementing these this year, focusing intervention on first to third classes.*

Information from **AoL** is used to compile a child's report, which can inform discussion between teacher and parents about the child's learning strengths and weaknesses.

### 5. Reporting assessment information

Teachers and children often share information from **AfL** on a daily basis. Children constantly communicate information to teachers. It can be a challenge for teachers to tune in to children's multiple channels of communication and understand what the information means for each child. Developing self-assessment skills and regular use of portfolios, rubrics and learning logs, empowers children as communicators of assessment information—information to which teachers can respond. (See Appendix A, pp. 84-85.)

For example, some of this information is communicated to parents through homework and this can promote continuity in learning between home and school. Teachers can highlight for parents some ways in which they can support the child's learning at home, particularly through activities in literacy and numeracy. Teachers can also communicate assessment information regularly to children, parents, other teachers, and other relevant professionals.

**AoL** information is generally communicated through parent/teacher meetings, report cards, staff meetings, and so on. Teachers can interpret assessment information for parents, highlighting how it can be used to improve the child's learning. Likewise, parents can respond to the outcomes of assessment. Thus there is a two-way process between teacher and parent.

*There is a continuing process through which the child's formal learning experience in school interacts with the less formal developmental experience of the home and the family.*  
(*Primary School Curriculum, Introduction*, p. 21)

This section has defined and described two complementary approaches to assessment, Assessment for Learning and Assessment of Learning, which build on the assessment information presented in the *Primary School Curriculum*. Together, the two approaches provide teachers with evidence of children's progress and achievement in learning. This information enables teachers to make decisions about adjusting teaching to meet children's learning needs more effectively. In essence, **AfL** and **AoL** enable teachers to create the most supportive learning environments in which children are more motivated to learn.