



## PHYSICAL EDUCATION: ASSESSMENT AND IT'S IMPLICATION

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### Abstract:

*The paper focused on the development of assessment and planning materials, the trailing of these by teachers in a school setting and their subsequent refinement based on the feedback received from the teaching and learning setting. The Final Evaluation Report of the Assessment in Junior Cycle Physical Education (NCCA, 2007) provides a more in-depth commentary of the project than is afforded here.*

### INTRODUCTION:

Assessment for Learning (AfL) reflects recent advances in knowledge of how learning takes place and the importance of assessment in the promotion of learning. AfL acknowledges that assessment should be part of the teaching and learning process, with information gained from ongoing assessment informing and shaping the process. The key principles of AfL are the teacher and pupils sharing the learning intention, sharing the criteria for success and providing feedback based on the criteria for success (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2003; Carless, 2005). Sharing the learning intention is concerned with making the learning intention clear to students using language they can understand through a variety of methods, e.g., orally, brainstorming or through questioning. Sharing the criteria for success is ensuring that learners know the criteria against which their work will be measured, involving students in articulating those criteria. Offering feedback is concerned with providing feedback on the learning task rather than on the person, encouraging students to judge their work by how much they have learned and the progress they have made.

'Rich tasks' were the operational basis for the Assessment in Physical Education initiative (Moynihan, Murphy & O'Flaherty, 2006). There is a clear synergy between 'rich tasks', i.e., a practical representation of the learning outcomes students pursue within physical education, and AfL, each concerned with the pursuit of authentic assessment. The effective use of rich tasks shares with AfL characteristics such as sharing the learning intention with students, helping students to recognize the direction and levels of assessment in their work and providing focused feedback and involving students in reviewing their progress and setting future goals. The rich task presents substantive real problems for the students to solve, based on the learning outcomes of the area of study and may be used as an organizational framework for the design of a block of work. The rich task is particularly useful in the physical education context as it is an integrated learning experience that represents the learning outcomes in a practical environment. Two formative assessment instruments were introduced to the project, the 'assessment wheel' and 'student portfolio', and both relate to the 'rich task'. The concept of the assessment wheel is to encourage the student to record, reflect and map their learning, related to the rich task and to assess their progress towards a preset goal. It also identifies any gaps that may exist and to plan for the next phase of their learning as

well as providing a context for feedback, i.e., inform discussion between student and teacher. The student portfolio is a collection of students' work including assessment wheels, self-assessment and peer assessment instruments as well as a record of tasks completed throughout the block of work, and is intended

Title:PHYSICAL EDUCATION: ASSESSMENT AND IT'S IMPLICATION  
Source:Review of Research [2249-894X] JAGVIR SINGH yr:2013 vol:2 iss:4

to encourage students to gather evidence of their learning (Melograno, 1998).

**PURPOSE:**

The project complements the already established developmental initiative in Assessment for Learning (AfL) in Junior Cycle (NCCA, 2005) and the revised JCPE syllabus (DES / NCCA, 2003). The pre-existing AfL Initiative arose out of a consultation carried out as part of the junior cycle review. The project evaluated in this paper sought to further embed AfL within practices already being promoted by the JCPE support service. The JCPE support service has incorporated AfL principles in developing a framework for planning pedagogy and assessment. Such a framework has been disseminated through JCPE in-service (Moynihan et al., 2006). In respect of learning and teaching in physical education, the project set out to

examine the use of a variety of assessment instruments  
report on the effectiveness of AfL strategies, and  
Provide a number of frameworks for effective planning of assessment and assessment procedures.

In relation to existing assessment materials, the project was interested in discovering their ease of adoption, potential to change practice and impact on students' learning.

**METHODOLOGY:**

The project was divided into two phases. Phase 1 ran from September to December 2005 and was primarily concerned with the use of planning approaches, the incorporation of AfL approaches into teaching, planning frameworks covering all areas of study from the JCPE and planning templates for lessons. Phase 2 ran from January to June 2006 with a focus on the refinement of Phase 1 outcomes.

The paper established three teacher networks for the purposes of testing the applicability of approaches to formative assessment in JCPE. The networks were in Shyam, Cork and Navan, Schools (n=20) that were approached and agreed to be involved in the project nominated one physical education teacher. These schools were drawn from the cohort of schools involved (or previously involved) in the JCPE national programme of in-service. Criteria for school selection included differing school types. Teacher requirements included the nominated teacher being a qualified physical education teacher and having a range of number of years teaching experience. Teachers were encouraged to identify and work with one particular junior cycle class per week, in one area of study in physical education, and incorporate project materials into this class through planning, teaching and learning experiences. Requirements of each teacher included planning for the lessons using the rich task framework, sharing planning and content related issues within their teacher networks, participating in network meetings and accommodating evaluation visits.

Fourteen schools were visited with the aim of supporting teachers in the work of the project and providing an opportunity for discussion on issues pertinent to the implementation of AfL in physical education. Areas of discussion included;

the process of planning  
how planning was influenced by the use of rich tasks and AfL  
approaches  
implementation issues such as practicalities and time, and  
the response of students.

Teacher network meetings allowed teachers to meet three or four times during the project to report on their progress and to discuss any related issues / concerns. Similar to the situation in Torrance & Pryor's (2001) study of developing formative assessment in the classroom, although teachers were part of a teacher network, they remained immersed in their own school practice. As part of each school visit and teacher network meeting, the facilitator recorded teachers'

discussions. This informed the emphasis and direction that the study took and verified a number of points raised by other data sources, such as prompt sheets, teacher interviews and student focus groups.

This research was informed by Nominal Group Technique (NGT) methodology (MacPhail, 2001). This involved sending prompt sheets to each school encouraging students and teachers to complete short, concise responses to a question. For students this question was, 'In what ways are the physical education lessons you have been involved in most recently been different from other lessons?' and for

teachers, 'What are your observations on the effectiveness of assessment for learning within the physical education context?' Responses were received from over 700 students and 13 teachers. Data collected informed subsequent teacher interviews and student focus groups. Two case study schools were identified and the physical education teacher in both schools agreed to formally share thoughts on their experience with the AfL methodology and assessment instruments. Pseudonyms are used for both schools and teachers. Aoife teaches in a single-sex girls school (St. Mary's) and her established teaching methodologies have been largely consistent with AfL approaches, including sharing the learning intention and criteria for success. Mark teaches in a single-sex boys school (St. John's) and indicated that AfL was a departure from his usual physical education pedagogy. Both teachers were interviewed in their own school in December 2005 on completion of Phase 1 and again in May 2005 on completion of Phase 2. With permission from each teacher, interviews were recorded. The structure for both Phase 1 and 2 interviews was deliberately similar to encourage commenting on the extent to which experience in Phase 1 had informed the delivery of Phase 2. Two student focus groups were conducted in each school, one at the end of Phase 1 and the other on completion of Phase 2. The focus group was to be informed by the pattern of responses from the NGT phase particular to that group of students with a focus on investigating issues related to students' experiences of the assessment instruments. Focus group interviews were recorded with permission from the students and subsequently transcribed. Data from the focus groups was limited by the extent to which students engaged with the questions.

#### FINDINGS:

Selected key trends evident in students' and teachers' appreciation of AfL are reported here. Other papers / reports provide a more detailed presentation of findings (MacPhail & Halbert, 2007; NCCA, 2007). Key trends reported in this paper include students' appreciation of the AfL key principles of learning intention and feedback, the use of assessment instruments and the focus on learning. Teachers conveyed an appreciation of student ownership and assessment instruments.

**Learning Intention:** Students acknowledged spending time at the start of the lessons discussing what they were going to do and how that was to direct their learning and were appreciative of the more formalised structure and working towards identifiable goals: 'We spent more time at the start of the class talking about our lessons and what we want to learn' (School 6, Phase 1)

'In each lesson we had a goal to achieve unlike before when we didn't plan to achieve anything'

**Feedback :** With respect to feedback, students acknowledged helping and informing each other either in observing a peer or working in groups: 'We watched how other people did it and told them how they could improve.' (School 16, Phase 2)

'It's more fun when you're working in groups and can discuss what we could improve on.

**Assessment:** There was a huge attraction to the assessment wheel from students as it allowed them to track progress: 'I think the assessment wheel is a great idea so we can see how much progress we've made but you don't have to tell anyone else.' While students were able to articulate the use of a portfolio, it was less popular than the assessment wheel due to students' interpretation of its use reducing the actual time spent on physical activity in the lesson and (perhaps) also the lack of uncertainty from teachers on how best to incorporate its use in the lesson: 'We have a folder to put out information ()' 'The folder causes less time on the activity'

In respect to the rich task students referred to a 'task', 'challenge' or 'performance' that was to be completed at the end of a unit of work. The use of instruments varied between teachers due to their level of engagement, confidence and investment with each although they were able to articulate observations already addressed by students: 'Found it a great resource for focusing students on learning, skill development and setting goals. 'I liked the wheel - it may not be very accurate but it did give some way of documenting the classes' achievements'.

**Focus on Learning:** Students valued the focus on learning although they hinted that the focus on learning resulted in less physical activity and more 'class work', being 'taught' more by the teacher and knowing the learning intentions: 'There has been a lot more learning involved in these new P.E classes' 'They were more interesting as I learnt more skills because of them'

**Student Ownership :** Teachers reported that they believed the AfL framework provided a pathway for

students to learn and subsequently that learning within physical education became more meaningful: 'I felt the students took ownership of their lessons and more and more I was becoming a facilitator () Students seemed much more motivated and took great pride in completing their tasks' Teachers also reported that the framework allowed students to experience both long- and short-term success and that questioning and feedback increased students' involvement in lessons.

#### **DISCUSSION**

Students were very conscious of the fact that they were 'learning differently' in the AfL lessons, noting the opportunity provided for them to be more involved and thus experience a sense of ownership. Students enjoyed having targets to aim for and recording their progress. Consequently they commented mostly favourable in sharing learning intentions at the start of the lesson and having a 'task' / 'challenge' to complete at the end of a block of work. Across both phases, it was difficult to establish the extent of students' understanding and appreciation of criteria for success. There was evidence that completing written work (and to a lesser extent the use of questioning and feedback) caused frustration among students who value the active nature of physical education. There was a mixed reaction to the use of the portfolio. While some students expressed pride in their folders and appreciated the opportunity to record progress, others felt they detracted from physical activity time and were not happy to carry them in and out of school. While there was a noticeable variation in the rate at which teachers adopted the approaches, teachers were highly motivated and energized by the AfL / rich task assessment framework and related materials, reporting that the standard of teaching, learning and assessment in their physical education lessons had improved greatly. There was consensus that the level of planning and preparation was time consuming but also an acknowledgement that it did result in a quality end product.

#### **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

It is possible to list a number of recommendations that are directly informed and supported by the experiences of those involved in the Assessment in Junior Cycle Physical Education Project. These include templates for planning frameworks, lesson plans and assessment wheels, along with a bank of completed planning frameworks, lesson plans and rich tasks, to be available electronically. This will complement the dissemination of AfL material on the NCCA and JCPE websites and allow access to planning documents that have been prepared, taught and refined. Also, the establishment of a formal network to provide professional advice and assessment instruments designed to be used for formative purposes within physical education. In the absence of a formal network, a teacher forum / discussion e-mail can keep teachers in touch regarding their interest and experiences with AfL. Thirdly, a pre-prepared AfL package including the key principles that are central to AfL, planning frameworks and lesson plans, assessment instrument templates, sample materials and exemplars of students' work to be available to teachers. Such a package could be the basis of a comprehensive addendum to the DES/NCCA (2004) Physical Education Junior Cycle

#### **GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS:**

We acknowledge that this study focused on the practice of assessment with some indications as to the impact that assessment had on student learning. There is considerable evidence supporting the contention that AfL leads to the enhancement of the students' educational experience and their valuing of a changed learning environment and an appreciation of the opportunity to monitor their own progress (William, Lee, Harrison & Black, 2004). However there is limited data in this

Evaluation study to allow us to comment on whether students' level of knowledge and understanding increased. Further work is necessary to explore the connection between the assessment used and its impact on the nature and extent of learning in physical education.

Formative assessment requires time to be integrated by each teacher (Black et al., 2005) and an investment in further refinement of materials and reporting options will not only inform JCPE but also help direct assessment within senior cycle physical education. Through this initiative AfL principles have been promoted, teachers and students have conveyed a level of understanding of AfL and case studies have illustrated the variable of the teacher and their class in experiencing the framework. For the initiative to contribute internationally to the growing practice-referenced research in the area of formative assessment in physical education, it is imperative that its continual evolution and refinement is informed by the experiences of teachers and students and the evaluation of such experiences.

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