


Assessment for Learning and Pupils with Special Educational Needs

Preamble

The purpose of this paper is to provide a summary of the inputs and the key issues that emerged during the Agency project Assessment in Inclusive Settings in relation to the application of the concept of Assessment *for* Learning to pupils with special educational needs (SEN).

Since the very beginning of the Agency Assessment project, country representatives have highlighted the use of assessment in inclusive settings as a key area of concern for the development of inclusive education generally. It is recognised in all countries that assessment can impact upon the educational chances of all pupils and often determine exclusion or inclusion. Information gathered through the Assessment Country Reports (<http://www.european-agency.org/site/themes/assessment/reports.shtml>) as well as feedback collected during project meetings, indicates that assessment plays a crucial role in promoting the process of learning of all pupils – including those with special educational needs. However, this is only the case when assessment processes and procedures are organised in light of inclusive principles.

Results from the Agency project indicate that assessment processes do in practice contribute to, or alternatively hinder the process of inclusion. The development of assessment procedures and inclusive practice generally appear to be connected.

A main conclusion of the first phase of the Agency project was the identification of the concept 'inclusive assessment'. This was defined as:

An approach to assessment in mainstream settings where policy and practice are designed to promote the learning of all pupils as far as possible. The overall goal of inclusive assessment is that all assessment policies and procedures should support and enhance the successful inclusion and participation of all pupils vulnerable to exclusion, including those with SEN.

(Assessment Project Summary Report, p.47)

Inclusive assessment is based on the general principle of celebrating diversity by identifying and valuing all pupils' progress and achievements in mainstream settings. It involves legislative measures that take into account the needs of pupils with SEN, ensuring that all pupils are entitled to take part in the assessment procedures.

Exploring the Concept of Assessment *for* Learning

The second phase of the Agency project involved the experts nominated by Agency countries taking part in case study visits to Austria, Denmark, France, Germany and the UK (please see www.european-agency.org/site/themes/assessment/index.shtml for more details). The aim of these visits was to see school settings and observe assessment practice in situ. During these meetings, input was collected providing suggestions on how to develop good practice and also how inclusive assessment could be implemented.

One important feature of inclusive assessment was highlighted as assessment accommodation: the modification of existing standardised or summative assessment procedures, tools and methods in order that they are able to meet the needs of pupils with SEN. However, this was only one aspect of inclusive assessment in practice.



A significant aspect of inclusive assessment in practice that emerged from the on-going discussions with project experts was the concept of Assessment *for* Learning. References and discussions regarding this concept can be found in the Country Reports on national assessment systems (see above). Within these Country Reports, Assessment *for* Learning emerges as a ‘qualitative’ type of assessment and related assessment procedures. This type of assessment – also referred to as ‘formative’ and ‘on-going’ assessment – is usually carried out in the classrooms by class teachers and professionals that work with the class teacher. It usually refers to assessment procedures that inform teachers about pupils’ learning and guide them to the next steps in planning pupils’ learning and lesson planning.

As a central task within the second phase of the Agency project, a decision was taken to explore in more depth the concept of Assessment *for* Learning and how this can be applied to assessment in inclusive settings. Two activities were conducted in relation to this exploration:

1. A review of available literature considering the concept. This short review (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Black and Wiliam, 2002; Harlen, 2007b; Harlen, 2007a; Wiliam, 2007; Wiliam and Leahy, 2007) focussed upon English language materials due to the need to use documents that could be easily accessed in the working language of all project participants;
2. Discussions with all project experts.

Information from the initial review of available literature was presented to project experts as a stimulus for their discussions. This leads to project experts being asked to reflect on the differences between Assessment *for* Learning (formative, on-going assessment) and Assessment *of* Learning (summative assessment) using the following parameters:

| PARAMETERS | ASSESSMENT <i>FOR</i> LEARNING | ASSESSMENT <i>OF</i> LEARNING |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Purpose | Supporting Learning | Accountability (linked to pre-determined standards) |
| Goals | Informs teaching and learning Promotes further steps in learning Focuses on improving Develops pupils’ skills of reflection | Collection of information about what has been achieved (a record of marks) Compares with targets that have been pre-established. Focuses on achievement |
| Actors | Teachers Pupils Parents Peers Other school professionals | Teachers External practitioners |
| When | On-going | At fixed and pre-determined times |
| Tools | Discussions, observations, self-assessment, peer-assessment, teacher debate, comment-only, dialogue, questioning, feedback, no-grading, portfolio, individual education plan | Tests, drilling, grading, marking, questioning, observation |

Adapted from Harlen (2007a)

The key difference between Assessment *for* Learning and Assessment *of* Learning can be identified as the purpose for which teachers and other professionals gather evidence of learning. This does not imply that there should be a choice between Assessment *for*



Learning or Assessment *of* Learning – both have pedagogical functions that support pupil achievement. Discussions with project experts indicated that the crucial issue is using the type of assessment that best suits the learning goal and purpose. If the educational purpose is to improve learning, then Assessment *for* Learning is best suited. If the educational purpose is to report on a current situation and to compare pupils against pre-determined standards and/or other pupils, then Assessment *of* Learning should be used.

Although some tools may be the same (e.g. questioning), the key issues emerging from the feedback provided by project experts, case study hosts and teachers alike indicated that it is necessary to keep in mind that:

- Assessment *for* Learning aims at improving learning; Assessment *of* Learning aims at ensuring accountability (of schools and teachers).
- Assessment *for* Learning explores the potential for learning and indicates the next step to be taken in order to promote learning (e.g. the dynamics of teaching and learning); Assessment *of* Learning shows what has been already achieved, memorised, absorbed (e.g. a snapshot of the current situation).
- The actors involved in Assessment *for* Learning are able to provide insights into progress that a pupil has achieved and how the school contributed to this development; the actors involved in Assessment *of* Learning include professionals who are external to the school situation (e.g. inspectors) and may be required to provide a picture of a school at a particular point in time, but they may not always know the school context and life in the necessary detail.

Overall, Assessment *for* Learning is concerned with collecting evidence about learning that is used to adapt teaching and plan next educational steps. Evidence about learning is crucial as it indicates if there has been a shift (or not) in the process of learning of a pupil. On the basis of such evidence, teachers can formulate targets/goals and are able to provide pupils with feedback about their learning (see Hattie and Timperly, 2007) clearly indicating to a pupil not just what they need to learn, but also giving them information on how best they can learn it, therefore contributing to a pupils' reflection on their own learning.

Assessment *for* Learning and Pupils with SEN?

The concept of providing feedback to pupils about their learning is the crucial element in understanding the potential difference between the use of the term generally by educators – as it is most often used for example within the project Country Reports – and the use of the term within a research context.

Within the research literature reviewed for this investigation, Assessment *for* Learning is often described as involving a form of self-reflection, or more specifically, as a means by which pupils reflect on their own learning as they are engaged in an interactive 'feedback loop' with their teachers.

This is clearly presented by the Assessment Reform Group (2002) who describe Assessment *for* Learning as:

... the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there.

(Assessment Reform Group, p.2)



Assessment *for* Learning within this research-based context involves issues of self-reflection and self-assessment that develops a pupils' own understanding of how learning is taking place and how it can be developed. This is particularly relevant as Assessment *for* Learning emphasises assessment as a process of meta-cognition (see for example the notion of Assessment *as* Learning in Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Education, 2006). These notions, however, are not always the main focus when the concept of Assessment *for* Learning is used more generally.

Meijer (2003) suggests that *what is good for pupils with special educational needs is also good for all pupils* and this maxim is one that has been considered throughout the entire Agency Assessment project. However, when considering the research-generated concept of Assessment *for* Learning, it has to be recognised that the work has been conducted in relation to pupils without SEN. Within the research work on Assessment *for* Learning considered in the literature review (Lynn and et al., 1997; Black and William, 1998), issues around Assessment *for* Learning and pupils with SEN are only very marginally dealt with.

Consequently, a decision was taken to actively explore within the Agency Assessment project the relevance of the research-based concept of Assessment *for* Learning for the learning of pupils with SEN along with the possible implications for teachers, school managers, parents, pupils and their assessment practice. Within the Agency Assessment project discussions therefore, the crucial question emerged as being *is what is good for most pupils also good for pupils with SEN?* The discussions with project experts essentially explored if the research concept of Assessment *for* Learning was valid for pupils with SEN.

Two main areas were debated by project experts:

1. Does Assessment *for* Learning mean the same thing for pupils with and without SEN? Are we talking about the same principles?
2. Are there differences in the use of Assessment *for* Learning for pupils with and without SEN? If so what are these differences for: pupils, teachers, school managers and educational practice?

The main conclusions of these debates are presented in the following sections. Direct quotes from project experts (presented in italics) are used to exemplify key points raised in the discussions.

Assessment *for* Learning – a relevant concept

The most crucial outcome emerging from the discussions of the project experts is the agreement that Assessment *for* Learning is a significant element in successful teaching and learning of teaching with all pupils, including those with SEN.

In essence, the critical question to ask is not *whether* Assessment *for* Learning can be applied to pupils with special educational needs, but rather *how* it can be applied.

Project experts suggested that:

... in principle there are no differences between pupils with SEN and pupils without SEN. All pupils no matter what ability they have, all have the same human rights ...

and:

... what is a definition of SEN? All pupils have needs, why do we differentiate?



That said one potential area of concern was highlighted in relation to using Assessment *for* Learning with pupils with the most severe needs. In particular, engaging pupils with profound learning difficulties in the ‘feedback’ loop was seen as being more challenging.

Many project experts indicated that the:

... collection of information and evidence of learning is not an easy task ...

However, project experts’ reflections on this potential difficulty can be summed up as follows:

... students with profound difficulties do not need different assessment systems but only different methods/tools of assessment.

When issues about pedagogy were discussed, project experts indicated that the principles behind pedagogy for pupils with SEN were not fundamentally different from those for pupils without SEN. The focus of change is upon the degree and the intensity of teaching and learning methods and the task of the teacher is to investigate alternative procedures and forms of adaptation:

All children have needs, some children have special needs. What is good for SEN is good work for all pupils. The better the quality of education the more pupils with SEN can be included.

In particular, active approaches – problem solving actively engaging pupils in teaching and learning processes – were considered as crucial strategies to be used in conjunction with Assessment *for* Learning:

... such pedagogy is very important; we need to encourage this with our pupils with SEN. They can or have had decisions taken away/made for them with regard to individual progress/assessment. Where possible and appropriate pupils should be involved.

Project experts reported that often examples of such interactive approaches are difficult to find, particularly in secondary education. That said it was acknowledged that:

... in primary grades teachers use such pedagogy more often than in higher grades.

Often such approaches have been explicitly used as a means of promoting meta-cognitive skills for pupils with SEN:

... we often use the process of meta-cognition with pupils with SEN, and not with other pupils and this is a pity.

The essential aim of employing the ‘feedback loop’ within Assessment *for* Learning is to promote pupils’ meta-cognition; that is their own understanding of not just what they learn, but how they learn and can learn in the best way.

Assessment *for* Learning – methods and tools

In relation to tools for Assessment *for* Learning, project experts’ feedback indicates that many Assessment *for* Learning approaches (such as individualised observation, portfolios and diaries) have been extensively used in special needs education settings for considerable time:

... I think we already use these tools with pupils with SEN ...



In relation to other potential methods and tools it is necessary to underline the fact that Assessment *for* Learning methods and tools can be used with pupils with SEN providing that they are modified and adjusted to meet the needs of the individual pupil:

... the tools are the same but they must be adjusted to the cognitive level, social abilities (more or less concrete, little steps) of the pupils.

As far as teachers' day-by-day (on-going) assessment is concerned, project experts agreed that this type of assessment should be applied to pupils with SEN. They also reported that such a tool was used in most Agency countries and that it provides the teacher with the best opportunity for collecting information about pupils' learning. Such an approach puts the emphasis on small steps of pupil development:

... on-going assessment provides an opportunity to view very small steps on a continual basis and this informs future teaching and learning'

... it is necessary to assess day-by-day as it is important for the child and for the teacher to get information about the planned achievement.

Teacher observation was seen by project experts as a main method for gathering Assessment *for* Learning information. This approach is seen as particularly relevant for pupils with SEN as it may be the only method available to gather information about the learning of pupils who use non- or pre-verbal forms of communication:

... observation is essential as very often it is the only way to establish pupils' responses ...

... it is very important for SEN pupils where written work and speech aren't always possible and responses to different stimuli – a person, sound, smell, environment – can be observed.

However, the inputs from project experts suggested that teachers needed to be given more guidance by specialists in order to improve their observation techniques. Specifically, project experts indicated that more guidance should be given to develop more programmed and individualised methods of observation of pupils with SEN:

... teachers should have more guidance given by the specialists/experts on how and what to observe in different cases (blind, deaf, communication disorders) ...

... observation should be more structured and teachers should have more time to reflect on this.

Some suggestions included the use of videos as helpful tools to collect evidence of learning for students with profound learning difficulties and to provide teachers with the best opportunities to reflect upon assessment and discuss about the evidence with their colleagues.

Questioning is often a crucial part of the teacher pupil interaction that occurs in the Assessment *for* Learning feedback loop. Project experts indicated that questioning pupils with SEN is also possible – and necessary – but only:

... if the questions are framed in a way that allows pupils to have enough time to answer (the 'wait time') and if different stimuli to support questions (e.g. visual versus verbal stimuli) and ways of responding (e.g. eye contact) are considered ...

In summary:

... questioning is one of the most important tools in our hand to communicate with a child with special educational needs, but the function and the type of question can be different.

Similarly, the use of dialogue in Assessment for Learning is critical. Some project experts suggested that it is not possible to use 'traditional' dialogue with pupils with SEN:

... [traditional] dialogue is valid where communication is based on verbal responses, but this is not always possible ...

In such circumstances, the teacher must be able to implement changes to the means and tools for communication.

Concerning the use of other Assessment for Learning tools, project experts highlighted that portfolios were currently used within many Agency countries for pupils with SEN:

*... [a] portfolio is a good way to find the best way of learning ...
... it is an empowering tool ...*

Portfolios can aid dialogue with pupils, supporting their self-assessment:

*... it is a good reflective method for all students to own ...
... pupils can see their progression and be proud ...
... [a] portfolio enhances creative self-reflective competences on the part of the child ...*

In addition, project experts also indicated that the portfolio – if complemented with information, for example the pupil's IEP or specialist therapeutic programmes – could be a tool for dialogue with other professionals and parents.

Similarly, the use of diaries was cited by some project experts as a useful tool in Assessment for Learning:

... what have I done today? The diary encourages self-reflection, however it is necessary to use other forms of communication not only language.

In conclusion, project experts expressed the view that approaches that encourage self-assessment and particularly self-reflection are tools within Assessment for Learning providing that they are adequately adapted and modified to meet the needs of individual pupils.

Generally it was felt that there are clear examples of where such approaches are being successfully used with good results. In fact, project experts expressed the view that the special needs education sector can offer a lead to the mainstream sector in tools for Assessment for Learning:

... needs to learn from SEN settings and see how this can be used for the mainstream. SEN [can] give tips to the mainstream.

Finally, the reinforcement of self-assessment skills is a crucial goal for pupils with severe learning difficulties whose personal learning targets may often include autonomy and independence. These competences are fundamental skills clearly supported by the development of self-reflection and meta-cognitive skills (Porter, J. et al. 2000).



Assessment for Learning – implications for school managers

Although school managers' monitoring of individual pupil progress is seen as advisable, project experts highlighted that such a task is not always feasible and therefore it often remains part of the mainstream teacher's responsibility as:

... monitoring is a continuous programming/task and it must be guided by the teacher.

In addition:

... it is the responsibility of the teacher to monitor SEN pupils' progress and this has to be written in the IEP.

All project experts agreed on the important role played by school managers in creating the opportunities for teachers to discuss and reflect on assessment issues and for parents to participate in the process of assessment of their children. There is a need for:

... head and deputy school managers [to] monitor planning and assessment ... more home/school diaries, informal chats reviews, phone calls.

Parents should be provided with opportunities to:

... discuss and reflect with assistants, teachers and managers ...

School managers are crucial actors for the development of an organisational ethos which recognises pupils' involvement as fundamental (Porter, J., Robertson, C. and Hayhoe, H., 2000). Without respect for pupils' wishes and a general school philosophy that supports pupil participation, Assessment for Learning is less likely to develop.

Overall, as far as school managers are concerned, project experts across different Agency countries indicated there is a real need for them to provide all teachers with more formal time to reflect on their use of assessment in order that they can successfully engage in Assessment for Learning processes with pupils.

Conclusions

All of the contributions from the project experts were unanimous – the concept of Assessment for Learning as currently understood by countries, but – most importantly for this debate – also as described in the research literature is valid for all pupils: including those with SEN.

From the discussions held with experts, this argument can be developed further – Assessment for Learning concerns all pupils and from an inclusive perspective there should not be any need to differentiate between pupils with or without SEN, but rather to differentiate classroom practice to meet all pupils' requirements.

Building on this assertion, four main findings should be highlighted:

1. The same principles of Assessment for Learning apply for pupils with or without SEN;
2. The only difference in Assessment for Learning between pupils with and without special educational needs is essentially in the type of tools and assessment/communication methods used by teachers;



3. The only area of concern relating to Assessment *for* Learning being applied to pupils with SEN relates to the notion of Assessment *for* Learning as a tool for pupils' reflection on their own learning (i.e. the interaction between the pupil and teacher during the 'feedback loop'). For pupils who use alternative forms of communication, this feedback process cannot operate in the 'traditional' language based way. In this case, a more individualised approach, new assessment tools and a variety of means for teacher/pupil interaction need to be explored and implemented; for example close observation in structured situations which allows staff to assess pupils likes/dislikes etc.

4. Many methods and tools of Assessment *for* Learning have been developed within special needs education settings and could be transferred into mainstream settings to improve educational provision for all pupils.

In summary, Assessment *for* Learning can and should be applied to all pupils, including those with SEN, providing that the relevant and necessary changes and modifications are made in order to ensure the individual pupil's full participation in the assessment process.

It is clear that the discussions relating to the concept of Assessment *for* Learning within the remit of the Agency Assessment project have only provided a starting point. More detailed examination – research and also the wider dissemination of examples of good practice in applying Assessment *for* Learning to meet the needs of pupils with SEN – is needed in the future.

It is hoped however, that the reflections from project experts as well as their assertion of the usefulness of the concept in supporting the learning processes of all pupils will inform the work and decision making of educational policy makers and practitioners across Europe.



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