

Implementing Inclusive Assessment

The end point of phase one of the Agency Assessment in Inclusive Settings project was a discussion and then an explanation of the concept of *inclusive assessment* as well as a series of recommendations for inclusive assessment policy and practice. The goal of phase two work aimed to provide a deeper examination of phase one findings by:

- Exploring school level assessment practice and its relationship to regional and national level structures and policy;
- Highlighting practical suggestions on the implementation of inclusive assessment.

The methodology used involved project experts working in teams with the staff of five 'case study' sites – school districts, or regions, clusters of schools, resource centres and the schools they worked with and not individual schools. These case study teams from Austria, Denmark, France, Germany and the UK (England) had agreed to host visits, as well as work on aspects of their assessment practice during an intervention period. The intention was to explore in depth school level assessment practice and how this inter-related to regional and national level support structures and policy.

More information about each of the five case study sites as well as the work they conducted during the project is available from the project website: <http://www.european-agency.org/site/themes/assessment/index.shtml>

During the project activities, a range of information and material was collected relating to assessment in inclusive settings. The focus of this paper is more general than other materials developed during the project, the main aim being to present a synthesis of findings from all the project activities in order to identify the essential prerequisites for implementing inclusive assessment policy and practice in mainstream settings.

This paper uses information from observations, discussions and reflections during and after the case study visits to identify the 'meta issues' for implementing inclusive assessment – that is the crucial factors for successful assessment practice that were not context or assessment situation specific, but were apparent across all case study sites (in varying ways and to different degrees).

To accompany this short document there is an extended version linked to multimedia presentations and excerpts of policy makers and practitioners discussing their experiences and assessment practice, as well as key literature examining the issues raised. This full resource is available from the project website: <http://www.european-agency.org/site/themes/assessment/index.shtml>

Two aspects to inclusive assessment in practice

Inclusive assessment has been defined within the Agency project 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*. Using this definition – and the associated recommendations as outlined in the project phase one summary report – as the starting point for the analysis of work in the case study sites, it has been possible to identify a number of common factors for implementing inclusive assessment. These are factors within the educational environments involved in the project that underpinned the assessment work of teachers and other professionals and stakeholders in assessment. These are general factors that are not always related to assessment processes, tools, methods and approaches, or even teaching and learning as such.

These factors are more to do with the overall educational environment and how this environment can support (or otherwise) a teacher's use of inclusive assessment in different ways. These factors have been identified as being crucial for inclusive assessment, but it can be argued that they are in fact essential aspects of successful inclusion generally – assessment being one process amongst many that is influenced and directed by these critical factors.

The factors of the educational environments that appear to support inclusive assessment can be grouped into two aspects of assessment policy and practice:

- *Infrastructure*: the structures, policies and support systems for assessment;
- *Shared value systems*: the attitudes, professional values and beliefs that underpin a school's educational culture and approach.

Within the project, it has been possible to identify the main characteristics of both educational infrastructure and shared value systems that appear to support inclusive assessment. Whilst each is considered separately here, it was clear from the study that each of the characteristics is highly dependent upon the others.

Educational policy that facilitates innovative practice

The five case study sites worked in very different assessment policy contexts. These ranged from assessment systems directed by national summative tests, with high levels of reporting and use of pupil assessment data for monitoring and accountability, through to systems with no externally set assessment procedures, mainly teacher led assessment and no use of pupil assessment data for monitoring purposes.

However, despite the differences in national and regional policies represented within the study, it was possible to see that the following elements within assessment policy were crucial for providing the preconditions necessary for innovation leading to inclusive assessment:

- Participation in local decision-making that involved all stakeholders in assessment;
- Flexibility within policies and systems that encouraged innovation and change in the implementation of assessment policy and practice;
- The active involvement of policy makers in the identification and mobilisation of existing human, physical and financial resources to ensure that local decision-making and innovation in assessment policy and practice could occur.

Overall, these characteristics of assessment policy were underpinned by a political commitment to support innovation, creativity and degrees of freedom for practitioners to innovate in their work and one concrete example of such political commitment is where innovators in inclusive assessment are directly involved in informing changes to assessment policy.

Inter-disciplinary support structures

Pupils, parents and teachers make complex demands of specialist support staff and services in inclusive assessment. A move towards 'inter'-disciplinary rather than just 'multi'-disciplinary working was identified during the project. Inter-disciplinary assessment integrates the knowledge and perspectives of different areas of professional expertise in order to consider issues holistically. This is not the same as a multi-disciplinary approach where professionals from different disciplines work alongside each other, but not necessarily within an integrated and agreed single approach. Inter-disciplinary working requires co-operation and collaboration at all levels, between all stakeholders in assessment: it is to a large extent guided by the local decision-making outlined in the previous section.

From the examination of the work of different types of specialist assessment teams in the five case study sites, the different stakeholders in assessment (parents, teachers and policy-makers) expect and encourage inter-disciplinary approaches, whatever the structure of specialist assessment teams. The following factors drive moves towards inter-disciplinary working:

- It is seen as an efficient use of limited public resources;
- It results in better workload management for assessment specialists and allows more meaningful work with pupils, parents and teachers;
- It leads to more flexible support options and a range of possible responses to requests and demands.

The participatory nature of inter-disciplinary work on inclusive assessment also appears to imply a change in the locus of control for support and input from assessment specialists. Decision-making not only involves, but also becomes increasingly led by those in schools, including mainstream class teachers with parents and pupils, working in partnership with professionals who are external to the pupil's immediate educational environment. Such a change in working approach requires a major attitudinal shift on the part of specialist assessment professionals, as well as changes to their practice.

Leadership and vision

The leadership and vision identified within each case study site are important for both infrastructure and shared value systems.

Policies that facilitate innovation have to be initiated and formulated by key groups or individuals who have a vision of inclusive education generally, as well as of inclusive assessment specifically. Similarly, the key individuals responsible for the work of specialist assessment teams are most often the driving forces behind the move from multi- to inter-disciplinary working. Such influential individuals not only initiate change in practice, but also give a lead in what values and principles should underpin policies and support systems.

In addition, within the Agency project it was clear that the role of school or resource centre leaders and senior managers in shaping shared value systems for inclusion and inclusive assessment was critical in developing professional environments that allowed innovation and change. In each of the case study sites, it was evident that key educational leaders:

- Had a personal vision for inclusive assessment, which they then developed into a shared vision within their staff or team;

- Actively promoted a school or organisational culture that supported pupil and parental participation;
- Either initiated change in practice, or actively supported other staff who initiated such change;
- Established organisational systems that did not just support, but actively required teamwork, collaborative problem solving and shared approaches to teaching and learning;
- Secured the necessary flexibility in physical, financial and time resources to allow possibilities for 'innovating', that is developing and trialling new methods and approaches to assessment;
- Provided various opportunities for teacher and educational staff training and development in assessment methods and tools specifically, but also inclusive approaches more generally;
- Established effective communication structures based upon a 'shared language' – specifically for assessment and generally for teaching and learning – that was understood and used by pupils, parents and all educational professionals.

The project discussions identified a developing priority for many leaders as 'formalising' informal communication and knowledge about assessment, so that innovations and changes could be documented, shared, reflected upon and then learned from. This 'formalising the informal' is *important* if innovative assessment practice is to be embedded into the regular practice within one institution such as a school, but *critical* if other professionals outside the immediate school environment are to learn from such innovations

Specifically in relation to assessment, but also generally in relation to all areas of their work, these leaders can be described as 'transformational'; they demonstrated a view of their organisations as 'learning communities' based upon collaborative cultures for decision-making and planning, as well as continuous professional development for all staff.

Positive attitudes towards meeting diversity in education

At the core of a shared value system that supports inclusive assessment is the view that diversity in education is a beneficial thing that all school stakeholders should acknowledge. A positive approach to meeting a diverse range of needs in education was perhaps the most critical element of a school's educational culture and approach that could be seen to promote inclusive assessment. Such positive attitudes were evident within the visions and development work of school leaders, but also within the day-to-day work of class teachers and other educational staff.

Work to avoid segregation in all forms and promote a school for all appeared to be characterised by:

- A view of the main purpose of assessment as supporting teaching and learning and not identifying needs for placement or resource allocation;
- A view of learning itself being process, not content or subject based and a main goal for all pupils' learning as being developing learning to learn skills, not just subject knowledge.

It was also apparent within the work of the case study site teams that successful approaches and techniques for supporting the learning of pupils with special educational needs can also be useful for promoting the social and educational inclusion of other groups (for example pupils from different social or ethnic backgrounds). In consequence, meeting a diverse range of needs was increasingly seen as an approach to developing education for all pupils generally, rather than being focussed upon specific groups.

Reflective practice

Within the case study sites involved in the study, it was clear that all teachers and other professionals to varying degrees engaged in reflective practice – they took opportunities to stand back from their work in order to better understand the teaching and learning process and then personally learn as a result of that standing back (or reflecting). This reflection upon practice can be interpreted as a consequence of working within educational environments geared to meeting diverse needs and based upon teamwork and a problem solving approach. However, it was clear that for many teachers, being engaged in professional learning and being guided by a shared set of educational principles and values was central to their work.

Such reflective practice can be seen to be crucial for innovation. Reflective practice is essentially underpinned by a problem solving approach that ultimately builds up to an evidence-based approach to practice. This can also be seen to be empowering for teachers as this involves them in the process of goal setting and review that helps in validating their own practice.

Interestingly, the process of reflective practice for teachers can be seen to mirror the process of assessment for learning for pupils in a number of ways. The processes of goal setting and personal reflection upon and feedback about performance are central to both reflective practice for teachers and assessment for learning for pupils. Also,

teachers who could be seen to take a reflective approach to their own work were often those who were most able to effectively use assessment for learning and inclusive assessment processes with all pupils.

School leaders in particular highlighted the role of 'critical friends' as being important; that is external people or organisations that worked with a school, or group of teachers to help them in the process of reflecting on their practice. (In effect, the methodology used in the Agency project was based on the idea that the visiting teams of project experts acted as critical friends for the case study teams.) School managers often saw the involvement of external people, who engaged with school staff in order to support them in exploring aspects of their work, as a trigger for change in teaching practice, as well as attitudes towards inclusion.

Concluding comments

It is clear from the study that in order to implement inclusive assessment there are no clear-cut solutions that 'work' for all school or class situations. Each of the case study sites involved in the Agency project developed different approaches to their assessment practice and focussed upon different aspects of what was felt as being crucial for the development of inclusion at that moment. This change depended on local challenges, but mainly on the school culture (or shared value systems) and the educational policies (or infrastructure) directing the work of the case study teams.

However, despite local differences in the five case study sites examined in the project, it can be argued that inclusive assessment is a process involving innovation and flexibility in thinking and action on the part of policy makers and practitioners. Transformations within thinking, as well as action are essential for developing inclusive assessment.

The two aspects of infrastructure and shared values are interconnected and highly inter-dependent upon each other. The infrastructure for assessment is mainly external to a school environment: that is inclusion and assessment policies, funding structures, support systems and specialist personnel are usually established at a national or regional level and individual schools work within the boundaries of these structures.

However, the shared value system of the school dictates to a large

degree how that infrastructure is actually implemented within the school's practice. The infrastructure may determine the parameters for school practice, but the school's shared value system appears to largely determine the interpretation of these parameters.

A main reflection from the analysis of the case study sites involved in the project is that whilst a supportive assessment infrastructure is crucial, the shared value systems within schools are a critical factor as to the successful implementation of the 'possibilities' offered within systems and support structures.

Developing the necessary shared value systems for the implementation of inclusive assessment is a challenge for all policy makers and practitioners. However there are clear examples across Europe that can be learned from and it is hoped that the identification of the main features of inclusive assessment in practice will contribute to the on-going debates and discussions at national and international levels.