

## Assessment *for* Learning and Pupils with Special Educational Needs

The aim of this paper is to provide a summary of 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).

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 to this concept can be found in the majority of project Country Reports on national assessment systems ([www.european-agency.org/site/themes/assessment/index.shtml](http://www.european-agency.org/site/themes/assessment/index.shtml)). Within these Country Reports, Assessment *for* Learning can be seen as a 'qualitative' type of assessment procedures. This type of assessment - also referred to as 'formative' or 'on-going' assessment - is usually carried out in 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 guides them in planning the next steps in teaching.

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:

- A review of available literature considering the concept. This was a short review of English language materials (please see the reference list at the end of this document);
- 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 led to the 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 FOR LEARNING	ASSESSMENT OF 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

PARAMETERS	ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING	ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING
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.

Although some tools may be the same (e.g. questioning) the key issues emerging from the feedback provided by Project Experts 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 and focuses upon the dynamics of teaching and learning); *Assessment of Learning* shows what has been already achieved, memorised and absorbed and provides 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 to provide insights into pupil 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 *Assessment for Learning* 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.

Overall, *Assessment for Learning* is concerned with collecting evidence about learning that is used to adapt teaching and plan next steps in learning. Evidence

about learning is crucial as it indicates if there has been a shift (or not) in a pupil's learning progress and possibly learning processes. 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 have learned, but also giving them information on how they may have learned it and how best they can learn in the future. The feedback provided during Assessment *for Learning* contributes to a pupils' reflection on their own learning.

Within the research literature reviewed for this investigation, Assessment *for Learning* is often described as involving this 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. 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.

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 (that is as in the project Country Reports).

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 Wiliam, 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 assessment procedures used by teachers, school managers, parents and even

pupils themselves. Within the Agency Assessment project discussions therefore, the central 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 same principles applied?
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?

### **Assessment *for Learning* – a relevant concept**

The most main 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.

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

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.*

### **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 some considerable time.

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 (accommodated) to meet the needs of the individual pupil.

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.

However, the Project Experts' inputs suggested that teachers needed to be given more guidance by specialists in order to improve their skills in observation. Specifically, project experts indicated that more guidance should be given to develop more individualised methods of observation of pupils with SEN. 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 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 addition, Project Experts also indicated that the portfolio – if complemented with other information, for example the pupil's IEP or specialist therapeutic programmes – could be a tool for dialogue with other professionals and parents.

Finally, Project Experts expressed their view that approaches that encourage self-assessment and particularly self-reflection are tools within Assessment for Learning provided that they are adequately adapted and modified to meet the needs of individual pupils. The reinforcement of self-assessment skills was seen as 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 et al., 2000).

### **Assessment for Learning – implications for school managers**

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.*



School managers are crucial actors for the development of an organisational ethos that recognises pupils' involvement as fundamental (Porter, Robertson and Hayhoe, 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 Project Experts, this proposition 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 can be highlighted:

1. The same principles of *Assessment for Learning* apply to 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 the 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 teachers to assess pupils' likes/dislikes and so forth.
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.

*For the full text of this paper – including direct quotations from Project Experts relating to the key findings – please go to:*

*<http://www.european-agency.org/site/themes/assessment/index.shtml>*

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