

ASSESSMENT IN INCLUSIVE SETTINGS

KEY POLICY MESSAGES

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the main conclusions and recommendations of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (the Agency) project on 'Assessment in Inclusive Settings' and highlight how the project recommendations may contribute to international and European Union policy priorities in the field.

Assessment is a crucial factor in supporting the learning of all pupils, including learners identified with special educational needs. Assessment can contribute, or alternatively hinder the process of inclusive education and the development of assessment procedures and inclusive practice generally appear to be connected.

Assessment in Inclusive Settings – Trends at European and International level

Assessment is increasingly being recognised within policy debates as a process that can support or hinder effective learning. The right to assessment that supports learning and development is implicit within the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* 2006 (UNCRPD). This implicit concern for assessment is discussed within an OHCHR/UNESCO draft report on Article 24 of the UNCRPD and the right to inclusive education. It states that: 'Children and other learners with disabilities should have a legal right to early assessment and intervention to ensure that the pathway to inclusive education is not unnecessarily foreclosed. They should have a right to an individualised assessment of educational need that specifically identifies their learning needs, that sets goals for the upcoming academic year, that provides tools to measure whether such goals are being attained' (p. 31).

The *Council conclusions on increasing the level of basic skills in the context of European co-operation on schools for the 21st century* (2010a), highlight the need for: *the use of new assessment methods* (p. 13) and the *Council conclusions on the social dimension of education and training* (2010b) highlight the potential role of assessment in promoting equity in education: 'Increasing the use of personalised approaches, including individualised learning plans and harnessing assessment to support the learning process, providing teachers with skills to manage and benefit from diversity, promoting the use of cooperative teaching and learning, and widening access and participation, are ways of increasing quality for all.' (p. 5)

However, the *Commission communication on improving competences for the 21st century* (2008) states: 'Research shows that explicitly designing assessment to promote learning is one of the most powerful tools for raising standards, particularly among low-achieving pupils, and for empowering lifelong learners [but] assessment is too often used merely to grade pupils, and not to help them improve; tests do not always assess what competences pupils can use, only what information they can remember.' (p. 6)

The 2009 Peer Learning Activity on key competences and curriculum reform suggests that: *Assessment can either help or hinder the development of competence and is therefore a major implementation issue for the dissemination of the key competences* (p. 7).

In summary, assessment is increasingly recognised within policy debates as both a potential barrier to and a facilitator of effective learning. The key policy challenges in relation to assessment that facilitates learning appear to be:



Encouraging a move towards formative assessment approaches that support teaching and learning and the acquisition of key competences;

Promoting the right ethos and culture for effective assessment in educational systems, as well as organisations such as schools and support services;

Ensuring professionals – particularly classroom teachers – have the necessary skills in using a range of assessment methods and tools that can be used for different purposes.

The Agency Assessment in Inclusive Settings project¹

The project began in 2005, with 23 Agency countries participating in phase 1 of project activities and 25 countries² involved in phase 2 activities. The overall goal for the project was to examine how assessment policy and practice can support effective decision-making about teaching and learning approaches, methods and steps in the best possible ways.

An agreed working definition of assessment was used in the project: *Assessment refers to the ways teachers and other people involved in a learners education systematically collect and then use information about that learners level of achievement and/or development in different areas of their educational experience (academic, behaviour and social).*

Phase 1 looked at policy and practice in participating countries. The end point of phase 1 was to define inclusive assessment and produce a series of recommendations for assessment policy and practice.

Phase 2 looked at how assessment can be put into practice. This was done via an in-depth examination of how the recommendations and principles of good practice identified in phase 1 were implemented in country case study sites.

Project Findings and Recommendations

The main issues faced by countries in relation to assessment policy and practice result from changing ideas about the purposes of assessment and the use of assessment information.

Despite the differences in approaches and uses of assessment information, all countries appear to be debating three common concerns:

- 1. Raising achievement of all learners - including those with SEN, by effectively using assessment information for different audiences and different purposes;*
- 2. Shifting the emphasis of assessment away from initial identification of SEN, linked to diagnosis and resource allocation (often conducted by people outside the mainstream school), towards on-going assessment conducted by class teachers that informs teaching and learning;*
- 3. Developing systems of on-going, formative assessment that are effective for mainstream schools.*

¹ More information is available from: <http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/assessment-in-inclusive-settings>

² Austria, Flemish and French speaking communities of Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, the German Bundesländer, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (England and Wales).



These three concerns represent the main challenges being faced at both policy and practice levels in all countries.

Within the Assessment in Inclusive Settings project, the focus was upon assessment approaches that inform teaching and learning – that is formative, assessment for learning. The project built upon country work on assessment for learning and took this further by identifying a new concept: *inclusive assessment* as an approach to assessment in mainstream settings where policy and practice are designed to promote the learning of all learners. The overall goal of inclusive assessment is that all assessment policies and procedures should support and enhance the successful inclusion and participation of all learners vulnerable to exclusion, including those with SEN.

Inclusive assessment can only be realised within an appropriate policy framework and methods of school organisation that support teachers who themselves have a positive attitude towards inclusion.

Policy therefore needs to ensure that:

- The needs of learners vulnerable to exclusion, including those with SEN, are considered and accounted for within all general as well as SEN specific assessment policies;
- All learners are entitled to be part of inclusive assessment procedures: those with SEN as well as their classmates and peers;
- All assessment methods and approaches are complementary and inform each other;
- Assessment aims to 'celebrate' diversity by identifying and valuing all pupils' progress and achievements.

Inclusive assessment involves:

- A range of methods and strategies that aim to gather clear evidence about learners learning in non-academic areas as well as academic subjects;

- Procedures that may fulfil other purposes in addition to informing teaching and learning (for example initial identification of SEN or monitoring of educational standards). However, all assessment procedures should be based upon shared values for inclusive education as well as the principles of participation and collaboration;

- Methods that report on the outcomes of learning, but also provide teachers with information on how to develop and improve the process of learning for an individual learner or groups of learners in the future;

- Decision-making based upon a range of sources that present evidence of learning collected over a period of time. This provides 'value added information' on learners learning progress and development, not just 'snapshot' information;

- Information that is contextualised within the educational environment taking into account any home-based or environmental factors that influence a learners learning;

- Assessing the factors that support inclusion for an individual learner in order that wider school, class management and support decisions can be effectively made;

- The active involvement of class teachers, learners, parents, class peers and others as potential assessors, or participants in the assessment process.



Areas for Further Policy Development

The approaches, methods and tools, as well as the people involved in inclusive assessment are all in line with the view that assessment is a fundamental part of teaching and learning. However, developments have not completely overcome the potential negative effects of educational assessment.

Wider tensions in countries' education systems impact upon debates surrounding inclusive assessment. In the 1996 UNESCO report *Learning: the Treasure Within*, seven tensions for education in the 21st century were identified. Of these, at least three focus upon issues relating to assessment that are still applicable and require consideration;

The tension between long-term and short-term educational considerations – there may be pressure to find quick answers and easy solutions to problems that require a long-term strategy for reform. The use of learner assessment information in monitoring educational standards is an example of one such area where pressure results in changes to policy and practice that may not always be evidence-based.

The tension between competition and equality of opportunity – there is a need to balance competition that provides motivation and incentives with co-operation that promotes equity and social justice for all. Assessment of learners can be based upon a competitive system, or it can be geared towards promoting inclusion through co-operation and shared learning experiences.

The tension between the expansion of knowledge and the capacity of individuals to assimilate it – there is a need to ensure that the curriculum covers all the relevant knowledge a learner requires, as well as opportunities for learning how to learn. Assessment is a key tool for teachers in determining not just what learners need to learn, but also how best they can learn it.

Concluding Comments

A central argument of the Agency project is that inclusive assessment practice should give a lead to general assessment practice. Implementing inclusive assessment leads teachers, school managers other educational professionals and policy makers to re-think and re-structure teaching and learning opportunities in order to improve the education of all learners.

Overall, the key messages highlighted within the Assessment in Inclusive Settings project lead to the conclusion that the principles of inclusive assessment are principles that support teaching and learning for all learners. Innovative practice in inclusive assessment demonstrates good assessment practice for all learners.

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