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A marking revolution

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Assessment for learning is not another spin doctor's slogan, but a relatively new approach to teaching being taken increasingly seriously by schools. Warwick Mansell looks at the latest developments and how they will change teachers' work

No one can doubt the seriousness with which schools in England treat national tests and exams. But it is the more subtle day-to-day assessment of pupils, which teachers do in the classroom that has repeatedly been seen as a national weakness.

Christine Gilbert, the chief inspector of schools, said in her last annual report: "Assessment remains, overall, the weakest aspect of teaching. Many teachers still struggle to use the information from assessment to plan work that is well matched to pupils' needs."

This has been a familiar lament. Sir Mike Tomlinson, one of Ms Gilbert's predecessors, said in 2001 that only 37 per cent of schools were good at assessment.

It is not surprising, then, that the Government and other organisations are seeking to address this.

It also explains why "assessment for learning" has been gaining popularity in schools.

Assessment involves gauging pupils' needs to improve their understanding instead of just recording the stage they have reached.

This could be as simple as a teacher not recording a mark - 13/20 for example - on the bottom of a piece of homework, but writing constructive comments or discussing the work with pupils.

The assessment for learning approach is being given a higher profile by education officials, and lies behind a range of initiatives.

Recent related developments include a move to give "chartered" status to expert assessors who work with schools to improve their assessment practice (see pages 20 and 21), and a new computerised testing system from the National Foundation for Educational Research (see page 22).

And the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has developed a framework for teacher assessment (see page 21), enabling teachers to track pupil progress in core subjects through many discrete skills.

The Government has been trying to incorporate assessment for learning into its teaching initiatives since 2001, adopting the phrase as the title for a 2003 drive to promote its online test data system, a move that angered education academics who said their idea had been hijacked.

The Primary National Strategy launched its latest advice on assessment for learning in January, complete with £150 million funding over three years.

Central to these drives is that teachers need help building their expertise, so they can become better at discovering how much pupils understand and respond effectively.

But will the schemes work?

As our reports indicate, there is considerable enthusiasm for several of these projects. They are threatened by two major pitfalls. The first is overloading teachers.

Paul Black, emeritus professor of science education at King's College, London, is arguably the father of assessment for learning in England.

He told The TES teachers needed much more time, both to carry out assessments and to work out how to adjust their teaching accordingly.

Professor Black said: "You need to arrange for teachers to reflect regularly with one another on their practice, and to exchange examples of their work. This includes observing what goes on in colleagues' classrooms, such as how many pupils speak in lessons, and what they say. It all takes time."

He backed a suggestion by his research partner Professor Dylan Wiliam, of London's Institute of Education, that government resources would be better spent giving teachers more time for this of work than with cutting class sizes.

The Primary National Strategy materials are being supported with three days' professional development for heads. The scheme also encourages teachers to work together to develop their lessons. But heads must decide for themselves how to allow them the time for this.

The second pitfall, according to experts, is the marginalisation of assessment in class during the past 15 years, as steadily increasing weight has been placed on "high stakes" test results.

The Cambridge University-based Primary Review has concluded that assessment for learning is "limited by the attention that teachers feel needs to be given to ensuring that national test results are optimised".

Steve Anwyll, of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's curriculum division, recently confirmed this in a speech to the Association for the Study of Primary Education's annual conference. Mr Anwyll, a former head of the national literacy strategy, said: "We know from surveys of primary schools that many of them spend long periods of teaching time in test preparation. Many people would say that what that public bit of assessment (the test) does is to have a negative effect on what happens in the classroom."

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The new Primary National Strategy material cites the work of Professor Black and his colleagues, and makes much of the value of teachers collaborating with their peers to develop their assessment practice.

Louise Johns-Shepherd, a senior adviser for progression with the Primary National Strategy, said the idea was not to impose any model on schools, but to give them the chance to opt to prioritise assessment for learning.

Whether assessment for learning truly takes off will be determined, Professor Black suspects, by teachers being able to commit to it the energy and attention it needs.

He said that another worry was that teachers could feel they were simply following orders in implementing another initiative. This, he said, was a mistake that lay behind an attempt to launch assessment for learning in secondaries in 2001.

Professor Black said: "The key thing to grasp is that it's not something that you can tell teachers to do. You have to live it for yourself."

WHAT IS ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING?

Simply, it is using assessment to improve pupils' understanding instead of just to record the stage they have reached. It can be a teacher deciding against jotting 13/20 on the bottom of a piece of homework and instead writing constructive comments or discussing what pupils could have done to make it better.

The assessment is not just about conventional marking of work and tests: it goes beyond that into the informal judgements which teachers make automatically about their pupils' understanding when they talk to the class during lessons.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) states: "Assessment for learning involves using assessment in the classroom to raise pupils' achievement. It is based on the idea that pupils will improve most if they understand the aim of their learning, where they are in relation to this aim and how they can achieve the aim (or close the gap in their knowledge)."

The QCA is careful to draw the distinction between "assessment for learning" and "assessment of learning" - the more traditional scoring of work and tests. The two types can also be referred to as formative and summative assessment.

Although good teachers have practised a form of assessment for learning for centuries, the term did not gain popular currency until after it was used in the 1998 book, *Inside the Black Box*, by academics Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam.

This was an analysis of 600 assessment studies, which argued that schools could push up pupils' GCSE grades if they got better at finding out what children knew, and then used it to help them improve.

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