

## Preface

This pamphlet is written by members of the Assessment Reform Group. The group started work over 10 years ago as the Policy Task Group on Assessment funded by the British Educational Research Association. Membership has changed slightly over the years but the major focus of the group has not: we have worked on policy issues in relation to assessment and have attempted to have a dialogue with policy makers.

As individual academics we have experience of research on assessment use and policy, much of which stems from the days before the introduction of the National Curriculum and Assessment. We have, however, all been involved in developing or evaluating the National Assessment Programme. Over the years we have become more and more convinced of the crucial link between assessment, as carried out in the classroom, and learning and teaching.

The group commissioned from Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam the major review of research on classroom assessment and its impact which resulted in the pamphlet, 'Inside the black box'. That review proved without a shadow of doubt that, when carried out effectively, informal classroom assessment with constructive feedback to the student will raise levels of attainment. Although it is

now fairly widely accepted that this form of assessment and feedback is important, the development of practice in this area will need a concerted policy-making push.

We are mindful of the recent critiques of educational research which suggest that much research in education is not useful and not acted on. However, we believe that this research on classroom assessment is absolutely central to the teaching and learning process, to the Government's commitment to raise standards, and to good teaching and learning practice. We are therefore engaging in a dialogue with policy makers so that we can, jointly with the teaching profession, move forward on this crucial issue.

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## Introduction

**C**an assessment raise standards? Recent research has shown that the answer to this question is an unequivocal 'yes'. Assessment is one of the most powerful educational tools for promoting effective learning. But it must be used in the right way. There is no evidence that increasing the amount of testing will enhance learning. Instead the focus needs to be on helping teachers use assessment, as part of teaching and learning, in ways that will raise pupils' achievement.

This pamphlet is about how this can be done. It is about the urgent need to examine current policy and practice in the light of important new research evidence that assessment as a regular element in classroom work holds the key to better learning. The research tells us that successful learning occurs when learners have ownership of their learning; when they understand the goals they are aiming for; when, crucially, they are motivated and have the skills to achieve success. Not only are these essential features of effective day-to-day learning in the classroom, they are key ingredients of successful lifelong learning.

However, there are some significant barriers to be overcome before this can be achieved. In the next section we refer to the evidence from research into the impact of the National Curriculum and

from inspectors' reports in England that much current classroom practice falls short of providing assessment for learning. A clear distinction should be made between *assessment of learning* for the purposes of grading and reporting, which has its own well-established procedures, and *assessment for learning* which calls for different priorities, new procedures and a new commitment. In the recent past, policy priorities have arguably resulted in too much attention being given to finding reliable ways of comparing children, teachers and schools. The important message now confronting the educational community is that assessment which is explicitly designed to promote learning is the single most powerful tool we have for both raising standards and empowering lifelong learners.

Change is urgently needed if we are not to miss out on the benefits of assessment practice which could significantly raise our achievement profile. This pamphlet sets out why and how steps should be taken by Government and its agencies to make this happen, to harness the powerful engine of assessment to the momentum of the current drive for higher standards. If we can do this we have the potential to achieve a radical transformation of both the enthusiasm and the effectiveness of learners in this country.

## The problem

The value that assessment can have in the process of learning as well as for grading work and recording achievement has been widely recognised. It is one of several roles of assessment given prominence in the National Curriculum for England and Wales and in parallel reforms in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Its value has been recognised in many official statements, as illustrated by the following examples:

‘Promoting children’s learning is a principal aim of schools. Assessment lies at the heart of this process.

It can provide a framework in which educational objectives may be set and pupils’ progress charted and expressed. It can yield a basis for planning the next steps in response to children’s needs ... it should be an integral part of the educational process, continually providing both “feedback” and “feedforward”.

It therefore needs to be incorporated systematically into teaching strategies and practices at all levels.’  
*(National Curriculum Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT): A Report, 1988)*

‘In order to raise the standards of attainment of individual pupils further the important contribution of everyday teacher assessment in

planning for progression throughout the key stage needs to be recognised and developed.’ (Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales report to The Welsh Office, 1997)

‘Assessment should be a powerful tool for learning, not merely a political solution to perceived problems over standards and accountability.’ (Association of Teachers and Lecturers, *Doing our Level Best*, 1996)

‘Teachers are recognising and realising the gains of formative assessment, in other words, informed feedback to pupils about their work.’ (Tom Shaw, Chief Inspector for Northern Ireland, when launching the School Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland, February, 1998)

Unfortunately it appears that what has been happening in schools often does not live up to this promise:

‘The use made of assessment information in determining the next steps in the learning ... is unsatisfactory in a substantial minority of secondary schools’.  
*(Annual Report of the Chief Inspector for Wales, 1995-96)*

‘There was insufficient use made of assessment and national testing as a means of evaluating learning and

teaching and of matching work to pupils' needs. The use of assessment information for discussing progress with pupils ... was not widespread.' (HMI Scotland report on *Standards and Quality in Scottish Schools*, 1996)

'Overall, the purpose of assessment is to improve standards, not merely to measure them. Although the quality of formative assessment has improved perceptibly, it continues to be a weakness in many schools.' (*Review of Secondary Education in England, 1993 – 1997*, OFSTED 1998, Section 5.6)

This is despite a number of initiatives aimed at helping teachers with classroom assessment<sup>1</sup>. These typically provide materials to help teachers with the categorisation of pupils' work, ensuring greater comparability in teachers' judgements of what constitutes work reaching certain standards or levels. They do little that addresses the need to change practice if assessment is really to be used to help learning. This is not to deny that teachers do need help with grading work but our concern here is to argue that help of a different kind is needed in order to foster assessment for learning and that it is this help that has not been given sufficient attention.

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<sup>1</sup> For example: *Consistency in Teacher Assessment (QCA, ACAC); Taking a Closer Look at Assessment* (Scottish Council for Research in Education)

## The evidence from research

In a review of research on assessment and classroom learning, commissioned by the group authoring this paper and funded by The Nuffield Foundation, Professors Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam synthesised evidence from over 250 studies linking assessment and learning<sup>2</sup>. The outcome was a clear and incontrovertible message: that initiatives designed to enhance effectiveness of the way assessment is used in the classroom to promote learning can raise pupil achievement. The scale of the effect would be the equivalent of between one and two grades at GCSE for an individual. For England as a whole, Black and Wiliam estimate that its position in respect of mathematical attainment would have been raised in the recent Third International Mathematics and Science Study from the middle of the 41 countries involved to being one of the top five. They also found evidence that the gain was likely to be even more substantial for lower-achieving pupils.

**The research indicates that improving learning through assessment depends on five, deceptively simple, key factors:**

- **the provision of effective feedback to pupils;**

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<sup>2</sup> Black, P.J. and Wiliam, D. (1998) 'Assessment and Classroom Learning', *Assessment in Education*, 5(1), 7-74.

- **the active involvement of pupils in their own learning;**
- **adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment;**
- **a recognition of the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils, both of which are crucial influences on learning;**
- **the need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve.**

At the same time, several inhibiting factors were identified. Among these are:

- a tendency for teachers to assess quantity of work and presentation rather than the quality of learning;
- greater attention given to marking and grading, much of it tending to lower the self-esteem of pupils, rather than to providing advice for improvement;
- a strong emphasis on comparing pupils with each other which demoralises the less successful learners;
- teachers' feedback to pupils often serves social and managerial purposes rather than helping them to learn more effectively;
- teachers not knowing enough about their pupils' learning needs.

There is also much relevant evidence from research into the impact of National Curriculum Assessment in England and

Wales, one of the most far-reaching reforms ever introduced into an educational system. That evidence suggests that the reforms have encouraged teachers to develop their understanding of, and skills in, assessment. However, the very high stakes attached to test results, especially at Key Stage 2, are now encouraging teachers to focus on practising test-taking rather than on using assessment to support learning. Pupils are increasingly seeing assessment as something which labels them and is a source of anxiety, with low-achievers in particular often being demoralised.

Other evidence of how practice fails to live up to the principles which make achievement of higher standards a reality comes from school inspectors.

## The evidence from inspections

There is abundant evidence from reports of school inspections that the use of assessment to help pupils learn is one of the weakest aspects of practice in classrooms across the UK. Reference to two recent reports from the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) in England illustrates both the nature of the problem and what inspectors are reporting as 'good practice' found in a minority of schools.

*Secondary Education in England 1993-1997* (OFSTED, 1998) draws on all the school inspections during that period. Worryingly, it states that assessment remains the weakest aspect of teaching in most subjects, especially at Key Stage 3. It is better in some subjects, such as English, than in others but too often teachers use closed questions, limiting pupils' responses and ultimately failing to register how far pupils have understood the objectives of the work. It is not usual for pupils to be encouraged to understand such objectives and to be involved in judging how far they have been successful in achieving them. Assessment and marking are typically processes which are done for, and to, pupils. Pupil self-assessment is more often a device to save the teacher's time than a way of engaging pupils in their own learning.

*Teacher Assessment in Core Subjects at Key Stage 2* (OFSTED, 1998) presents a picture drawn from 75 schools selected to represent good practice. Even in that specially selected sample, pupils were seldom aware of the teacher's assessment objectives and good quality marking practices were found in only a small number of schools. The report does, however, point to ways in which assessment can be used effectively to raise standards. That happens, it argues, when teachers:

- decide how and when to assess pupils' attainment at the same time as they plan the work;
- are proficient in using a range of assessment techniques in the classroom;
- prepare and make use of manageable systems for recording the progress of individual pupils.

These are just two out of many reports, from all parts of the UK and dealing with the training of teachers as well as with assessment in schools. The weaknesses in current assessment practice have thus been clearly spelled out by the Government's own inspectors.

## Assessment for learning in practice

It is important to distinguish assessment for learning from other current interpretations of classroom assessment. What has become known in England and Wales as 'teacher assessment' is assessment carried out by teachers. The term does not imply the purpose of the assessment, although many assume that it is formative. This often leads to claims that what is already being done is adequate. In order to make the difference quite clear it is useful to summarise the characteristics of assessment that promotes learning.

**These are that:**

- **it is embedded in a view of teaching and learning of which it is an essential part;**
- **it involves sharing learning goals with pupils;**
- **it aims to help pupils to know and to recognise the standards they are aiming for;**
- **it involves pupils in self-assessment;**
- **it provides feedback which leads to pupils recognising their next steps and how to take them;**
- **it is underpinned by confidence that every student can improve;**
- **it involves both teacher and pupils reviewing and reflecting on assessment data.**

This contrasts with assessment that simply adds procedures or tests to existing work and is separated from teaching, or on-going assessment that involves only marking and feeding back grades or marks to pupils. Even though carried out wholly by teachers such assessment has increasingly been used to sum up learning, that is, it has a summative rather than a formative purpose.

The term 'formative' itself is open to a variety of interpretations and often means no more than that assessment is carried out frequently and is planned at the same time as teaching. Such assessment does not necessarily have all

the characteristics just identified as helping learning. It may be formative in helping the teacher to identify areas where more explanation or practice is needed. But for the pupils, the marks or remarks on their work may tell them about their success or failure but not about how to make progress towards further learning.

The use of the term 'diagnostic' can also be misleading since it is frequently associated with finding difficulties and errors. Assessment for learning is appropriate in all situations and helps to identify the next steps to build on success and strengths as well as to correct weaknesses.

A particular point of difference with much present practice is the view of learning that the approach to assessment implies. Current thinking about learning acknowledges that learners must ultimately be responsible for their learning since no-one else can do it for them. Thus assessment for learning must involve pupils, so as to provide them with information about how well they are doing and guide their subsequent efforts. Much of this information will come as feedback from the teacher, but some will be through their direct involvement in assessing their own work. The awareness of learning and ability of learners to direct it for themselves is of increasing importance in the context of encouraging lifelong learning.

So what is going on in the classroom when assessment is really being used to help learning? To begin with the more obvious aspects of their role, teachers must be involved in gathering information about pupils' learning and encouraging pupils to review their work critically and constructively. The methods for gaining such information are well rehearsed and are, essentially:

- observing pupils – this includes listening to how they describe their work and their reasoning;
- questioning, using open questions, phrased to invite pupils to explore their ideas and reasoning;
- setting tasks in a way which requires pupils to use certain skills or apply ideas;
- asking pupils to communicate their thinking through drawings, artefacts, actions, role play, concept mapping, as well as writing;
- discussing words and how they are being used.

Teachers may, of course, collect information in these ways but yet not use the information in a way that increases learning. Use by the teacher involves decisions and action – decisions about the next steps in learning and action in helping pupils take these steps. But it is important to remember that it is the pupils who will take the next steps and

the more they are involved in the process, the greater will be their understanding of how to extend their learning. Thus action that is most likely to raise standards will follow when pupils are involved in decisions about their work rather than being passive recipients of teachers' judgements of it.

Involving pupils in this way gives a fresh meaning to 'feedback' in the assessment process. What teachers will be feeding back to pupils is a view of what they should be aiming for: the standard against which pupils can compare their own work. At the same time, the teacher's role – and what is at the heart of teaching – is to provide pupils with the skills and strategies for taking the next steps in their learning.

## What can Government and its agencies do?

**T**he previous section makes clear that assessment for learning depends on what teachers do in classrooms and how they see their role. The evidence from inspections also makes clear that changes in classroom practices are still needed in many schools. However, teachers can only be expected to make these changes if they are encouraged to do so within a supportive environment. The demands made of them by management and



government therefore need to facilitate these changes, not constrain them. Some relevant action has been taken by each of the agencies with a national responsibility for education in England<sup>3</sup> but, in our view, this should go further.

We have not assumed a ‘blank sheet’ as our starting point because this would be unrealistic. For example, we would not wish to deny the need for assessment for grading and the accountability purposes associated with it. What we are offering here is not a radical alternative to current practice but some pragmatic suggestions for changes in emphasis in national policies on assessment. As we have shown, research indicates that assessment for learning will contribute to the raising of standards. What we propose therefore is that future initiatives should be more clearly directed towards raising standards by improving the quality of classroom assessment. Each of the agencies can play its part both by asserting the importance of assessment for learning and by specific action to strengthen this aspect of classroom practice.

### *Initial teacher training (ITT)*

The ‘standards’ for ITT, developed by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and

issued by the DfEE as Circular 4/98 do acknowledge that a trained teacher should be a skilled assessor of pupils’ learning. For example, teachers are explicitly expected to “monitor strengths and weaknesses and use the information gained as a basis for purposeful intervention in pupils’ learning” (DfEE Circular 4/98 p.15).

However, that is only one of several hundred such expectations of trainees whose courses of training may be a mere 36 weeks long (approximately two-thirds of which will be work in schools). The trainees’ own experience of being educated is likely to lead them to view assessment primarily as a process of summarising and grading. The education system at the national level currently also appears to be concerned more with generating indicators of pupil performance than with making effective use of assessment information in the classroom. In these circumstances, how much attention will assessment for learning be given in training institutions’ courses and in training schools?

We suggest that assessment for learning should figure more prominently in the ITT standards and in the Framework for Inspection of ITT when these are next revised. There may well also be other initiatives which the TTA could take to reinforce the message that every trainee must develop this aspect of the skills of teaching.

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<sup>3</sup> This section, and the proposals which follow, refer to England; any action to be taken in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would be for the equivalent Government department or agency.

### *Continuing professional development (CPD)*

Although the nature of the training teachers receive during their careers is for each school and each teacher to determine, the Government and its agencies can exert a powerful influence on the training agenda. It can do this both indirectly, by creating expectations of 'what schools should be doing', and more directly through its part in the funding of training and establishing new 'standards' for various categories of teacher.

To date, assessment for learning has not been seen as a high priority for CPD. For example, the DfEE's Standards Fund for 1998/99 specified assessment as being eligible for a special purposes grant. However, the emphasis in the criteria which those bidding for funds have to meet is on assessment for grading. The general indication is that development of, and training for, assessment for learning should be funded under Grant 1 for 'School Effectiveness' where it inevitably has to compete with other areas for development.

We suggest that future Standards Fund circulars should specifically encourage LEAs to bid for funds to support assessment for learning as a powerful lever to raise achievement in schools. The evidence that low attainers benefit most also suggests that this will provide support for the improvement of 'seriously weak schools'.

We also suggest, as with ITT (see above), that assessment for learning should feature more strongly in the standards for teachers as they gain experience and seek career development. The current standards published by the TTA make little reference to anything that looks like assessment for learning. This is particularly noticeable in the standards for headteachers where great emphasis is placed on their ability to use assessment data for monitoring and evaluation purposes. If headteachers are to provide leadership for teaching and learning, which is the key to school effectiveness, then more emphasis should be placed on assessment for learning. This should also be the case in the proposed standards for Advanced Skills Teachers who will have responsibility for supporting the development of colleagues in their own schools and beyond.

### *School curriculum and assessment*

The remit of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) includes specific reference to raising standards of attainment and providing high-quality guidance and support for teachers, lecturers, trainers and employers. It is to be welcomed that the involvement of students in assessing their own learning is integral to the assessment model for General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). Reports on

experience of GNVQ courses refer to the motivating effects on students of receiving regular feedback on their progress towards meeting the course requirements.

Supporting classroom assessment has been a feature of recent SCAA and QCA programmes for National Curriculum assessment. In the *Consistency in Teacher Assessment* series SCAA and QCA have produced helpful examples of pupils' work, test materials and guidance, with a view to improving the consistency, across teachers and schools, of teachers' judgements of their pupils' work. However, as indicated earlier, the focus has been on how to make judgements not on how to use evidence from assessment to support learning. Greater consistency is clearly desirable but it does nothing in itself to enhance the usefulness of teachers' assessments for pupils. There is still much scope for QCA to provide advice and examples of good practice focused specifically on assessment for learning.

The revision of the National Curriculum will lead to revised schemes of work for each subject and teacher guidance to accompany them. This is an opportunity for QCA to emphasise how assessment can be used to help learning in the classroom. The format of the schemes of work currently available, which include learning objectives and learning outcomes, may facilitate this. Some indication of the difficulties that pupils encounter in tackling particular

topics and themes, how these can be elicited and how teachers might offer strategies for improvement, may be of particular value.

### *Inspection of schools*

The introduction of new style school inspections in 1992 has had a powerful influence on practice in schools. The 1992 framework for inspections contained a discrete section on assessment, recording and reporting but the current handbook (issued in 1996) integrates references to assessment into a number of sections. We recognise also that inspectors' understanding of assessment for learning is central to effective interpretation of questions such as 'Do teachers assess pupils' work thoroughly and constructively, and use assessments to inform teaching?' (OFSTED Inspection Schedule, 1996, 5.1).

In order to highlight the importance of assessment for learning, we suggest that it should be given a prominent place in the next revision of the inspection framework. The draft framework that is out to consultation at the time of writing gives 'Teaching' and 'Learning' as two key headings for lesson observation. If these are adopted they would provide a clear opportunity to provide specific feedback on the quality of assessment for learning in classrooms. However OFSTED will need to make clear what it expects schools to be doing in relation to this aspect of practice and how it will

view innovative procedures that are being tried by schools. Registered and assistant inspectors may also need more focused training in order to judge and report on the effectiveness of teachers' practice in assessment for learning.

## Proposals

It is important that a focus on assessment for learning is not seen by teachers as adding to the expectations of them, but as integral to the already well understood national project to raise educational standards. That must be spelled out whenever possible in official statements and echoed in the attention given to assessment for learning in other contexts, such as survey reports from OFSTED and the other national inspection agencies within the UK. It is our belief that many teachers and schools already do appreciate that effective practice in the use of assessment within classrooms and across schools is essential if we are to achieve real and lasting improvements in educational standards.

To conclude, we propose the following six point plan.

**1 Assessment for learning should be a central focus of the Government's programme for raising standards.**

**2 A range of examples should be published, showing how assessment**

**for learning can be integrated into classroom practice and into the planning of schemes of work, across age groups and across subjects.**

**3 Classroom assessments and their role in teaching and learning should be given greater prominence in initial teacher training and continuing professional development.**

**4 Development by schools and local authorities of assessment for learning as a means of raising standards should be supported by Government-led funding such as the DfEE's Standards Fund.**

**5 Greater recognition should be given by school inspectors, who should be supported with appropriate training and a revised inspection framework, to practices within classrooms and across schools which are effective in using assessment to support learning.**

**6 A programme of evaluation should be established to feed directly back into this series of initiatives and to monitor their development.**

We believe that such a plan would bring demonstrable improvements in the quality of classroom learning. Education policies at the national level cannot afford to neglect this vital component in any strategy for raising educational standards.