

A worthwhile investment? Assessing and valuing educational outcomes for children and young people with SEND

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SEN POLICY RESEARCH FORUM

**A worthwhile
investment?**

**Assessing and
valuing educational
outcomes for
children and young
people with SEND**

December 2017

SUMMARY

This seminar addressed questions about what sorts of educational outcomes are relevant and appropriate, how can these be assessed, how can we ensure they are properly valued and what implications are there for the ways in which the educational performance of schools, settings and services is judged?

Professor Graham Douglas (Birmingham University) discusses inclusive assessment dilemmas and how to address them. He understood inclusive assessment in terms of being inclusive in terms of who is assessed, how they are assessed and what is assessed. This implied an inclusive assessment framework that should: (1) include all, (2) be accessible and appropriate and (3) assess areas of relevance, based on an international study of inclusive assessment policies and practices. He considers various approaches including ways to contextualise international and national assessment data and raising the question of whether Ofsted inspection framework reinforces the problems.

Graham Easterlow (National Education Union Joint Executive Council) then discusses assessment issues from an special school perspective. He explains how a residential specialist SEN school uses a holistic model that covers all the different aspects of being a person to create educational outcomes that are personally relevant. Assessments involve setting a baseline to monitor progress. He asks in conclusion whether ordinary schools can meet the needs of complex SEND learners if they are under-resourced.

In the first round of discussion groups the common themes are about why are we assessing children and young people? Many participants believe that the purpose was to inform the teaching and learning. Though accountability is also seen as legitimate, but it needs to be more nuanced and flexible. Assessment should also be focussed beyond the academic core subjects and cover a greater breadth. Some participants are also concerned that age-related expectations put some children into a permanent state of failure.

Dr Jean Ware (Bangor University) then examines assessment issues for children and young people with significant / complex learning difficulties. She argues based on an overview of recent policy and practice in this field for assessment policy that ensures that what is assessed is what matters most, for moderation within and between settings and for the data collected to be used to inform teaching and learning.

Finally, Anne Heavey (ATL) examines accountability issues and their implications for children and young people with SEN and disabilities. She argues that current school level performance measures undermine inclusion prevent providing parents with meaningful information. Despite the promising Local Authority SEND inspections, she argues that Ofsted is not performing well enough. She concludes that accountability measures need to give voice to the real experiences of children and young people with SEND.

Participants in the second and final round of discussion groups focussed on a range of key points. The negative effects of overarching policy and the accountability system as it operates, is a theme in several groups. For one group the accountability measures are not supporting positive responses to diversity. For many the assessment system is also not informing those with a direct stake in it, such as parents. For others, the tension between developmentally determined educational needs and chronologically determined accountability is not addressed enough nor being resolved. Linked to this is the question of how assessment can meet a social justice model and not just an economic one. In other words, is assessment primarily about realising workforce potential rather than improving social and educational outcomes. A linked concern is expressed in terms of whether it is possible to answer questions about assessing schools and assessing children and young people? It is suggested that this cannot be done with a single tool. Continuing Professional Development that values collaboration, peer review, self-evaluation and exchange placements is also seen as contributing to improved assessment practices.

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Section 5:

Assessment issues for children and young people with significant/complex learning difficulties.

Jean Ware

Introduction

This section looks at six issues around assessment and valuing of educational outcomes for children and young people with significant/ complex learning difficulties in the light of the recent publication of the Rochford Review (2016):

1. Who are children and young people with significant / complex learning difficulties?
2. What is important for us to assess for these learners?
3. How should these learners be assessed?
4. What are the problems?
5. What are appropriate uses for this assessment?
6. What is the contribution of the Rochford Review to addressing these questions?

There is no agreement about which learners are included by the term ‘significant/ complex learning difficulties’. ‘Complex learning difficulties’ is a problematic term, because it can be a bit of a ‘catch-all’; learners with autistic spectrum disorder, learners with multisensory impairments and profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) have all been described as having complex needs (e.g. Nind, 1996; Watson and Fisher, 1997, Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, 2011). This lack of agreement fuels a level of confusion when any attempt is made to discuss either the needs of this group or the development of policy to ensure that these needs are met.

I intend, therefore, to concentrate on one sub-group of learners with complex needs, those with PMLD. There is no universally agreed definition of this group either, but as Bellamy et al.’s 2010 study to define the term demonstrated, there is a wide level of agreement about the core characteristics of the group, which include a profound level of intellectual disability together with one or more other severe impairments (for example a physical or sensory disability) (Lacey, 1998; Ware, 1996). These core characteristics are evident in the following definition, which is widely cited as the ‘official DfE definition’.

“Pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties have complex learning needs. In addition to very severe learning difficulties, pupils have other significant difficulties, such as physical disabilities, sensory impairment or a severe medical condition.

Pupils require a high level of adult support, both for their learning needs and also for their personal care. They are likely to need sensory stimulation and a curriculum broken down into very small steps. Some pupils communicate by gesture, eye pointing or symbols, others by very simple language. Their attainments are likely to remain in the early P scale range (P1-P4) throughout school. (DfE, 2003)”

In fact, this definition is also potentially somewhat problematic, because it contains reference to the type of curriculum needed by learners with PMLD and to their expected assessment performance in terms of the 'P Scales'. Arguably therefore it's guilty of the sort of tautology of which the old Code of Practice was often accused. But it does at least give a clear picture of severity of the difficulties which people with PMLD experience. Interestingly, Bellamy et al.'s research (2010) found that family carers preferred definitions which highlight 'the circumstances which are necessary to enable individuals with PMLD to be given the opportunity to participate in their immediate situation, their community and ultimately in wider society.' (Bellamy et al., 2010 p232). And to at least some extent, with its references to sensory stimulation and a curriculum broken down into small steps the DfE definition does meet those criteria.

I have chosen to limit what I am saying to this group of learners for three reasons. The first is simply pragmatic, given the wide range of different needs which are sometimes included under the heading 'significant and complex needs' some limitation is necessary. Second, it is possible to argue, as Norwich has done in the past, that these learners present a sort of test case. Of all learners their needs are the most extreme, the progress they are expected to make in comparison with other learners is the least and so, arguably, they exemplify general issues to do with assessment at their most critical.

There is however an additional reason for concentrating on this group of learners- and that is that in terms of addressing issues to do with assessment, they are amongst the least satisfactorily served (Tadema et al.,2005; Vlaskamp, 2005)

What is it important to assess for these learners?

What I want to say is that one crucial issue in assessing any learner, or group of learners, is deciding the priorities for assessment. We cannot assess everything, so what should we assess?

In the field of PMLD, there is general agreement that communication is absolutely central for these learners (Goldbart and Ware, 2015), and therefore that accurate and detailed assessment of communication is essential.

But, as noted in that DfE definition, the majority of these learners do not communicate through speech, and some will be at the pre-intentional stage of communication. It is not surprising, then that families both in Bellamy et al.'s study and another by Goldbart and Caton (2010) identified familiar communication partners, who know how the individual communicates, and what meaning can be attached to specific behaviours, as of particular importance. This may also be what is most important in assessment terms for some learners with PMLD. What makes most difference in terms of outcomes, may be having a consistent interaction partner who is able to 'read' their communication; and, for some of these learners, the most important outcomes may be in terms of quality of life, rather than more obviously 'educational' outcomes. If you have profound and multiple learning difficulties and are perhaps often uncomfortable or in pain; it is of critical importance that if, at all possible, you are enabled to convey that to someone who will take action on your behalf. Of course, as part of achieving that objective it is also important to establish

baselines, and develop strategies for moving the learner on. For example, what meanings does the individual convey, do they do so intentionally or pre-intentionally? So good, appropriate, assessments of communication are important; but developing an assessment of communication (or any other area) specifically for this group faces considerable barriers, for example, developing rigorous, fit for purpose assessments is very costly, and the very low incidence of PMLD means that people with PMLD make up only a tiny percentage of the population (around 0.025%, Mansell, 2010). The diversity of challenges faced by people with PMLD makes the development of an assessment for this group especially challenging. Additionally the drive towards inclusive assessment means that the need for PMLD-specific assessments is not always acknowledged. Two communication assessments usually seen as particularly helpful for learners with PMLD are the Affective Communication Assessment (Coupe-O’Kane and Goldbart, 1998) and the Triple C (Bloomberg et al., 2009).

Besides communication, other areas which the majority of people working in this field probably agree should be prioritised for assessment are; cognition – which includes skills such as problem-solving, and PHSE (e.g. Nadjii and Tymms, 2009). Some, particularly, perhaps, in continental Europe, also regard motor skills as an important area. Assessment is equally challenging in all these areas.

Other issues

These learners are operating at such an early level that they are not able ‘to play the assessment game’. So assessment generally consists of the methodical collection of evidence and careful observation of the learner most often in natural situations and often over a period of time, although occasionally situations may be engineered to test whether a learner has achieved a particular step.

Despite the challenges, there are a number of assessment instruments which are designed to help educators with this process. In England, there are the ‘P Scales’ (DfE, 2014). The ‘P Scales have been in use since 1998, and are currently statutory in England. However, if the recommendations of the Rochford Review are accepted they will no longer be so. The P Scales make the assumption that at the very earliest stages (P1-3 see figure 1) division into conventional school subjects such as ‘maths’ or ‘geography’ is not relevant, as there are very early generic skills which apply in all areas,

Figure 1 P Scales – P1-3

- P1 (i) Pupils encounter activities and experiences
 - They may be passive or resistant
- P2 (i) Pupils begin to respond consistently to familiar people, events and objects
- P2 (ii) Pupils begin to be proactive in their interactions
- P3 (i) Pupils begin to communicate intentionally
- P3 (ii) Pupils use emerging conventional communication

It can be seen from Figure 1 that Communication features strongly in these early generic skills. The ‘P Scales are a ‘best fit’ assessment, so it is not necessary for a

learner to have met all the criteria for a particular level to be credited with that level, just the majority of them.

However, for some learners with PMLD, even these levels seem to be too broad, so from the earliest days of the P Scales, some schools working with learners with PMLD, have seen a need to use other more detailed assessments in order to document learner progress, and sometimes also in order to be sure about which level on the P Scales is the best fit. A range of additional assessment materials were developed to answer this need, e.g. B-squared (2017) and PIVATS (LCC, 2017) . Evidence from a recent survey by Ware and Weston (2016) suggests that schools that use the P Scales have continued to find additional assessments helpful or necessary in order to demonstrate progress for pupils with PMLD and set appropriate targets for them.

The most popular assessment other than the P Scales for this group is probably 'Routes for Learning' (RfL) which was published by the (then) Welsh Assembly Government in 2006. RfL currently looks only at Communication and Cognition, although a revision is currently under discussion. RfL is very specifically aimed at learners with PMLD, and covers only about the first 18 months in developmental terms, with more detail in the earlier stages. It tries to map potential pathways (Routes) from one milestone to the next and is explicit about the likelihood that learners may follow different routes, and that this may depend to some extent on the nature of their disabilities.

Problems in Assessing Educational Outcomes for Learners with PMLD

As mentioned above, learners with PMLD cannot play the assessment game, and that this means collecting evidence over time. There is also considerable evidence that their performance is particularly inconsistent from day to day and situation to situation. For the reasons mentioned above, there is very little research on the assessment of learners with PMLD. Neither RfL nor any of the other assessments specifically devised for learners with PMLD is standardised. That makes moderation at school or authority, or academy chain level a real challenge. There are similar problems too, in relation to the collection of overall performance data, as illustrated by the work of Centre for Educational Monitoring at Durham University (Ndaji and Tymms, 2009)

The 'P Scales' data that has been collected by the Centre for Educational Monitoring at Durham University is from a considerable number of schools since 1999. Data for learners with MLD and SLD collected as part of that project show that older learners score higher than younger learners; similarly data for learners with MLD shows progress from year to year. However, data for those with PMLD shows that these learners score more or less the same regardless of age. There are several possible explanations for this, but it may be that in relation to learners with PMLD the P Scales are insufficiently fine-grained to show progress, adding support to the view of teachers that additional assessment instruments are needed for this purpose.

Research on RfL has been much less systematic than that for the P Scales; probably because there has been no government funding for such research, so that what has been done has been at the initiative of individuals or schools. Several small-scale projects have, however, shown that teachers believe Routes is fit for purpose, (e.g.

van Walwyck, 201; McDermott and Atkinson, 2016). In addition, some individual schools have kept data in a systematic fashion, in order to use them for school self-evaluation and improvement. A tracking tool for this purpose has been developed on the initiative of one of the original team who developed Routes (Martin, 2017). Aggregating data for a cohort of children in this way enables potential bottlenecks in progress to be identified, and hypotheses to be generated as to the potential reasons. For example, pupils with visual impairments might consistently become 'stuck' at a particular step and identifying this could enable the school to look for potential solutions, to enable these pupils to make better progress.

The contribution of the Rochford Review to addressing these questions

The Rochford Review recommends that the P Scales should cease to be statutory in England and that learners with SLD and PMLD should instead be assessed in the 7 areas of engagement developed by the Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (CLDD) project (<http://thesendhub.co.uk/the-cldd-research-project/>) (responsiveness, curiosity, discovery, anticipation, persistence, initiation and investigation). They suggest that this will ensure schools give appropriate attention to the development of concepts and skills that are pre-requisites for progressing on to subject-specific learning. This would become a statutory duty. However, it is curious that no specific method of assessing the areas of engagement is recommended. This will make moderation within and across schools and settings, significantly more difficult and, like the other assessment instruments discussed in this chapter the engagement scales are not standardised. Moderation within and across settings is essential if we are to make the education of these learners as effective as possible; as has been demonstrated in research both on the P Scales and in school-based work on RfL.

Furthermore, the Review recommends that assessment in other areas is to be non-statutory. Assessment in cognition and learning is to be the only statutory assessment because it maps onto what are seen as the most critical skills for mainstream / all learners. Of course, cognition and learning is very important for learners with PMLD, and the CLDD engagement scales highlight critical aspects which have frequently been neglected. But, for the great majority of learners with PMLD, communication, interpreted very broadly and focusing on interpersonal understanding is widely regarded as being of central importance because, as Bunning (2009) says:

“Communication is the conduit between the individual and the world. It is the very cornerstone of identity formation, social engagement and human relationships.....In this respect, people with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities (PIMDs) are no different to the typically developing population. The real differences lie in the scope and level of sophistication of available skills and the role performed by significant others (the people who engage with them on a daily basis).” Bunning (2009, p.46).

To conclude: assessment policy for this group of learners needs to ensure that what is assessed is what matters most, that moderation within and between settings is possible, and that the data collected is used to inform teaching and learning- so that the learners concerned can make the best possible progress. That after all, is what all learners deserve- not least those with significant and complex learning difficulties

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