Assessment of Special Educational Needs

Keith Horrell

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

The aim of this short article is to put into perspective my own thoughts on assessment methods used within a Special Educational Needs (SEN) design and technology department. Please don't stop reading if you don't teach in a special needs environment, as I think there are many relevant issues that need to be aired. I do not consider myself an expert in the field of assessment – I have read what seem to be hundreds of publications from a variety of sources – therefore the following is a basis to start discussion and by no means a *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Universe.*

I believe assessment is fundamental to good teaching, and that by making assessments during the key stages you will build up your knowledge of individual pupils' strengths and weaknesses. This in turn is an integral part of the planning and development of any course, enabling you to set objectives either for groups of pupils or for individuals.

While most pupils will fall within the range of National Curriculum Description Levels 3-7 our main concern is with those that fall outside this area. We therefore need systems that allow progress to be monitored within and beyond the National Curriculum (at both ends of ability).

This is not a departmental issue, as the schools must and should ensure that there is a clear, consistent and cohesive assessment policy that promotes access to the National Curriculum for all pupils. It should also provide teachers with clear responsibilities regarding the policies on the assessment, recording and reporting of pupils. It is then the department's responsibility to ensure that this becomes an integral part of planning and development work.

The DATA handbooks for primary coordinators and secondary heads are a useful starting point, with excellent sections on assessment. I believe a positive approach to assessment is essential, therefore a single manageable whole school framework is needed to:

- measure what students have learnt, and to what extent
- identify students' strengths and weaknesses
- diagnose the appropriate next step for progressing their learning
- evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching programme
- provide feedback on progress to the learner and other interested parties, such as parents, teachers and LEAs
- make predictions about the speed of future progress.

(DATA, 1997)

In addition, for SEN children we need to:

- ensure that Statement procedures are carried out fully
- ensure that evidence is provided for their Annual Review
- monitor and plan Individual Education Programmes (IEPs)
- identify short, medium and long-term targets and priorities for individual learning within a suggested framework
- make Transitions Plans for the Annual Review at Year 9.

(Taken from SCAA, QCA, DfEE and own school literature)

There are several useful publications from the DfEE and SCAA/QCA . They include:

- Consistency in Teacher Assessment Key Stages 1-3
- Consistency in Teacher Assessment Exemplification of standards
- Consistency in Teacher Assessment Supporting pupils with special needs
- Design and technology the new requirements Key Stage 3
- Assessment and Reporting Arrangements Years 7-9.

This is by no means a complete list.

Types of assessment

A variety of assessment methods may be required to meet the full range of SEN children, as one specific method may not be relevant to your situation, however, they should all:

- inform students
- provide help in a constructive manner
- reward success
- record positive achievement.

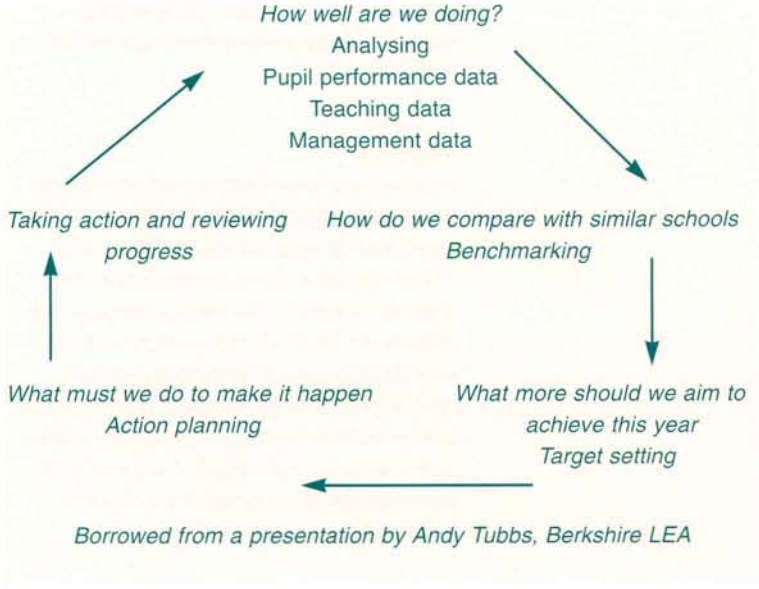
The range of approaches used with individual children must be appropriate to their ability and planned to assess achievable steps. This may be done through formative or summative, written or oral, formal or informal assessment. In addition, the value of student self-assessment must not be underestimated; I have found that students are very capable of taking an active role in the form of individual or group evaluations.

All these activities need to monitor improvements made by the child. It is up to individual schools to decide how often this needs to be done. One time that you may find useful is early in Year 7. This can give a much clearer picture of a starting point or benchmark to calculate 'value added' for later years. If two new pupils arrive at Level 4, Key Stage 2, it is possible that if they are at opposite ends of the band, then the less able may take almost a full year to achieve the same assessment as the more able. In addition, it also reduces the anomaly of consistency in teacher assessment. However, remember that it is imperative that marking should not be looked at solely as a reporting tool, but also as a means of improving standards and directing future programmes of study.

Monitoring, evaluation and target setting

When there has been so much revolution in design and technology rather than evolution (which is my preference) it seems strange for me to support new initiatives. At a time when resources and time management are at a premium, the thought of targeting may seem daunting. However, when one looks closely at the details, it can address many areas of concern in a positive manner.

Particularly important, I think, is monitoring the effectiveness of planned units of work. The following diagram outlines the process in general, although it in no way represents all the issues that can be raised.



Borrowed from a presentation by Andy Tubbs, Berkshire LEA

Schools will receive benchmarking data for schools of similar type to enable comparisons in core subjects. From this information, targets will be set by the LEAs, schools and at departmental level. (I personally think you need to be very actively involved at this time).

There will be three types of target:

- elite targets – trying to raise the numbers that gain level 6 + in Year 9 or grade C at GCSE
- whole-group targets – trying to raise the average attainment of all groups
- reliability targets – trying to lower the numbers failing.

The new directive will be to send design and technology teachers to round up any truants on the day of the final examination and drag them back to school to sit their exam, thereby reducing the number of U grades!

Despite my cynicism about the latter target, I do think overall it will be possible to help individual students progress by indicating areas in need of further attention and

identifying, whole class/group topics that require development. I think that careful scrutiny or evaluation of our performance in this format can lead to an overall improvement in standards. However, there are still a lot of concerns for many people and whether it is readily accepted by teachers depends how these are finally addressed.

Planning

Assessment is an integral part of planning across all aspects of the curriculum and can help develop appropriate transition work. There has been some concern over the transfer of specific knowledge between Key Stages 2-3 and 3-4, but assessment can provide appropriate starting points and challenges. Through ongoing observations and evaluations of pupils' progress, related to the aims for each pupil, it is possible to demonstrate and monitor this progress accurately.

One of my concerns is why pupils in science subjects score more Level 8's than they do in design and technology. Is this because it is easier or is it that they are given the opportunity to achieve it?

For the first time this year I have set all Technology groups (4-form entry). We have made the low achievers group quite small (admittedly putting pressure on the size of the other groups) but at this early stage it certainly has made a big difference. We now differentiate by task and not by outcome (the children still complete the same projects but the tasks around them are very different). The more able are constantly challenged and the less able obtain more individual support, allowing both groups to improve on achievement.

Within departments that cover the full range of design and technology subjects, time management is at the forefront of any planning. Using different projects, subjects and individual teachers' strengths it is possible to set responsibilities for planning, assessment and recording to focus on a particular aspect of the attainment levels. This creates a main focus for individual projects so pupils may be directed towards their true potential and as a consequence higher specific attainment levels. This in turn can avoid repetition of work. This is not to say that, for example, 'evaluation' should only be carried out in one project by one teacher; far from it. It does, however, allow time allocation to be specifically focused towards key issues for that project.

Conclusion

The aim of this short article has been to provoke discussion and help you develop assessment procedures. I believe the essence of good assessment lies in a sound whole school assessment policy which allows you to plan and evaluate your work whilst allowing you to report in confidence in the knowledge that the final assessment is based on a secure foundation of valid and reliable teaching.

I look forward to hearing comments about this article from anyone, particularly those like myself at the chalk face. I believe all teachers are prepared to accept change provided at the end of the day the pupils are genuinely able to raise their achievement.

References

DATA (1997) *The Design and Technology Secondary Head of Department Handbook* Wellesbourne: DATA