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The SENCO Role: Leading on Assessment

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‘There’s a pupil in my class who I think really needs an assessment of SEND. Could I put in a request for one?’

‘What is the assessment data telling us about the overall progress of our SEND pupils?’

‘How can we assess Chloe in French? She doesn’t have the literacy to access the test paper’

‘I was actually surprised when I assessed their learning from the previous lesson. He had remembered so much more than I expected’

Introduction

As the above quotations show, notions of ‘assessment’ underpin many of those day-to-day encounters with colleagues that are a key part of the SENCO role. Such notions however can be extremely varied in nature, reflecting a wide range of perceptions of what assessment is, and what a SENCO ‘does’. It is not unusual, for example, for the term ‘assessment’ to be interpreted differently in the context of SEND and reserved for reference to diagnosis and identification. In other situations, ‘assessment’ in the context of SEND may become a synonym for ‘data’, requiring the design of systems and processes to quantify the progress made by pupils or the identification of ‘trends’ relating to SEND cohorts. At times, the term ‘assessment’ may be used to refer to activities such as ‘record keeping’ or ‘evidencing’; activities that are not assessment per se but are processes which merely support assessment.

This chapter will examine the SENCO's role in leading assessment processes and how a SENCO's promotion of both formative and summative assessment might enhance inclusion. Following a consideration of the difference between formative and summative assessment, this chapter proposes two 'paired principles' for guiding SENCOs in making effective strategic decisions around curriculum and assessment within their schools. These 'paired principles' of 'critical triangulation' and 'opportunistic innovation' are illustrated through references to recent policy changes and can be utilised when considering and implementing assessment practice which all pupils, including pupils with SEN, might benefit from.

Formative and Summative Assessment: What is the difference and what does this mean for pupils with SEND?

Much assessment activity that takes place in schools is described as 'summative'. Summative assessment describes assessment taking place at particular points of time, such as at the end of the academic year or key stage. Summative assessment may be used to provide a snapshot of the achievement or attainment of individual pupils; often in order to report pupil progress to parents (Black and Wiliam, 1998). Additionally, summative assessment enables schools to generate data on large groups of pupils to inform analysis and maintain accountability. This activity can also inform whole school strategic planning, processes such as timetabling or the appraisal of teachers. On a local authority or national level, data from summative assessments, collected from all schools, may hold wider stakeholders accountable and shape wider policy decisions.

Inclusive and high quality education including effective SEND provision is contingent on a school and its educators knowing their pupils; the barriers they encounter and the teaching strategies they tend to respond well to, in addition to the strategies that support them personally to face challenges (Deluca and Bellara, 2013). Formative assessment is therefore used by educators to enhance their knowledge and understanding of pupils (Black and Wiliam 1998; Black *et al.* 2003). This can be done through a variety of methods including the marking of written work, question and answer sessions within lessons, or the use of close observation techniques to explore an individual's experience of lessons (Wiliam, 2011).

Unlike summative assessment, formative assessment is a continual and ongoing process. Its overall role is to enable greater personalisation of teaching and learning, informed by elicited insights into pupils within a classroom. The use of purposeful formative assessment ensures that educational provision is no longer generic. As teachers note the responses of pupils to learning opportunities through formative assessment processes, small refinements and adaptations are being made all the time (Black *et al.*, 2003). This has obvious value to any pupil with SEND, who like all pupils, require teachers that are not passive in their practice, but actively interacting with their unique learning differences.

The implementation of the 'graduated approach' as outlined in the 2015 SEND Code of Practice, would be impossible without the use of formative assessment. The term 'graduated approach' refers to a four-stage cycle of 'assess/plan/do/review' that should be successively followed in relation to pupils identified as requiring 'SEND Support'; this term being used to identify pupils with needs that have been recognised by a school but are not deemed as yet to require the drafting of a legally-binding Education, Health and Care Plan. Alongside outlining the Graduated Approach, the Code of Practice also emphasises that 'quality first'

teaching is central to SEND provision (0-25 SEND Code of Practice, section 1.24).

Formative assessment is a key contributor to giving teaching this 'quality'.

In leading assessment therefore, SENCOs have a role to play in facilitating practitioner reflections on practice and building a culture of professional enquiry around learners, which use formative assessments as a starting point (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). One example of how this might be achieved is through the use of 'Lesson Study' through which teachers conduct joint observations and planning, and collaboratively interpret formative assessment data such as that derived from question and answer sessions, close pupil observations, or discussion activities (Norwich and Ylonen, 2015). Using this method of 'Lesson Study' permits the implementation of the 'graduated approach' representing a 'spiral of enquiry' or a 'spiral of support' around each pupil. Whilst residing at the centre of the enquiry process, each rotation of the 'assess/plan/do/review' cycle around the child, enables provision to 'wraparound' them more tightly and become increasingly supported within the classroom.

However, in contrast to this productive use of assessment processes to enhance learning and teaching for all, anecdotal evidence would seem to suggest many SENCOs in the English policy context are spending time on tasks such as comparing predicted attainment against actual, or the progress of SEND pupils with the progress of a year group as a whole. Whilst entirely worthwhile activities, this comparative use of summative assessment data emulates the 'big data revolution' that has been taking place within technology and industry; the collection and analysis of statistics on vast populations to support the identification of trends, the customisation of products and services and the targeting of marketing.

The Finnish educationalist, Pasi Sahlberg, however, presents a powerful case for educators to instead be primarily guided by ‘small data’. For Sahlberg (2017), ‘big data’ can often be too simplistic, enabling evaluations that are limited to being at a superficial level. ‘Small Data’ however is more qualitative, providing richer insights into the learning of individuals. Only by interacting with the more nuanced ‘small data’, can SENCOs discover what is really going on for pupils and lead colleagues to teach in transformative ways that do not merely reproduce the usual patterns of success and failure.

The leadership of SEND provision, however, does not involve the wholesale rejection of any one type of assessment. Leading SEND provision is likely to involve both ‘big’ and ‘small’ data, formative and summative assessment processes, and contribute to delivery of assessment which is both subject specific within the curriculum and non-subject specific around holistic goals relating to emotional wellbeing, engagement or independent living skills. Inclusive education settings will also be concerned with capturing those significant ‘small steps’ of progress made by lower-attaining learners whilst maintaining sight of those ‘big steps’ being ultimately worked on, such as those relating to the aspirational outcomes outlined within Education, Health and Care Plans. It is not surprising therefore, how hybrid the word ‘assessment’ has become with it seemingly referring to a wide range of expectations of SENCOs as leaders of learning.

Inclusive Assessment as ‘Critical Triangulation’

Whatever approach to assessment is being used, and whatever the type of data being collected, it important that it reflects the *evaluation* of learning and progress, rather than the *demonstration* of it. SENCOs offer far less value to schools if preoccupied with gathering evidence to ‘show’ the impact of provision on the achievement of SEND pupils. Instead,

SENCOs focus must lie on enabling staff to confidently identify what is working well within their educational provision and what may need to change. It could be easily argued that some ‘types’ of assessment and data collection are more facilitative of this. It is also the case however, that the evaluation of learning and progress might be strengthened through the first ‘paired principle’ that underpins the core arguments within this chapter: ‘critical triangulation’.

‘Critical Triangulation’ is the use of a range of assessment systems, methods and approaches with an openness to the possibility that they may each reveal different things about the learning undertaken. ‘Critical Triangulation’ therefore, requires professionals to interpret data subjectively with a degree of scepticism. ‘Critical Triangulation’ is an alternative to assessment that is based entirely on a single method or system with uncritical fidelity. Although ‘Critical Triangulation’ may incline us to work more with formative rather than summative assessment, it does not require us to make a simplistic binary choice between one approach and another.

‘Critical Triangulation’ of assessment approaches is integral to the leadership of those cultures of professional enquiry within schools that strive to *evaluate* learning and progress rather than *demonstrate* it. The interpretation of varied and possibly conflicting data requires dialogue and interaction with pupils with SEND, their families (Laluvein 2010; Oostdam and Hooze 2013), teachers, teaching assistants and other professional agencies (Head 2003; Rose 2011). Through ‘Critical Triangulation’ approaches, SENCOs have the ability to collaborate with all relevant stakeholders to make sense of the experiences of each individual pupil. This logically offers greater transformative potential than the uncritical use of a single assessment

approach through which single data sets are presented with assumed unambiguity and authority.

Depending on priorities for pupils, and a school's circumstances, a wide range of assessment tools exist, that can play a role in Critical Triangulation. For example, a primary school may report in relation to the pre-keystage standards for Mathematics, Reading and Writing, when assessing pupils working significantly below age expectations. Alongside this, they may also use tools such as the 'Thrive' approach to assess social and emotional development (www.thriveapproach.com) or 'Mapp' to track personalised learning intentions, including those that relate to aspirational outcomes within Education, Health and Care Plans. They may also find themselves adapting the Engagement Model (DfE, 2019) to develop setting-specific assessment processes which address complex barriers to learning and participation.

Inclusive Assessment as 'Opportunistic Innovation'

Within the English policy context and taking the direction of travel taken by recent governments, resistance from SENCOs and schools to adoption of more inclusive and creative approaches to assessment is understandable. In recent years, middle and senior school leaders shaping inclusive education provision in England have become used to implementing statutory approaches to assessment with its emphasis on 'big data' rather than applying the principles often outlined in policy to shape approaches for pupils within their setting.

Any suggestion that schools might exercise the autonomy to choose and interpret a range of assessments with criticality therefore, may be met with any entrenched "learned helplessness" within a school's culture, that can represent a barrier to its development (Kerkha, 1995).

There would also seem to be an inbuilt concern that giving educational professionals the agency to innovate can incite scepticism, fear or ‘innovation’ that is moulded within old paradigms that ends up lacking in innovation.

Various features of current national policies relating to curriculum and assessment in schools do raise questions around inclusivity and learning differences: replacing levels with age expectations, the ‘knowledge rich’ emphasis on content within the National Curriculum, exam-only GCSEs, the ‘Progress 8’ scoring of secondary schools and its apparent impact on arts subjects. However, for the SENCO within a school, these very same policies can be embraced as an invitation to ‘Opportunistic Innovation’ and the leadership of personalised curriculum planning that drives improved outcomes for SEND pupils.

In relation to inclusive assessment, ‘Opportunistic Innovation’ can be defined as positively exploiting elements of national policies frameworks so that they underpin a rationale for the inventive design of new approaches through which pupil need can be addressed with sincerity. Examples of ‘Opportunistic Innovation’ for SENCOs might be leading a working party to write a set of assessment objectives related to developing independent living skills for living in a small town for a school which was working to teach skills such as waiting at a bus stop safely, to vulnerable pupils with a diagnosis of Severe Learning Difficulties. Another example of ‘opportunistic innovation’ might be through the development of ‘social skills groups’ in a primary school, through which pupils work on personal learning intentions related to turn taking or losing a game.

It is through such ‘Opportunistic Innovation’ that the SENCO leadership role becomes an active pedagogical one; leading inclusive teaching and learning towards its continual

improvement. The opposite of ‘Opportunistic Innovation’ might be termed ‘Cautious Compliance’: an assumption that schools can only possibly work within perceived expectations and that any alternative ways of assessing pupils are therefore not viable.

Figure 1 summarises the ‘paired principles’ of ‘Critical Triangulation’ and ‘Opportunistic Innovation’ as ways of providing assessment process that enhance learning and teaching within schools.

<FIGURE 12.1 HERE>

Inclusive Assessment and Curriculum Policy for SEND

Having considered how each of our ‘paired principles’ might support the leadership role of the SENCO in relation to assessment processes within their educational contexts, the chapter’s focus now moves on to consider inclusive assessment approaches in relation to recent education policy within the English context, and the SENCOs leadership role in implementing this policy in ways that enhance the educational experience of all pupils.

Whilst not without its tensions, the 2014 National Curriculum for England and Wales, alongside accompanying changes to statutory assessment, was viewed as a key milestone enabling educators to ‘critically triangulate’ their assessments and be ‘opportunistically innovative’ in relation to SEND pupils. For example, the replacement of National Curriculum levels with age expectations enabled some schools to creatively shape their own internal assessment systems upon which to base their evaluations.

Perhaps more importantly for some SENCOs, supplemental to the 2014 National Curriculum, the Rochford Review (DfE, 2016) made recommendations for the assessment of pupils working below age expectations. The very first of these recommendations was the removal of ‘P-Scales’, otherwised referred to as ‘P-Levels’ (p10). The ‘P-Scales’ were devised for the assessment of pupils attaining below ‘Level 1’ under the former National Curriculum (Ndaiji and Tymms, 2010; Imray, 2013). Since publication of the Rochford Review (2016), pre-key stage standards have been introduced for Mathematics, Reading and Writing to be implemented in primary education settings.

It has been noted that, unlike the P-Levels, the brevity of the pre-key stage standards results in teachers finding it challenging to break them down into ‘small steps’ for interim assessment. That this is the case is not an oversight but an intentional part of their design. The pre-key stage standards have been devised to be broad and that pupils be required to achieve each element of a standard resulting in pupils remaining on the same standard for many years. For example, a pupil who is proficient at sight-reading familiar words but is not decoding any words using phonics will remain on Standard 2 for Reading even if they have achieved all other aspects of Standards 3, 4 and 5. Although this initially appears somewhat unjust and seems not capture the achievements made, it must be remembered that reporting against the standards is primarily summative in purpose; populating national data sets rather than labelling the pupil. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that if assessment is viewed in an ‘opportunisticly innovative’ manner, SENCOs can encourage staff to consider more holistically the progress being made by the pupils *within* a standard.

Particularly, when used as part of ‘critical triangulation’ with other assessments, teachers can be encouraged by SENCOs to distinguish between true achievement and progress and merely

moving from one standard to another. Concentrated efforts to ‘show’ movement within and between P-Levels led to many schools breaking them down into pages of sequential ‘small steps’ for pupils to work through to ‘demonstrate’ progress term-by-term. The published guidance to pre-key standards however, emphasises that they are not a ‘formative assessment tool’ (Standards and Testing Agency, 2020a: 2). Instead, they exist to enable reporting at the end of Year 2 and Year 6 and do not prompt teachers to place the demonstration of progress above evaluating it.

The Rochford Review (2016) also addresses the issue of ‘non-subject specific learning’ giving credibility to assessment practices with pupils with complex learning needs; permitting focus to be placed on developmental priorities rather than the subjects within the National Curriculum. The Rochford Review (2016) references the seven ‘indicators of cognition and learning’ established through the Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities Research Project (SSAT, 2007). This informed the eventual publication of the Engagement Model, based on five areas of engagement (Standards and Testing Agency, 2020b:10):

- Exploration
- Realisation
- Anticipation
- Persistence
- Initiation

This Engagement Model is based on a recognition that “engagement” is an essential dimension to learning and encourages close observation of pupils around the above five

indicators. Such observations are an example of the use of ‘small data’ to generate insights into individual pupils which inform planning and enable the refinement of provision. Rather than have a basis in subjects such as Maths and English, these indicators facilitate more holistic assessment.

The Rochford Review (2015) was concerned with assessment at Key Stages One and Two but its broad principles may be applied to all phases of education and school contexts. Although the Review recommended the statutory use of this ‘non-subject specific’ assessment for only a tiny proportion of pupils in the school system, it has likely value in supporting any pupil for whom there are broader barriers to being ‘engaged’ in learning including those with social emotional and health difficulties.

One final key message of the Review (2016) was to avoid permitting assessment to drive the curriculum. Arguably, this occurred previously when some schools and teachers broke down ‘P-Scales’ into exhaustive list of tasks to be sequentially worked through. Such lists were often conducive to pupils being required to ‘perform’ rather than ‘master’ knowledge and skills; to ‘do’ something in the moment so that a box could be ticked rather than embed their learning sustainably. For learners in Key Stage 4 and 5, this has also arguably often been the case across the accreditations landscape.

‘Opportunistic Innovation’ and the 2019 OFSTED Framework

Deep and sustainable learning resides at the very heart of the new framework for OFSTED inspections. Unlike previous frameworks, the new OFSTED Framework (2019) has a ‘Quality of Education’ grading category within which the curriculum is central. Through this process, data that appears to ‘show’ progress will play a much more marginal role in

upholding the accountability of any school. This apparent change of emphasis in the new OFSTED Framework is a response to possible previous incentives for schools to significantly narrow their curriculum offer to the detriment of those who would benefit the most from having the broadest range of alternatives. Using the new OFSTED Framework, inspectors are now required to assess and evaluate the ‘three I’s’:

- Intent: the purpose and design of a school’s curriculum
- Implementation: the structure and organisation of learning
- Impact: results, pupil destinations, reading

The emphasis on curriculum ‘Intent’ enables schools to make bold decisions to establish the most meaningful education package for their pupils. For example, this may mean compromising subjects such as science by giving an extra hour a week to the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme for pupils at risk of exclusion. In other circumstances it may also involve extending curriculum time for subjects such as science or maths or anything else that addresses priorities for individual pupils.

In focussing on the ‘Implementation’ of the curriculum, the new OFSTED framework (2019) emphasises evaluation of the sequencing of programmes of study; the order in which things are taught and the cumulative building of knowledge upon the foundations made during previous learning. This represents a departure from what was termed the ‘OFSTED Lesson’ and judgements based on snapshots at specific points of time. The new OFSTED framework places more emphasis on where each lesson fits into to the bigger picture of the curriculum and the role it plays in wider visions for the long-term progress of pupils. The framework also has an interest in how knowledge is being maintained and strives to move away from

notions that a ‘lesson’ can be ‘good’ in isolation. Under this system, it is also not satisfactory for secondary schools to use the accreditation being followed as a curriculum. The subject in question (the ‘intent’) is what is being taught and the accreditation is part of the assessment of this (the ‘impact’). Thus, curriculum should be driven by ‘intent’, rather than the requirements of any qualifications.

These changes have exciting implications for the SENCO role. They enable ‘opportunistic innovation’ around assessment, which interacts with the reality of a pupil’s point of learning, needs and experiences. SENCOs may lead for example, in implementing systems for evaluating pupil progress in relation to life skills, engagement or health and wellbeing; establishing clear synergy, for example, between what is ‘taught’ and what is outlined within an Education, Health and Care Plan. SENCOs may also play their part in navigating the ‘deep dives’ that are now part of the inspection process: focussed explorations by inspectors of particular aspects of a school’s curriculum via scrutiny of pupil work, visits to a sample of lessons and discussions with senior and middle leaders, teachers and pupils. Rather than be something to dread, these ‘deep dives’ might be viewed as opportunities to articulate pupil-centred decision making informed by collaborative formative assessment.

The new OFSTED Framework should permit SENCOs to focus on such activities as ‘intent’ for SEND pupils rather than demonstrating that small steps of progress have been made via a series of ticked boxes. Indeed, it should be noted that under the new OFSTED framework schools are not required to show any internal tracking data. Supporting the organisation of learning in ways that support the maintenance and building of knowledge (implementation) enables the SENCO to build considerations around barriers to doing effective learning; resulting in the development of inclusive curricula across the school. Through this process,

the SENCO can be a leader of authentic assessment and pedagogy as opposed to a leader of alleged ‘assessment’ and bureaucracy.

Enhancing Inclusive Assessment through the SEND Code of Practice (2015)

The SEND Code of Practice (2015) is often viewed as the primary policy document impacting on the work of the SENCO in England. In relation to assessment practices, the SEND Code of Practice (2015) in many ways aligns with other government policy documents such as the Rochford Review (2016) and new OFSTED Framework (2019). It should be noted, however, that the Code of Practice (2015) policy on assessment also has the potential to be interpreted in ways that would be detrimental to learners with SEND.

For example, the ‘graduated approach’ outlined in the Code of Practice (2015) for pupils identified as ‘SEND Support’ might be merely viewed as a record keeping or accountability tool, through which SENCOs can ‘evidence’ that they have ‘tried something’ before putting in a formal request for an Education, Health and Care Plan. However, when viewed alongside the new OFSTED Framework (2019), one can view the ‘graduated approach’ cycle of ‘assess/plan/do/review’ more positively, as a framework for iterative and inclusive teaching.

Florian and Beaton (2018) utilise Pryor and Crossouard’s (2008, 2010) distinction between ‘convergent’ and ‘divergent’ assessment-for-learning activities in outlining a clear and exciting vision for inclusive formative assessment in schools. Whereas ‘convergent’ approaches focus on the effective transmission of knowledge from teacher to learner, ‘divergent’ approaches are interactive, open and facilitate a deeper dialogue around learner development. According to Florian and Beaton (2018), it is the use of divergent formative

assessment that the teacher can allow themselves to be taken by surprise, and thereby challenge misperceptions they may hold such as presumptions about level of ability.

The use of the Engagement Model (UK Standards and Testing Agency, 2020b), published following the Rochford Review (UK Standards and Testing Agency, 2015), exemplifies this type of divergent formative assessment offering voice and agency to pupils who may not have verbal language to communicate their experiences of learning. Using the five areas of engagement within the model, practitioners are provided with a scaffold for carefully observing pupils, analysing their responses and considering any non-intentional communication that may inform refinements to the learning environment to further maximise engagement.

For other pupils, divergent approaches to assessment have proved to be beneficial as pupils themselves take ownership of their learning as they develop a more informed understanding of themselves as learners (Reay and Wiliam, 1999).

Figure 2 outlines the distinction between divergent and convergent formative assessment, giving examples.

<FIGURE 1.2 HERE>

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the SENCO's leadership role in enabling assessment practices that facilitate a better educational experience for all pupils. Following a discussion on the different purposes of summative and formative assessment, it was proposed that the use of

‘critical triangulation’ and ‘opportunistic innovation’ can support schools to assess pupil progress more effectively. Both ‘paired principles’ were then examined within the context of current government education policy in England.

In conclusion, it should be noted that effective ‘critical triangulation’ of assessment reliant on having confident professional judgement and pedagogy, as is the capacity to accept the invitations from policy, to engage in related, meaningful “opportunistic innovation”. To truly enact our two “paired principles” education professionals need to be able for example, to select, summarise, interpret and synthesise data from a range of sources (Deluca and Bellara, 2013). This makes the SENCO role, in relation to the leadership of assessment, a highly important one, involving the development of systems, processes and staff.

In addition to strong leadership, pedagogy and creativity, both ‘critical triangulation’ and ‘opportunistic innovation’ require investments in resources and time. Collecting ‘small data’ via close pupil observations can be highly time-consuming, requiring staff who could be otherwise supporting learning more directly. Using several assessment tools simultaneously could arguably add onerously to workload. These entirely valid concerns make it imperative that, in developing inclusive assessment, schools genuinely break away from ‘old’ ways of working and move into new. Changes cannot simply be implemented on top of previous practices. Schools need to boldly cease ‘assessment activity’ which may not be contributing to enhanced participation of all pupils in learning and instead introduce new methods of assessment which have been demonstrated to be more ethical and effective.

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