



Making the most of assessment data

Image: Adobe Stock

Collecting assessment data is easy – but with so much data available, collecting the right information and ensuring you are using it effectively to support pupils’ learning can be more difficult. **Emily Jones** explains

With the end of the academic year fast approaching, schools across the country will have their summative assessment processes well underway.

However, while it is relatively easy to collect assessment data, interpreting it can be harder. Schools hold and generate a large amount of data. In order to make the most of it, teachers need to know what data they have, how to interpret it and, crucially, how best to use it to promote further learning.

What data are schools likely to have?

In terms of numerical or statistical attainment data, there are several types which schools commonly collect. These include individual raw scores, standardised scores or scaled scores from national or optional assessments, information drawn from question-level analysis of tests, and teacher assessment data expressed numerically. Schools are also likely to have background data on pupils, which can be used to analyse and compare attainment of particular groups, such as boys and girls or eligibility for Pupil Premium.

When used effectively, data is valuable in enabling schools to highlight gaps in attainment, identify patterns of achievement and make insightful comparisons. For example, by comparing pupils’ standardised scores over time, schools are able to identify pupils making more, the same or less progress than the national average. These scores can also be used to compare pupil attainment and progress across different subjects.

Despite the opportunities that data offers schools in terms of improving teaching and learning, it is important to remember that data recording and tracking should not be burdensome and all data recorded should have a useful purpose.

As Sean Harford, the national director for education at Ofsted, warned in a recent blog post, an over-reliance on “meaningless data” is currently the biggest flaw in assessment across schools (April 2018).

He writes: “I think there is too much marking being expected compared with the resultant benefits to pupils’ learning; too much reliance on meaningless data; and too little meaningful assessment of the right things at the right point in the curriculum.”

Schools should therefore ensure that any assessment information collected can be used to support better pupil achievement.

With this in mind, schools may want to consider the following when collecting and recording assessment data:

- Rationalise the data you record to make sure it meets your needs.
- Ensure that you comply with legal requirements such as those in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- Centralise responsibility for managing the school’s database and entering data to make the process more efficient and to minimise the risk of errors or lost data.
- Seek out training and keep skills up-to-date. Allow teachers to invest time in working with the system to increase familiarity. This time will be repaid in what they can then achieve with it.
- If paper records are kept in classrooms, be aware of confidentiality issues.
- Be wary of tracking systems which reduce the curriculum to a series of points and which claim to help teachers to track termly and half-termly progress.

Using assessment data to improve teaching and learning

Data is useful on different levels: for monitoring individuals, developing learning targets, grouping pupils, allocating resources, evaluating teaching initiatives, and for whole-school accountability and reporting.

Data from early or mid-year assessments is particularly useful for identifying areas for development or further consolidation, since there is



time following the assessments to respond to identified needs. A question-level analysis of the data at this stage can highlight areas of individual or class misunderstanding and so can help teachers to identify exactly what they need to clarify for their pupils.

Data from year-end assessments offers a valuable way to evaluate pupil progress over the duration of a learning period, measure success of interventions and teaching strategies implemented, and help schools plan for the following year.

“Effective use of data should stimulate questions about the standards achieved, the learning that is taking place and inform the next steps for teaching and learning”

It is worth bearing in mind that in summarising data numerically, some detail is inevitably lost. Therefore it is important to review your data and draw conclusions with care. Don't be afraid to ask critical questions. For example, if data for a particular pupil or class is not what you expected, think about contextual factors that may explain the differences.

Ultimately, assessment data should be used to deliver better learning outcomes for pupils. To do this effectively, schools may want to consider the following:

- Look not only at present attainment, but at pupils' rates of development as they move through the school and use this insight to shape classroom practice.
- Refer to assessment data regularly throughout the year, comparing achievement across subjects to guide evaluations of progress.
- Remind teachers that pupils' progress may not be linear: they appear not to progress at some times (e.g. while consolidating learning) and may progress more rapidly at others.
- Teachers can use question-level analysis (of national or published tests) to inform subject, class or year-group planning, but should draw conclusions carefully (e.g. avoid bold statements about attainment in a particular subject on the basis of just a few questions about part of that subject).
- Remember that, in a small school, class or year group, individual pupils can have a disproportionate impact on percentages.
- Aim for a culture of using data constructively for positive, supportive change.

As the academic year draws to a close, schools should remain mindful that data collection should not be viewed solely as a means of accountability. Effective use of data should stimulate questions about the standards achieved, the learning that is taking place and inform the next steps for teaching and learning. **hu**

• *Emily Jones has been developing tests for more than 15 years, mainly for primary-age pupils. She now leads the development of the National Foundation for Educational Research's (NFER) own suite of standardised curriculum tests.*

Further information

- For more information on NFER's work in assessment, visit www.nfer.ac.uk/key-topics-expertise/assessment/
- *Assessment – what are inspectors looking at?* Sean Harford, Ofsted April 2018: <http://bit.ly/2IMrE2Q>

NFER Tests for Years 1–5

Standardised assessments
trusted by thousands of schools.

Make confident judgements about attainment and progress

Benchmark your results nationally

Identify areas for development and support

Visit www.nfer.ac.uk/tests to find out more and view sample materials.