EEF Blog: Assessing learning in the new academic year (Part 1 of 2) – three key questions for school leaders to consider

Assessment - to help identify pupils’ learning gaps following Covid-19 school closures - has emerged as one of the top priorities for schools preparing for the new school year. In the first of this two-part blog, Prof. Rob Coe, senior associate at the EEF, looks at the different purposes of assessment to help teachers and school leaders think through what you want to put in place for the autumn.

Since the Covid-19 closure of schools in England to most children, there has been a lot of concern about learning loss and widening gaps. The EEF’s own rapid evidence assessment has suggested that school closures are likely to at the very least reverse progress made to close the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers since 2011.

Many teachers have suggested that when children return to ‘normal’ schooling, assessment will be crucial to identify gaps and target catch-up strategies, while others have argued that cancellation of Key Stage 2 and GCSE exams proves we can live without them and perhaps should downplay these kinds of assessments in the future.

Assessment can certainly help to identify what students have, or have not, learnt and so inform and enhance subsequent teaching. This is perhaps best captured in a much-cited quotation from David Ausubel:

"If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him [sic] accordingly." (Ausubel, 1968, p. vi)

Like most things in education, this is easier to say than to do.

Designing and interpreting assessments that tell you ‘what the learner already knows’ turns out to be surprisingly hard. A further complication is that a lot of assessment does not even try to do that. So, when we talk about ‘assessment’ we may mean a lot of different things, and potentially misunderstand, or argue at cross-purposes.

Assessing with Purpose

Teachers use assessment for a range of reasons.

1. Assessment to impact on learning

Sometimes, the main reason is to motivate students to study, or to give them practice in answering questions.

Retrieval quizzes would be one example of the latter: requiring students to recall information is a good way to help them remember it. For these purposes, calculating a score is less important than the learning that results from just doing the assessment task.

You may also want to use the score, which has added in a different purpose – of course, many assessments serve more than one – but we should be clear on our purpose or purposes.

2. Assessment to support school-level decision making

Another group of assessment purposes involves monitoring student progress, forecasting student performance, or evaluating the effectiveness of teaching.

These kinds of assessments are ‘high-level’ in the sense that a single, global score, often from a standardised test,
usually gives us what we need. These assessments may be formative if, for example, we use them to identify individuals or groups who are not making the progress we would hope for, and intervene to address that.

The use of a standardised test means that we have a way of interpreting the scores (for example, compared to a national norm for children the same age) and (we hope) that the test is the product of a robust development process that ensures its validity for these students and purposes. We do not need anything more granular by way of information about performance on specific topics or questions for these purposes, and most standardised tests do not provide this.

These kinds of assessments could be useful in a post-Covid return to normal schooling, especially for school leaders.

If we want a high-level picture of how far students are behind where they would have been without the closures, for example, then a standardised test could be a good option. It could tell a teacher or school leader which individuals or groups of students have fallen furthest behind and help the school to target resources or other catch-up interventions at those who need it most.

A case could be made, for example, for assessing reading – or literacy more broadly – in this way, given its crucial role in unlocking access to the rest of the curriculum and to wider learning, and using the results to target evidence-based, structured programmes for small groups (see EEF Guidance Reports for recommendations).

3. Assessment to inform classroom teaching

A third group of purposes includes assessments that aim to support diagnosis or decision making about individual students’ learning.

When people use the word ‘formative’, they usually mean assessments that give this more granular level of information. Here, the detail really matters: we want to know exactly what knowledge, procedures, skills and understanding is secure and what isn’t yet.

We will discuss the ways diagnostic assessments can support classroom decision-making in Part 2 of ‘Assessing learning in the new academic year’.

Key questions to consider this autumn about assessment quality and purpose

As we build towards the new academic year then, it is an opportunity to revisit the purpose of our school assessments.

So, what questions could school leaders consider about assessment quality and purpose in the autumn term and beyond?

1. What is the purpose of your assessment/s? For example, are you using a test or assessment task for its impact on learning, to provide a high-level ‘monitoring’ overview, or to inform specific classroom decisions?

2. Understanding assessment purposes means being clear what you will do as a result. Are you clear what the choices are and how your decision will depend on the outcome of the assessment?

3. What is the balance between deploying standardised assessment and ‘granular’, subject-specific formative assessment?