

ASSESSING PUPILS WITH MODERATE  
OR SEVERE LEARNING DIFFICULTIES  
LITERATURE REVIEW

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## 1.0 Introduction

This report highlights the literature that exists on assessing pupils with learning difficulties in the classroom, including those with moderate and severe learning difficulties. Education should be inclusive – teachers of those with moderate and severe learning difficulties need appropriate assessment methods to use in their day-to-day teaching, to provide an insight into pupils' progress in the same way this is achieved in mainstream schools. Some of the methods discussed in this report include classroom assessment and interviews, although, and depending on the learning disability, for some pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD) teachers may only be able to use pupil engagement as a method of assessment.

### 1.1 Background

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stipulates that countries must take steps to ensure that “persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live” (UN, 2006). This is in an attempt to counteract how people with disabilities experience lower educational opportunities as children and will therefore face fewer opportunities as adults. People with disabilities are more likely to be out of school or leave school before completing their full primary or secondary education (UIS, 2017).

Education should provide all pupils with the skills and competencies needed to enhance their lives. This includes assessment practices that enable teachers to:

- identify pupils' current level of skill, their strengths and weaknesses;
- target instruction at each pupil's personal level;
- monitor pupil learning and progress;
- plan and conduct adjustments in instruction; and
- evaluate the extent to which pupils have met instructional goals (ElSaheli-Elhage et al, 2016).

Not only is assessment vital for the teacher, it also assists the pupil in understanding the areas they are competent in and those they need to work on. Throughout this literature review, reference will be made to both summative and formative assessment.

CCEA's Assessment for Learning (AfL, 2004) outlines an approach to teaching and learning that creates day-to-day feedback which is used to improve students' performance. Some of the key principles of AfL are useful for special schools, particularly as they encourage pupils to become more involved in the learning process, and from this gain confidence in what they are expected to learn and to what standard. Pupils are assessed regularly in topics, which provides a framework for the teacher to move forward. CCEA provides a range of assessment frameworks that have been developed to support teachers during the assessment process for those with either severe learning difficulties (SLD) or moderate learning difficulties (MLD). All these frameworks are aligned with the Northern Ireland Curriculum and include *Quest for Learning*, Prerequisite Skills (Q Skills) and the SEN Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework.

## 1.2 Assessment of Pupils with Learning Difficulties

Pupils with SLD tend to exhibit deficits in one or more academic areas, such as communication, logical thinking and/or problem-solving. In addition, pupils with SLD often experience social and behavioural difficulties, including social skills deficits, impulsivity, hyperactivity, attention problems, memory deficits, perceptual difficulties, behavioural problems and issues with self-confidence (Rotatori, Obiakor and Bakken, 2013). Assessment of pupils with SLD is particularly difficult due to the impact of sensory and motor impairments, epilepsy and general health concerns on both learning and performance (Ware and Donnelly, 2004).

Rochford (2016) outlined that the best scenario is an inclusive approach to summative assessment, where it is both feasible and valuable. However, the Rochford Review's guiding principles also state that equality is not necessarily always about treating pupils in the same way – in fact, this may well be impossible for those with SLD. The Rochford survey found that 66% of respondents agreed that some pupils with special educational needs have *unique needs* which require them to be assessed differently, although where possible these differing arrangements should form part of mainstream statutory assessment arrangements. This opinion was also supported by Bourke and Mentis (2014), who highlighted how learners with special needs require a range of pedagogical practices and diverse assessment approaches that can 'better inform and summarise their learning'.

Segers, Dochy and Cascallar (2003) and Struyven, Dochy and Janssens (2005) suggest that pupils should be active participants in the assessment process, in addition to being involved in the understanding of how the assessment process actually occurs. Pupils tend to display a more positive attitude towards assessment tasks and methods if they perceive them as being fair and positively affecting their learning.

In many special schools, formative assessment is the most commonly used practice, as pupils are not usually working towards qualifications but towards knowledge and skills acquired within the lessons instead. Formative assessment is essential in special schools as it focuses on specific, individual abilities and informs teachers on a day-to-day basis of a pupil's ongoing learning needs.

At school level, teachers must ensure that multiple assessments are used to cater to the learning needs of all pupils – in other words, that assessments are inclusive. This may require some adapting and the creation of new assessment methods. A study in 2010 found that in New Zealand, 24 different assessment approaches were used by teachers to test pupils with high needs (Bourke and Mentis, 2014).

In preparing pupils with SLD for the future, there is a need to extend education beyond the core subjects of numeracy, literacy and IT. These pupils will need practice and guidance on matters relating to personal care, implying that education and assessment in these areas will differ from that of mainstream pupils.

## **2.0 Pupils as active participants in preparing and planning assessments**

Harris and James (2006) noted that assessment will be most effective if pupils understand its purpose, what they are required to do and the standards that are expected of them. There is compelling evidence that pupils' conception of educational assessments has a considerable impact on the quality of their overall educational experiences and learning (Ramsden, 1997). Pupils who lack confidence in their abilities tend to achieve less (Pajares, 1996), especially pupils with learning disabilities who have experienced recurrent academic difficulties and failures.

However, involving them in meaningful assessment practices, where they have the opportunity to maximise their conception of assessment as a process that increases

their personal accountability, helps them improve their achievement (Brown and Hirschfeld, 2008). These concerns were addressed by Assessment for Learning, which prioritised sharing learning goals with pupils and helping them recognise the standards to aim for (Assessment Reform Group, 1999).

Formative, active and creative modes of assessment promote pupils' focus on the construction of knowledge and deep understanding, although traditional forms of assessment emphasise the focus on memorisation and grades, rather than the learning itself (Struyven, Dochy and Janssens, 2005). It is these formative methods of assessment that this literature review will focus on: the day-to-day methods teachers can use with their pupils.

### **3.0 Assessment methods**

Lee (1999) broadly outlined why assessment in special schools is carried out:

- daily monitoring of progress against individual targets;
- daily monitoring of progress against learning objectives; and/or
- end of module/topic assessment.

Pupils with SLD, however, may be working at such a low level that end of topic assessment is not appropriate. With many SLD pupils, the only assessment method teachers have is observation. This will be discussed in detail later.

For schools that assess pupils with MLD, there has been a broader range of assessment tools available. ElSaheli-Elhage et al (2016) found in their study of special schools in Lebanon that, in terms of traditional assessments, special education teachers resorted to the following practices more frequently than mainstream teachers:

- using paper-and-pencil tests provided with the curriculum material rather than creating their own;
- true/false items;
- multiple choice items; and
- fill in the blank items.

Special education teachers indicated that multiple choice items were more important as assessment items, compared with their regular education colleagues.

EISaheli-Elhage et al (2016) also found that special education teachers working with pupils with MLD showed significantly less use of essays as an assessment tool, reported higher frequency in using portfolio assessments and indicated alternative assessments – creating their own performance and portfolio assessments and using portfolios in their classroom – compared with mainstream education colleagues.

Some of the methods used to carry out summative and formative assessment are listed below.

### **3.1 Self-Assessment**

It's always positive for pupils to be able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. When it is possible, self-assessment can lead the pupil to a better sense of understanding of their learning. The teacher should ask guiding questions that can lead to this discovery.

Findings from Porter (2000) show that pupils need accurate, clear and specific feedback if they are to make good progress in their learning and that feedback should actively encourage self-assessment and peer-assessment. Furthermore, including learners in aspects of self-assessment addresses the important issue of equity (Cline, 1992), namely that pupils should have a 'voice' in the assessment process that is both listened to and valued. Self-assessment can include pupils identifying activities they have enjoyed, as well as reflecting on activities they have been part of. They can be tasked with specifically identifying behaviours and activities that have gone well, through to evaluating whether they have achieved their self-set targets. At the very earliest stages of involvement in the learning process, pupils will need an awareness of what they are doing – many schools apply objects of reference and calendar boxes to aid pupils' anticipation. This early start to pupil involvement was apparent in a school for pupils with SLD where Individual Education Plans addressed core skills. Individual targets were set, which involved pupils in the initial stages of decision-making, through to the development of communication preferences and actions for expressing choice (Porter, 2000). Lee (1999)



acknowledged that self-assessment of pupils with severe learning difficulties is difficult but watching and observing their reactions and involvement is the start.

### **3.2 Observation**

Many professionals believe that instructional programming information can be obtained through direct classroom observation (Wilson, 1987). The information gained is relevant because it can reflect a pupil's daily performance on important academic tasks. Classroom observations can provide information about a pupil's behaviour in school and how this affects their learning; this is information not generally available during formal testing (Sattler, 2008). In addition, the information obtained is immediate (i.e., informs how the pupil is doing on the day of the observation) and objective (i.e., can be openly observed) (Wilson, 1987). South Lanarkshire Council (2015) suggested that using observation for those with SLD involves looking for even small changes in a pupil's behaviour or engagement, such as changes to breathing, vocalisation or eye movement.

South Lanarkshire Council also outlined how observation can take place informally, by merely observing the pupil, or more formally through structured observation sessions. All changes in behaviour must be recorded, both positive and negative, and adults working with the pupil should have input into the observation. It was also suggested that structured observation should take place in a quiet room, where other stimuli will not distract the pupil, while informal observation can be carried out in the classroom and will be continuous.

However, since an informal classroom observation tends to be general and non-specific, details can be lost or not identified in the process. It may therefore be necessary to use an observation checklist to ensure all aspects of behaviour are observed and considered.

### **3.3 Aspects of Engagement**

The Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (CLDD, 2011) research project identified seven areas of engagement for learning that pupils can be assessed against. These interrelated indicators can be used to inform the assessment of pupils with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties, to provide evidence of pupils' progress. The different indicators should not be viewed in a strict hierarchical

sense but more as a guide for assessing a pupil's effective engagement in the learning process.

The seven areas of engagement can be used as an observational framework to monitor how and to what degree a pupil demonstrates attention, interest and involvement in new learning. They provide the scaffolding that will enable a pupil ultimately to become autonomous in the acquisition of a new skill or concept.

The skills and concepts pupils acquire through the application of these indicators form the necessary foundations for moving on to later subject-specific learning. Statutory assessment of these aspects of engagement will therefore provide a solid basis for moving on to the subject-specific assessment defined in the early pre-key stage standards. The seven aspects of engagement are as follows:

**Responsiveness:** Assessment of responsiveness should evaluate any change in a pupil's behaviour that demonstrates whether they are being attentive to a new stimulus or reacting in a meaningful way. This type of assessment is important for establishing what differing stimuli motivate a pupil to pay attention. This is a prerequisite for learning and is particularly relevant for assessing pupils with multiple sensory impairments who have reduced and/or atypical sensory awareness and perception.

**Curiosity:** Assessment of curiosity demonstrates how a pupil is building on an initial reaction to a new stimulus, perhaps by reaching out or seeking the source of the new stimulus.

**Discovery:** Assessment of discovery provides information about the changing ways in which a pupil interacts with, or responds to, a new stimulus, sometimes accompanied by expressions such as enjoyment and excitement; curiosity and discovery are closely linked. At a more advanced point of development, they both help to demonstrate a pupil's degree of interest in, and exploration of, activities and concepts. These both help to drive the acquisition of new knowledge and skills.

**Anticipation:** Assessment of anticipation should demonstrate whether a pupil is able to predict, expect or associate a particular stimulus with an event. This is important for measuring a pupil's concept of cause and effect.

**Persistence:** Assessment of persistence measures the extent to which a pupil is sustaining their attention towards a particular item or action and is therefore beginning to develop conceptual understanding. The ability to sustain attention is important for maintaining an activity long enough to develop the learning associated with it and consolidating that learning.

**Initiation:** Assessment of initiation demonstrates the different ways in which a pupil investigates an activity or stimulus, and to what extent, in order to bring about a desired outcome. It is an important part of developing the autonomy required for more advanced cognitive development and learning.

**Investigation:** Assessment of investigation measures to what extent a pupil is actively trying to find out more about an object or activity via prolonged, independent experimentation. This demonstrates a more advanced degree of autonomy than other aspects of engagement and is important for ongoing learning.

Disengagement is linked with behaviours that traditionally indicate a lack of attention and reluctance to complete work within the school environment (Finn, 1989).

The Rochford Review (2011) outlined how using the above indicators of cognition and learning could be carried out:

- It is good practice to set realistic but stretching success criteria that are specific to the pupil, then set out how you are going to monitor progress against them. These success criteria should be based on the curriculum used by the school, linking to the outcomes in education, health and care plans.
- Just as the curriculum should be sufficiently motivating to engage pupils in learning, the means of assessment should capture the pupils' interest and be appropriate for their age and interests.
- It is good practice to engage parents and carers in dialogue about assessments. They can provide information about the child's interests and progression outside school that can help inform the approach to assessment in the classroom.
- Where possible, teachers should aim to assess each of the seven aspects of cognition and learning in a range of different ways.

- Assessments should evaluate whether the pupil is able to exhibit the different areas of cognition and learning independently or the extent to which support is required.
- Assessments should demonstrate whether a pupil is able to sustain new skills and understanding over time. They should not just reflect a snapshot of one activity or observation.
- Assessments should demonstrate whether a pupil is able to apply the indicators of cognition and learning in a variety of different situations.
- Good assessment should look at pupils' development in all of the seven areas individually but should also consider the whole picture, including what they say about a pupil's attainment and progress when viewed together.
- One assessment activity can assess more than one of the seven aspects of cognition and learning at the same time.
- Overall assessments should be informed by evidence gained from a range of different sources and outside agencies.
- Assessment methods should be sufficiently flexible to be adapted to the needs of the pupil – and the design of assessments should take into account advice from different sources and outside agencies. (For example, an occupational therapist might advise on the right postural position for a child that will create appropriate conditions for an assessment.)
- There is no expectation that pupils should be able to demonstrate attainment or progress in all of these areas, just that assessments will take place to demonstrate whether they can.

### **3.4 Classroom Assessments**

Teachers face major problems in assessing written tests and oral examinations for children with MLD. Accommodations usually involve an extended time for writing the tests or answering oral examinations. Test adaptations are also made based on the impairment of the child – such as different fonts, larger spaces between lines or prints, and extraction of too difficult or inappropriate tasks (Hussu and Strle, 2010). Teachers also need to take special care in presenting the instructions to ensure that some of the test questions test the minimum standard of knowledge and that the assessment schedule is planned with pupils and arranged in advance (Hussu and Strle, 2010).

### **3.5 Presentation**

A presentation is a verbal demonstration of skill, knowledge and understanding where the pupil can narrate or answer questions about their task. Presentation can also take the form of discussion, debate or a purely interrogatory exchange. Some children may require a small group or one-on-one setting, as pupils with disabilities may be intimidated by larger groups (Watson, 2020). For those children who are non-verbal, demonstrations can be supported using other communication systems, such as Makaton.

### **3.6 Conference**

A conference is a one-on-one between the teacher and the pupil. The teacher will prompt and cue the pupil to determine their level of understanding and knowledge, which takes the pressure away from having to perform written tasks. The conference should be somewhat informal to put the pupil at ease. The focus should be on the pupil sharing ideas, reasoning or explaining a concept. This is an extremely useful form of formative assessment (Watson, 2020).

### **3.7 Interview**

An interview helps a teacher clarify the level of understanding for a specific purpose, activity or learning concept. A teacher should have questions in mind to ask the pupil. A lot can be learned through an interview, but it can also be time-consuming (Watson, 2020).

### **3.8 Performance Task**

A performance task is a learning task that the pupil can do while the teacher assesses their performance. For example, a teacher may ask a pupil to solve a maths problem by presenting a word problem, asking them questions about it. During the task, the teacher is looking for skill and ability, as well as the pupil's attitude toward the task, asking, for example, whether the pupil clings to past strategies or if there is evidence of risk-taking in their approach (Watson, 2020).

### **3.9 Setting Milestones**

Those with MLD and SLD have varied levels of abilities that are not always linear. At times, and for different reasons, these pupils can regress or remain static in their abilities. Because of this, Rochford (2011) argued that instead of basing statutory

assessment on pre-defined criteria outlining what the pupil should be able to do at the end of the key stage, assessment should be tailored to the individual's needs and their unique profile of learning difficulties. Such assessment should take account of the stage a pupil is at in their cognitive development and learning, rather than their chronological age. As it is not appropriate to set age-related expectations for pupils with the most severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties, members of the Rochford Review do not feel it would be appropriate to prescribe milestones that present progress as linear (Rochford, 2011). South Lanarkshire Council (2015) agreed, suggesting that, because each pupil with SLD may be at a different developmental stage, a period of assessment at the start of the year will be necessary to set individualised targets.

In the same vein, Lee (1999) suggested breaking the curriculum down into small lessons and setting milestones at different stages for each pupil.

### **3.10 Adaptations to Assessment**

For pupils who can complete summative assessments, Aidonopoulou-Read (2019) suggested individualised interventions when carrying out assessment. Some pupils, for example, would benefit from emotional engagement rewards, while others may benefit from tangible rewards and interesting resources. Some could benefit from a preparatory session to enable them to start the lesson in a prime position for learning by monitoring mood and behaviours. This is in line with the work of Simmons and Watson (2014) who stated the importance of individualisation of the assessment process.

Martin (2016) discussed some adaptations to assessment, depending on the difficulties the pupil is having. These are as follows:

Pupils with reading difficulties:

- The pupil could listen to the assessment questions using text-to-speech technology. If the pupil does not have access to technology, someone can read the questions out loud.

Pupils with writing difficulties:

- Use a scribe or speech-to-text technology.
- Use spell-checker software.
- Use word prediction software to help with spelling and ease the process of generating ideas.
- Use a method of demonstrating their learning other than pen and paper, for example videos, mind maps, comics, Bristol boards or models.
- Complete the evaluation orally and/or as a 'fill-in-the-blank' style page, so they only need to add the basic information being assessed.

Pupils with difficulties organising their ideas and time:

- Divide the evaluation into smaller sections, so the pupil can complete it over several different class periods.
- Split the questions into smaller steps and in a logical order for the work that is required.
- Use a countdown timer to help pupils manage their time.

Pupils with memory difficulties can be provided with the following:

- a word bank related to the assessment;
- a formula list related to a maths assessment;
- a glossary with images or written definitions, depending on the pupils' strengths; and/or
- a reference page for calculation processes such as division, multiplication or how to use a protractor.

Teachers should provide pupils with access to devices like calculators for maths computations. Please note that the pupil will still be required to justify their answer on paper.

## 4.0 Conclusion

Pupils with MLD and SLD have a very different educational experience than those following a mainstream pathway. The goal is to treat those with an SEN the same as those without it, though this is not always possible. Pupils with an SEN have a greater focus on combining the development of life skills with academic skills – this leads to a greater emphasis on formative rather than summative assessment.

For pupils with MLD and SLD, a range of assessment methods should be used. These methods should be tailored to meet the individual needs of each pupil.

There is limited literature on methods of engaging those with learning difficulties in assessment, which is indicative of the burden teachers must feel in adapting and creating their own assessment methods.



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