

Assessment for learning: the impact of National Strategy support

This survey evaluated the impact of the National Strategies' approaches to assessment for learning in English and mathematics lessons across a sample of primary and secondary schools. The impact on achievement and provision was no better than satisfactory in almost two thirds of the schools visited. It was better developed in primary than in secondary schools. Surveys of other subjects provided additional evidence of its variable impact.

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Executive summary

Assessment for learning has been a priority for development, for the National Strategies, for several years and is an important part of the programme to improve teaching, learning and pupils' achievement.¹ Since 2006, the National Strategy support for secondary schools has moved from assessment for learning across the school, to a focus on the core subjects of English and mathematics. The Assessment Reform Group has defined assessment for learning as 'the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there'.²

The findings of this report are based on inspections of assessment in English or mathematics in 27 primary and 16 secondary schools between April and December 2007. Further evidence was drawn from Ofsted's continuing programme of subject surveys. The overall effectiveness of over half of the schools in the main sample had been judged as satisfactory at their last inspection. These schools were selected for the survey because they were more likely to have received support and training from the National Strategies to develop assessment for learning, raise standards and improve pupils' achievement. Apart from three schools, (one primary and two secondary), the schools in the sample acknowledged their focus on assessment for learning and provided evidence of its implementation and its outcomes.

The impact of assessment for learning was good or outstanding in 16 of the 43 schools visited. It was inadequate in seven, including four of the 16 secondary schools visited. It was better developed and more effective in the primary than the secondary schools. Although teachers and senior leaders valued the training and support they had received from the National Strategies, this did not necessarily lead to effective assessment for learning in their schools.

Effective practice in assessment for learning derived from very strong direction by senior leaders, whose continued drive filtered through to other key leaders in school to set clear expectations for teaching and learning, and an agreed commitment for consistent classroom practice. Senior leaders made judicious selections from National Strategy training and materials. They ensured that teachers were supported effectively by relevant training, continuing coaching and well focused advice. In five of the schools, effective assessment for learning had contributed to pupils' outstanding achievement and transformed their learning.

¹ For further information on the National Strategies see [www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Education/National-strategies/\(language\)/eng-GB](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Education/National-strategies/(language)/eng-GB).

² *Assessment for learning: 10 principles*, Assessment Reform Group, 2002, available in the publications section of the website, www.assessment-reform-group.org/.

Where assessment for learning had had less impact, the teachers had not understood how the approaches were supposed to improve pupils' achievement. In particular, they used key aspects of assessment for learning, such as identifying and explaining objectives, questioning, reviewing pupils' progress and providing feedback without enough precision and skill. As a result, pupils did not understand enough about what they needed to do to improve and how they would achieve their targets. Teachers did not review learning effectively during lessons; opportunities for pupils to assess their own work or that of their peers were infrequent and not always effective. Procedures in these schools for monitoring performance and evaluating progress did not lead to sustained training and support from senior staff or local authorities to ensure that key approaches were embedded effectively. In the secondary schools visited, despite the more regular monitoring of students' progress, work planned for them was rarely matched closely enough to their understanding and to what they had learnt before.

The secondary schools in particular rarely evaluated the impact of assessment for learning. Where monitoring and evaluation were more effective, however, senior staff often used the National Strategies' self-evaluation materials to identify priorities for development.

The wider programme of subject visits showed that, with notable exceptions, assessment for learning was weak across the curriculum. In primary schools, this was because of teachers' weaker subject knowledge beyond English and mathematics. In the secondary schools, although teachers' subject knowledge was generally good, assessment for learning was not well developed. The good practice seen in some subjects, including modern foreign languages, physical education and information and communication technology (ICT) was strongly linked to improving standards.

Key findings

- The impact of assessment for learning on standards, achievement, teaching and the curriculum in English and mathematics was outstanding in five of the 43 schools visited; four of these were primary schools. It was good in 11 schools, satisfactory in 20 and inadequate in seven. Its impact on students' achievement was inadequate in four of the 16 secondary schools visited.
- Assessment for learning was better developed and more effective in the primary schools visited than in the secondary schools. In the best examples, primary schools adopted approaches to assessment for learning consistently and they could show a clear link between regular assessment and its impact on pupils' achievement. This was the case in only one of the 16 secondary schools.
- In primary and secondary schools, the most important factor in effective assessment for learning was the very clear whole-school vision of teaching, learning and assessment developed by senior staff, their high expectations of teachers and an agreed drive towards consistency. It was usually a priority in the

school's improvement planning and formed a key component of training programmes. National Strategy training and materials were used selectively, as recommended, but very effectively. Sustained, consistent and well understood assessment principles and practices had a demonstrable impact on pupils' achievement.

- In the less effective practice, teachers failed to understand sufficiently how the approaches were meant to improve pupils' achievement. Although schools valued the training and support provided, good practice in assessment for learning did not necessarily follow. Senior leaders did not maintain the momentum of implementation, often moving on to other priorities before practice was secure.
- Despite more regular assessment and monitoring of progress in the secondary schools, teachers rarely pitched work precisely enough to students' understanding and prior learning. Matching work to pupils' needs was a strong feature of the best practice in the primary schools.
- The drawing together of learning during lessons and opportunities for pupils to assess their own work and that of their peers were still rare and not always effective. However, they were key features of the most successful lessons.
- The secondary schools rarely evaluated their work on assessment for learning. More of the primary schools did so, using the National Strategy's self-evaluation materials to assess the impact. These audits were effective in identifying inconsistencies and areas where the impact had been less marked.
- Assessment for learning was better established in English and mathematics than more widely across the curriculum in primary schools. This was also the case in the wider sample of secondary schools.

Recommendations

In order to improve the effectiveness of assessment for learning in schools, those responsible for leading and managing the National Strategies, nationally and locally, should:

- ensure that teachers understand why assessment for learning will improve pupils' achievement and how to use effective questioning, review of learning, purposeful marking, and pupils' peer and self-assessment in lessons
- ensure that training and support for schools extend into and beyond the implementation stage in order to consolidate teachers' practice and have an effect on pupils' achievement
- promote approaches to assessment for learning beyond English and mathematics in primary and secondary schools.

In order to raise standards, senior leaders in schools should:

- make their expectations of teaching and assessment for learning explicit and link them to improving pupils' achievement
- ensure that teachers in all subjects are properly trained in assessing for learning and understand the importance of adjusting work and teaching approaches to respond to pupils' needs, abilities and interests, especially in secondary schools.

In order to raise standards, teachers should:

- explain clearly to pupils what they are to learn, by what criteria they will be assessed and how they will know when they have been successful so that they are increasingly involved and responsible for their learning outcomes
- develop their skills in targeting questions to challenge pupils' understanding, prompting them to explain and justify their answers individually, in small groups and in whole class dialogue
- employ a range of strategies to assess pupils' progress in lessons and use the information gained to give feedback to pupils and plan further work.

What is assessment for learning?

1. The Assessment Reform Group has defined assessment for learning as 'the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there'.³ The '10 principles' for assessment for learning are that it:

- is part of effective planning
- focuses on how pupils learn
- is central to classroom practice
- is a key professional skill
- is sensitive and constructive
- fosters motivation
- promotes understanding of goals and criteria
- helps learners know how to improve
- develops the capacity for peer and self-assessment

³ The Assessment Reform Group works closely with teachers, teachers' organisations and local authority staff, as well as policy makers, to ensure that assessment policy and practice at all levels take account of evidence from research. In 2000 it set up the Assessment and Learning Research Synthesis Group to review research relating to assessment in schools. In its early years the Group was particularly concerned to study the introduction of national testing and assessment in the United Kingdom. Its focus has broadened to the use of assessment to advance learning as well as to summarise and report it.

- recognises all educational achievement.⁴
2. The principles are described in more detail in *Pedagogy and practice*.⁵ Assessment for learning is seen as central to personalising learning in schools, as outlined in the report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group. It is formative; it takes place all the time in the classroom, and it is a focused joint activity between the teacher and the pupil. Its aim is to close the gap between a pupil's present state of understanding and the intended goal. Self-assessment is essential if the pupil is to do this. The teacher's role is to ensure not only that pupils understand how to assess their progress but also to adjust teaching in the light of that. They communicate appropriate goals and promote self-assessment as pupils work towards them. Assessment for learning is about using information gained to improve learning and teaching.

Training and materials

3. Assessment for learning has been a priority for the National Strategies for several years and is considered to be a key element in the national agenda to personalise learning for pupils.
4. Schools identified for support through their local authorities have usually had some training in implementing assessment for learning. It was part of the Intensifying Support Programme for primary schools and was rolled out initially in secondary schools through 'pathfinder' subjects and, later, through the emphasis on the quality of teaching across all subjects.⁶
5. The National Strategies produced materials and developed training to assist senior leaders and teachers in reviewing their current practice, recognising common issues for development and identifying aspects of assessment for learning which were particularly relevant in their subject or phase. The training units for secondary schools focused on:
 - assessment for learning in the classroom

⁴ *Assessment for learning: 10 principles*, available in the publications section of the Assessment Reform Group's website, www.assessment-reform-group.org/.

⁵ *Pedagogy and practice: teaching and learning in secondary schools* (DfES, 0125/2003), 2004. These study units are intended to provide a common language with which to discuss teaching and learning, as well as the means for teachers to develop their skills.
<http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DfES+0423+2004G&>.

⁶ The Primary National Strategy's Intensifying Support Programme is a school improvement programme which began in some primary schools in 2003/04. It is designed to raise standards and improve teaching and learning through regular assessment and setting of targets in English and mathematics, and as a plan for raising attainment.
www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/wholeschool/isp/.

- the formative use of summative assessment
- objective-led lessons
- oral and written feedback
- peer and self-assessment
- curricular target-setting
- questioning and dialogue.

Similar emphasis was given to these aspects in the guidance and training for primary schools. These were particularly strongly associated with the Primary National Strategy's Intensifying Support Programme which later developed into the Improving Schools Programme.⁷

6. The National Strategies produced materials to help subject leaders audit provision in their subject and improve practice in assessment. This involved identifying current provision and its impact on pupils; planning actions to develop practice; evaluating the impact of the actions; and embedding successful practice. Specific materials supported senior leaders in leading and managing change in assessment for learning, linked to guidance on coordinating professional development.
7. Supplementary materials from the National Strategies dealt with guidance for teachers of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and of pupils who speak English as an additional language. The National Strategies also provided guidance for teaching assistants on using assessment for learning.⁸

Assessment for learning in English and mathematics

The impact of assessment for learning

8. Overall, the impact of assessment for learning was outstanding in five of the schools visited, good in 11, satisfactory in 20 and inadequate in seven (Table 1). The impact of assessment for learning on the other key aspects of provision in the 43 schools was broadly similar.

⁷ The Improving Schools Programme leaflet was issued by the DCSF in March 2008 to share learning from the Intensifying Support Programme and to explain what has been effective in supported school improvement and why. www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/wholeschool/isp/.

⁸ All these materials are available on the following websites: for the Primary National Strategy www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/; for the Secondary National Strategy www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/keystage3.

9. The impact of assessment for learning was greater in the primary schools in the sample, as the breakdown of the figures by phase shows. For the primary schools, the impact of assessment for learning broadly matched the judgements made in their previous inspection. Its impact was outstanding in four of the 27 schools, but inadequate in three. In the 16 secondary schools, however, its impact was good or outstanding in only three of them and satisfactory in nine. In four of the secondary schools, its impact was inadequate.

Table 1. The impact of assessment for learning and of leadership and management in the 43 schools visited.

Impact	Number of schools				
	Total	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Overall	43	5	11	20	7
On achievement	43	4	11	20	8
On teaching and learning	43	3	13	19	8
On the curriculum	43	3	13	21	6
On inclusion	43	5	17	18	3
Of leadership and management	43	6	13	16	8

10. The greatest impact of assessment for learning derived from very strong direction from senior leaders. Usually it:
- was a priority in the school's improvement planning
 - featured prominently in teaching, learning and assessment policies
 - formed a key component of training programmes
 - was promoted by the headteacher and senior staff.

Particularly in the primary schools, but also in the few secondary schools where the impact was good or outstanding, senior leaders set clear expectations. They monitored the implementation of approaches to assessment for learning through lesson observations and scrutinies of pupils' work. This improved the consistency of approaches and ensured that pupils better understood what they were learning, how they would know they were making progress and how to assess their own work.

11. The middle school in the next example drew its pupils from an area of social and ethnic diversity. Over two thirds of its pupils spoke English as an additional language. Senior leaders used assessment for learning with considerable success to improve teaching and raise achievement.

When it was inspected in 2000, the school was judged to be satisfactory and the use of assessment, particularly to guide curriculum planning, was identified as an area for development. The headteacher saw assessment for learning as a key component in improving teaching and learning. Policy documents gave very clear guidance, while relevant and effective training and professional development supported teachers in implementing approaches to assessment for learning. The ethos of the school focused on getting the best out of its pupils.

When the school was inspected again in 2006, it was judged to be outstanding, having 'created a culture of high achievement'. Value-added data had placed the school in the top 10% of schools nationally for three years. The inspection report praised the consistently high quality of teaching, particularly teachers' careful planning, innovative use of resources, focused questioning and effective academic support. It concluded, 'The school rightly prides itself upon how the children assess their own work so that they can improve it.'

12. Too many schools are still in the early stages of implementing approaches to assessment for learning and they have yet to see a marked impact on pupils' achievement. Simply adopting the approaches does not necessarily improve the quality of teaching. Assessment for learning had little, if any, discernible impact in eight of the 43 schools visited. A key constraint was that teachers often used approaches such as setting clear objectives or reviewing learning without understanding fully how these practices were meant to improve pupils' achievement. As a result, the objectives for lessons focused more on what pupils would do rather than what they would learn. Success was often measured by whether the pupils had completed the tasks rather than whether they had understood and were able to apply their knowledge and skills. This confusion was exacerbated by inconsistent practices: for example, teachers in adjoining classrooms used similar techniques in different ways with widely differing outcomes. This was particularly evident in the secondary schools.
13. Teachers valued the training they had received from local authorities and it inspired their early and enthusiastic implementation of new assessment practices. However, in the schools where assessment for learning was weaker, senior leaders had usually not taken a sufficiently clear stance and, consequently, the teachers lacked direction. References to assessment for learning, for example, were frequently omitted from key policies on assessment and teaching. In too many cases, not enough was done to prevent the schools

faltering or losing the momentum of implementation. Consequently, the impact on pupils' achievement was limited.

The impact on achievement

14. In the schools where the impact of assessment for learning was outstanding, senior staff had seen it as a key driver to raise standards. Pupils were involved in setting their targets and evaluating their understanding and progress. As a result, they were usually confident and independent learners who generally made outstanding progress. This was shown clearly in the middle school which had improved from being satisfactory to outstanding.

At the end of lessons, pupils knew that they had responsibility for assessing what they had learnt and setting themselves targets for the next lesson. This strategy helped them to focus on what they were trying to achieve and reflect on the next steps in their learning. A pupil wrote, for instance: 'I was able to complete my graph but I need help on interpreting the data.' These self-assessments provided valuable information which teachers used in planning subsequent lessons. They helped pupils to build an overall picture of their progress. A Year 7 girl said, 'I can look back at my self-assessments and know where my strengths and weaknesses are.'

15. Where assessment for learning was having less impact on pupils' achievement, clarity and drive to secure consistent practice were insufficient. For example, pupils knew their curricular targets but did not know what they needed to do to achieve them; teachers gave pupils feedback but did not allow them enough time to respond or to act on the guidance.
16. In three of the 43 schools visited, achievement was good because they had developed their own assessment for learning systems consistently across the teaching and learning in their schools. Their focus was on good-quality teaching with high expectations and effective assessment practices, some of which the schools themselves devised. The common characteristic of the schools with effective assessment was strong direction from senior leaders and an unwavering concentration on improving teaching and learning.
17. Most lessons in the primary schools had some match between the objectives and activities and the pupils' individual needs, but this was far less common in the secondary schools. Too often, the teachers did not use assessment information precisely enough to match learning objectives and activities to the needs of groups and individuals. As a result, higher-attaining pupils were not always challenged sufficiently and some lower-attaining pupils were pushed beyond their understanding and capability without sufficient support.

The impact on teaching and learning

18. Inspectors judged just over one in 10 of the 232 lessons seen in the survey to be outstanding. In these lessons, teachers were clear about how and what they wanted pupils to learn. They planned carefully using information from assessment to set objectives which were appropriate to pupils' understanding and attainment. This was particularly so in the primary schools. Pupils understood what they were to learn and how to meet the objectives. Teachers regularly revisited and reinforced the objectives at key points during the lesson, encouraging pupils to assess their own progress. Teachers then knew what the pupils could and could not do and used this information to ensure that they made progress in the lesson and for planning the next lesson.
19. The most skilful teachers used carefully phrased questions, pitched appropriately to reflect pupils' levels of understanding. They supported pupils to answer by providing time for them to think and discuss, encouraging them to justify their answers and deepen their understanding. In some classrooms, teachers had systems to ensure that all pupils had the opportunity to answer a question at some point in the lesson.

In a Year 7 mathematics lesson with a lower attaining class, the teacher ensured that all pupils had time to think through their answers. She expected them to be able to explain their ideas to the other pupils. She used labelled pegs to ensure questions were asked equally of all those in the class.

She took a name label and gave the pupil notice that he would give his answer, to a question about shape, in 30 seconds and reminded him that he would need to give reasons for his answer. During the 30 seconds, all pupils discussed the question in pairs to establish the response they expected so that they could either help or challenge the answer. When asked, the pupil gave a clear answer with detail of how his previous learning had helped him to work out the problem. Pupils were used to justifying their answers and at ease when challenged by the teacher or their peers.

20. These teachers were usually also skilled in drawing learning together at key moments of the lesson and, rather than just recapping on the lesson to that point, they encouraged pupils to show what they had learnt. They gave them opportunities to discuss their learning and develop their understanding. For example, these teachers used 'talk partners' to explore an open-ended question or gave groups different questions to answer. These approaches encouraged pupils to give feedback and explain their ideas to others.

An infant school which drew its pupils from a socially disadvantaged area had a common approach to reviewing learning. Lessons had regular

'learning stops'. These were short breaks during independent activities when some groups were asked to talk about how well they were meeting the success criteria for the lesson. The pupils were asked to give reasons for their assessments and to provide examples. Sometimes pupils assessed their own work and sometimes they assessed the work of other members of the group. Pupils responded very well, demonstrating that they were familiar with the approach. They talked fluently about what they had achieved and what they still did not fully understand. The teacher responded by suggesting one or two practical steps they could take. Pupils generally made very good progress. This successful approach was highlighted in the school's inspection in 2006.

21. The teachers of these good and outstanding lessons kept a close check on pupils' progress and knew exactly how to develop the next stages in their learning. If necessary, they moved away from the lesson plan to tackle pupils' misunderstandings or moved on when pupils showed they already understood key concepts or had the skills they needed. They gave pupils helpful oral feedback, as in this example.

In a lively and complex lesson with a Year 4 class, the teacher managed effective pair and small group work within a very tight timescale and yet was still able to develop pupils' answers, enabling them to share and evaluate each other's responses.

The overall objective was to plan the writing of an account. The lesson required pupils to sequence a series of photographs of themselves, taken during an activity earlier in the term. This lesson focused on composing succinct yet well-written captions. The particular learning objective was for pupils to offer reasons and evidence for their views. The teacher set very tight deadlines for pairs to agree captions for the photographs they had chosen. They also had to be able to explain why they had chosen particular vocabulary. The teacher asked a number of pairs to read out a caption and explain some of their choices of vocabulary. Pupils were confident in working in this way.

Next, two pairs combined. They had to discuss and agree which were the better captions and why, again with a focus on improving the vocabulary. After another tightly managed discussion, the teacher asked for feedback again. This time she collected some key words and encouraged the class to evaluate which were most effective and why. All the time, the pupils were both sharing reasons and giving opinions on the effectiveness of the vocabulary. However, at the same time, they were improving the quality of the vocabulary in the captions.

The next stage was for the groups of four pupils to make a final selection of captions, applying what they had learnt, and to display these on their table. All the pupils toured the tables to see what the others had chosen.

One member of the group had to be ready to explain their choice to other pupils. Pupils managed this without fuss.

The teacher had drawn the class together to review learning three times in 30 minutes but each time in a slightly different way.

22. Very effective assessment for learning was usually supported by detailed and constructive marking of written work. In the best examples, pupils were made aware of what they had achieved, what they needed to do to improve and how to go about this. They were also expected to consider the teacher's comments and their own assessment, and to act on the advice to improve their work. The middle school referred to earlier ensured that there was regular written comment for pupils but also time for them to reflect and respond.

The school's assessment policy was adapted to help teachers make regular comments on pupils' work. For marking, classes were divided into four mixed-ability groups. In each lesson during the day, one of the groups had their work marked by the teacher. The teacher's written comment had to identify and praise success against the learning objectives, move learning on and show pupils how to improve. While the teacher was marking, pupils in the other three groups were expected to use the time to reflect on the teacher's earlier comments and improve or develop their work. This contributed to pupils' confidence in knowing what they had achieved and what they needed to improve. It also built the ethos of involving pupils in their learning.

23. Of the 232 lessons observed during the survey, 40% were satisfactory and 11% were inadequate. Assessment for learning was not a strong feature of these lessons: it was either completely absent or was not having sufficient impact on learning and achievement.
24. Almost all these lessons had objectives which were made clear to the pupils. However, too often, the objectives did not reflect pupils' understanding or attainment. This was particularly the case in the secondary schools where there was rarely more than one objective for all the students in a lesson. In some of these lessons, the objectives were based on the task which needed to be completed and not on what students needed to learn. There was not enough checking of teachers' plans by subject leaders; this lack of monitoring reflected the limited direction and expectations set by senior leaders.
25. Unlike the very best lessons, once teachers had made the objectives clear to pupils, they rarely referred to them again; in some lessons, objectives were also not referred to at the end when the teacher was drawing learning together. Too often in these plenary sessions, teachers summarised what the pupils had done in the lesson rather than assessed their understanding and progress. As a result, it was unlikely that planning for the next lessons could be based securely

on the pupils' current achievement. Pupils were often too passive at this crucial point. Often, time ran out before teachers could draw the learning together.

26. In these less effective lessons, although teachers usually asked questions from time to time, these had far less impact on learning than in the best lessons. Their questions required only brief and usually factual answers without explanation or justification. Teachers often asked the question to a whole class and then selected a volunteer to answer. Relatively few pupils answered and the questioning rarely generated any discussion or supplementary questions. This approach did not enable teachers to challenge individual pupils' understanding or track their progress.
27. In a minority of the lessons, teachers used 'talk partners' or group work to stimulate discussion. However, again, they posed relatively closed questions or tasks which generated generally similar responses and, therefore, limited the potential for discussing the answers. Too often, at these times, rather than gaining interest and challenge, the lessons lost pace and focus and so the teachers reduced even more the time they allocated for discussion.
28. Peer and self-assessment was insufficiently developed. Even if such assessment featured in the school's development plan, it was often in the early stages of implementation. In one or two schools, it had been developed to be an integral part of teachers' final assessment of pupils' work in particular units. In these cases, pupils were increasingly confident in using assessment criteria and level or grade descriptions. A few of the 43 schools visited had tried to use peer or self-assessment and had abandoned these approaches because they took too much time. However, they require teachers to persevere and build up pupils' skills and understanding. The teachers who had established effective practice used it very well throughout lessons to engage pupils in monitoring their own progress, helping them to secure their understanding. In this example from a large secondary school, a teacher used peer assessment with a group of Year 8 boys of lower attainment to refine their understanding about how to improvise an audition effectively.

The students worked in pairs improvising an audition based on parts for the Mechanicals' play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. After the first attempt, students watched one pair show their work and were asked to comment on what worked and what did not. Initially, their comments were superficial. The teacher gave the students another part to audition and they improvised again. This time, the comments after watching two pairs show their work were far more constructive and allowed the teacher to focus on how the interviewer might help his partner by offering prompts. The third audition worked very effectively: students applied what they had learnt from watching and assessing others. The process also helped students to begin to form criteria by which they could assess their own work.

29. In the best examples, teachers' oral and written feedback was focused firmly on the objectives for learning and pupils' individual targets. In English this often focused on how to improve work by adding detail, increasing the complexity of sentence construction and the use of punctuation, using a more engaging range of vocabulary and demonstrating a wider range of skills. In mathematics, the feedback concentrated on how pupils might correct misunderstandings or apply skills and knowledge in different contexts. Too often in mathematics, however, pupils received pages of ticks on their work with little comment other than general praise.

The impact on the curriculum

30. In the schools where assessment for learning had the most impact on the curriculum, senior leaders expected teachers to use information from assessment to determine the content of lessons and to focus on key areas of learning. In the very effective infant school mentioned earlier, assessment was central to curriculum planning.

The school analysed performance data rigorously to identify common areas of weakness. From this, curricular targets were adopted for each class and then more specific ones established for each group within it. Teachers used key objective sheets well to track pupils' progress. This review of progress informed lesson planning. Teachers aimed to provide integrated learning based on 'centres of interest' which had a thematic focus. There was a mix of direct teaching and independent work. The regular review of progress allowed planning to take account of pupils who needed additional support.

31. A successful small rural secondary school, admitting students with average attainment, had made a concerted move towards personalising learning based on activities which challenged students to think.

Teachers concentrated on how mathematics could be applied. They referred to the world outside school and contexts for solving real mathematical problems. Planning had been extended so that students used mathematical thinking to solve problems in science, geography and a range of vocational subjects. Students spoke positively of the efforts that teachers made to ensure these curriculum links were apparent. Boys were particularly positive about this practical approach and appreciated being challenged appropriately and encouraged to solve problems practically.

32. In the primary schools, particularly where the Intensifying Support Programme was well established, careful analysis of pupils' strengths and weaknesses informed the setting of curricular priorities and pupils' targets. Teachers planned lessons to match pupils' understanding and, in the best examples, the range of different needs and capability in the class. Again, where assessment

for learning was most effective, this also involved pre-planned and rigorous consolidation of English and mathematical knowledge and skills in other subjects. This related to the way in which senior leaders promoted assessment strongly as a key means of raising pupils' achievement.

33. Only three of the secondary schools showed they used assessment information effectively to plan the curriculum and teachers' setting of objectives. In the other secondary schools visited, although some general analysis of students' weaknesses was completed and used to focus attention on particular topics, they did not use more frequent, continuing assessment to pitch teaching precisely for individuals and groups of students. In a majority of the lessons seen, all the students were set the same objectives and completed the same work, some very quickly and others without really understanding what they were doing. Teaching and learning policies and schemes of work in these schools contained little guidance on using assessment for learning. In a small number of the secondary schools, however, the Assessing Pupils' Progress programme was beginning to have some impact on sharpening the focus of the curriculum and lesson planning.⁹
34. In the schools which used assessment effectively to inform the curriculum and lesson planning, their identification of pupils who needed additional help to make progress was also good. This usually led to an effective range of intervention programmes linked to building up pupils' confidence and understanding in specific areas. In the most effective primary schools, this was a part of pupils' experience throughout the school and not just as they neared the end of Key Stage 2.

The impact of leadership and management

35. The primary schools were much more likely than the secondary schools to have used the National Strategy's audit process to establish which aspects of assessment for learning needed development. They were also more likely to have reviewed their progress similarly. In primary and secondary schools, however, the most important factor in effective assessment for learning was the very clear whole-school vision of teaching, learning and assessment developed by senior staff. It was most effective when led by the headteacher. In these schools, self-evaluation was strong and identified clearly the areas for

⁹ The Assessing Pupils' Progress materials have been produced by the National Strategies to strengthen schools' approaches to assessment for learning and are designed to secure teachers' summative assessment judgements of students' progress in Key Stage 3. The materials for reading and writing were distributed to all secondary schools in 2006 and those for mathematics in the early part of 2007. The materials for speaking and listening and for science will be distributed in 2009. Following successful piloting of comparable materials in primary schools, it is intended to roll these out nationally in 2008. www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primaryframework/assessment/app/.

development. The schools chose specific approaches, supported where possible by training and advice from the local authority. Staff were encouraged to feel responsible for the strategies adopted. Approaches agreed upon were usually based on already consistent teaching methods. In the primary schools, the development was often associated with the Intensifying Support Programme.

36. The effective infant school mentioned earlier had used several National Strategy initiatives to promote improvement.

The school had participated enthusiastically in the Primary Leadership Programme, Primary Learning Network, Intensifying Support Programme and various teaching and learning initiatives, including assessment for learning.^{10,11} In close cooperation with the local authority, it developed effective practice in assessment and the authority encouraged other schools to visit to observe good practice. The particular strength of its leadership was its evaluation, selection and combination of relevant aspects of National Strategy initiatives into a successful approach to improve achievement. Senior staff worked together to establish clear and consistent policies and practice across classes, with assessment at the core of effective teaching.

37. Another key factor in implementing assessment for learning successfully was the high expectations which headteachers and senior staff held of teachers. In particular, there was clear guidance and expectations that planning, teaching and assessment were integrated activities, not to be approached separately.
38. An outstanding comprehensive secondary school in an area where there was selection on entry, and where students were admitted with attainment which was broadly average, judiciously selected certain National Strategy aspects such as reporting to parents. However, the way it used assessment had raised achievement in mathematics effectively.

¹⁰ The Primary Leadership Programme is a school improvement programme provided through the Primary National Strategy with the National College for School Leadership. This has been a rolling programme, reaching most primary schools since 2003/04. It focuses on developing collaborative leadership through guidance from experienced and effective consultant headteachers.
www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/leadership/63557/.

¹¹ Primary Strategy Learning Networks were established in 2004 as a funded programme to foster professional links between primary schools. Their focus was on learning and the improvement of teaching practice. Each network agreed a statement of intent. Around half of all primary schools were involved in one of these networks by 2005/06.
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/wholeschool/learning_networks/.

The headteacher analysed assessment data to identify students who were making good or inadequate progress and discussed the information with the heads of subject departments. They took on responsibility for monitoring students who were underachieving and implemented strategies for them to catch up.

The head of mathematics insisted that teachers concentrated on students' understanding of mathematical concepts. Teaching was relatively traditional but the quality and level of questions and answers were high. Students asked mathematical questions and wanted to understand. The subject leader visited classes regularly to look at the work being done by students who were a particular focus. She also commented on their written work as part of her regular monitoring. The students were very aware of and appreciated her role in challenging those who were underachieving.

39. Developing assessment for learning was usually more secure where senior leaders, with local authorities, provided continuing support. For example, in a large primary school which had been slow to adopt National Strategy approaches, including assessment for learning, a lead literacy teacher in the authority worked alongside teachers to develop their skills.

She visited classrooms to identify teachers' areas of strength and those needing development in terms of approaches to teaching and assessment for learning. This audit led to a training programme run in staff meetings. She then worked in classrooms alongside particular teachers to demonstrate good practice and build their confidence in using assessment for learning.

In the next phase, teachers were to observe each other. Senior leaders were to review progress in assessment for learning through formal lesson observations.

40. Strong direction from senior leaders was usually supported by effective subject leaders. These were skilled teachers who had a very good understanding of the benefits of assessment for learning and how it could be applied. They provided effective models of successful practice, encouraged the sharing of good teaching and monitored the impact of teaching on learning thoroughly.
41. The subject leader for mathematics in an urban junior school where pupils had broadly average attainment demonstrated the key characteristics of effective leadership.

She had a very clear understanding of the curriculum and very good subject knowledge. She was a leading teacher, demonstrated highly effective practice and had high expectations of teachers and pupils. In particular, she sought consistency of approach and methodology so that

pupils could see progression in their learning. Her monitoring of teaching and pupils' work was comprehensive and she used the information gained to identify areas for improvement. She provided straightforward, practical guidance on improvements and offered helpful training where appropriate. Pupils' achievement was outstanding as a result.

42. A majority of the schools visited, particularly secondary schools, identified assessment for learning as a priority in school improvement plans; however, little progress had been made in implementing key aspects. Policies on assessment and teaching did not refer explicitly to assessment for learning. Initial training had been completed with local authority support, often several terms previously, and yet there was no obvious response from the school. This is not to say that assessment for learning was unrepresented in these schools. Individual teachers used key approaches very successfully but other teachers, teaching the same subject, used the same approaches ineffectively or not at all.
43. Occasionally, inconsistencies in approach were evident in schools which had clear policies but where senior staff and subject leaders had not followed up implementation strongly enough. Monitoring and evaluation of assessment for learning were generally weak. In contrast, where leadership and management were strongest, part of the focus for regular lesson observations and work scrutinies were specific aspects of assessment for learning, in some cases supported by evidence from interviews with pupils. Importantly, reviews of this sort did not record simply whether teachers used the approaches but also whether they were linked to pupils' achievement of targets and general progress.
44. The lack of rigorous monitoring limited the identification and dissemination of effective approaches, where they existed, and also failed to challenge teachers who used the approaches without fully understanding them. This was particularly important in the secondary schools, where achieving consistency and sharing practice were more difficult.

The impact on inclusion

45. Assessment for learning helps those pupils, who do not always find learning easy, to make progress. Knowing clearly what they are to learn, what they need to do and how they will know when they are successful are all important. Discussion and well focused questioning allow them to explore what they are learning and to try out ideas. Reviewing their learning regularly with the teacher during the lesson identifies misunderstandings promptly and provides opportunities for further explanation or the correction of errors. Assessing their own work or reviewing that of their peers builds an understanding of what success looks like and how to apply skills.

46. The impact of assessment for learning on the progress of vulnerable or underachieving pupils was good or outstanding in 23 of the 43 schools visited. It was more marked in primary than secondary schools. Generally, it related more to the regular assessment of pupils' progress and the provision of objectives and activities matched to pupils' needs than to the regular use of the approaches described in the previous paragraph.
47. Tracking pupils' progress to identify what intervention and support were needed worked effectively in a large urban primary school which served a socially disadvantaged area.

The school had developed a very effective system to track pupils' progress from term to term. For each class it showed graphically the rate of progress each pupil made and which were above, at, or below national expectations for their age. For those who were not making sufficient progress, a very detailed plan was drawn up which specified the support the pupils would receive, based on analysing their individual needs. As a result of good provision, these pupils made very good progress. The tracking system was also used to set challenging but relevant targets for each class. Teachers used these effectively to plan work at the right level for the range of pupils. The local authority was disseminating the system to other schools as an example of good practice.

Assessment for learning in other subjects

48. Evidence on assessment for learning was also drawn from Ofsted's programme of survey visits to primary and secondary schools in science, ICT, other foundation subjects and religious education. With some exceptions, assessment remains a general area of weakness in these subjects. Inspectors sought evidence that assessment for learning, a core element in the personalising of learning, was developing across the range of other subjects, drawing on effective practice expected in English and mathematics.

Primary schools

49. Where assessment was good in the primary schools visited, this was because senior leaders and teachers had given careful thought to effective assessment in English and mathematics and transferred these approaches successfully to other subjects. Pupils were clear about what they were learning and received useful feedback. More generally, however, when teachers used approaches recommended by the National Strategy in subjects other than English and mathematics, they did not adapt the assessment techniques sufficiently.
50. In the foundation subjects and religious education, teachers' weak knowledge and understanding of progression and the standards expected restricted the extent to which they were able to use assessment for learning effectively.

51. Improvements were noted in assessment in science. Strengths included teachers' marking and pupils' involvement in evaluating their own work.¹² Increasingly, the schools were assessing pupils' progress in the skills of scientific investigation. Good assessment was usually a strong feature of effective provision for science.
52. The strengths in assessment identified in the survey visits for RE, listed below, are also transferable to the foundation subjects. Assessment is more effective when:
- planning enables teachers to identify the key assessment criteria clearly
 - the language of National Curriculum levels is built into planning and reporting to parents
 - specific assessment points are identified in the planning
 - teachers are encouraged to use simple mechanisms for recording evidence of pupils' achievement, such as annotating the planning or asking teaching assistants to note examples of pupils' achievement
 - some use is made of plenary sessions, peer and self-assessment to help pupils begin to identify the criteria for assessment.

Secondary schools

53. Assessment was one of the weaker aspects of teaching in the secondary schools visited, although in some of the foundation subjects there was evidence of the impact of work on assessment for learning. Inspectors saw more good examples of assessment than in previous years.
54. In response to initiatives from the Secondary National Strategy, there has been some improvement in teachers' use of assessment for learning in science. In general, however, it was insufficiently diagnostic and not used well enough to plan work for groups. The emphasis has been on summative assessment and preparation for tests and examinations. Students generally knew what their targets were in science, but lacked sufficient guidance to be certain about what they needed to do to meet them.
55. In art, good assessment for learning was characterised by:
- critical and constructive dialogue between teachers and individual students
 - tutorial discussions, including the marking attached to students' work which offered clear direction about how to improve it

¹² *Success in science (070195)*, Ofsted, 2008. www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070195.

- discussions about the work of different students in the class, comparing and contrasting what others had done.
56. In physical education, a strong feature of assessment was teachers' questioning to develop students' independence in learning; they knew how well they were doing and how to improve.
 57. In modern languages, the best assessment was built into lessons – for example, with the teacher 'eavesdropping' on students working in pairs, and students regularly evaluating each other's work to suggest improvements. In a minority of the schools visited, peer and self-assessment were based on level descriptions which students were able to apply confidently.
 58. More generally, in the minority of schools where inspectors saw good practice in assessment, teachers had understood and applied carefully the key principles of assessment for learning. Consistent and coherent assessment practice across a school built on approaches which had been established successfully in the core subjects. These schools showed that effective assessment is possible and that problems can be overcome. In too many cases, however, subject departments had not adapted to generic approaches to assessment. This occurred in geography, for example, although some departments had made good use of materials which had been adapted and issued by subject associations.
 59. Assessment for learning has to begin with clarity about objectives and outcomes for lessons and series of lessons. Too often, learning objectives were insufficiently precise. Where there was good practice, for example in some history and geography lessons, students were aware of what they should be learning and they received constructive feedback to enable them to meet the objectives; this was because teachers were more aware of the need to look for and interpret evidence of whether students had learnt what was intended, particularly through high quality questioning, and what steps needed to be taken next.
 60. Where assessment for learning was used successfully to underpin progression in learning, teachers referred to the assessment criteria routinely as part of their teaching, identifying clearly for students how specific tasks or activities related to higher achievement. However, subject progression remains a challenging aspect of teaching, with particular difficulties reflecting the nature of the subject. In music, for example, teachers rarely gave sufficient attention to how much progress students were making because audio recording was not used regularly as a way of assessing learning. In religious education and personal, social and health education there was a lack of clarity about subject progression; and in citizenship, although much work is being done to develop more robust assessment, teachers were only just beginning to come to grips with issues of progression as they considered the implications of an eight-level scale for National Curriculum assessment.

61. Teachers of other foundation subjects are more used to level descriptions, but, even so, there were variations across the subjects in the ways these were used to support progression. There is a danger that level descriptions are remote from students' experience. In the best examples, teachers took care to ensure that the terminology of assessment was meaningful to students. This meant that, in all aspects, including peer and self-assessment, students understood what was expected and could relate this to level descriptions; teachers understood the progress students were making and were able to use the information to monitor standards.
62. Assessment is particularly complex in ICT where it seeks to draw on students' attainment across subjects. The following exemplifies good practice in ICT.

The school found out students' attainment in ICT when it admitted them from their primary schools or shortly afterwards. There was extensive assessment of work in discrete ICT lessons as well as in other subjects, providing an excellent picture of individual students' capabilities. Students were set targets and received good guidance on how to improve their work. Their use of ICT in other subjects was assessed. All teachers had received extensive training in how to recognise ICT National Curriculum levels in the context of their own subjects. The school had an excellent awareness of each individual's ICT capability which was used to plan personalised programmes. Students knew the level at which they were working and how to improve their work.

63. Departments that were most successful in securing a common understanding of standards had done so by using a good range of assessment instruments and illustrating the standards by, for example, using portfolios of students' work. Widespread use of peer and self-assessment had encouraged a culture where students were at ease with giving and accepting constructive criticism. Weaknesses in this respect derived from teachers' difficulties in translating level descriptions into workable criteria against which to assess students or against which students could assess themselves.
64. The following example from a Year 11 history lesson shows the general benefits of involving students in assessing their work. The lesson focused on what could be learned from a trial GCSE examination paper.

The teacher used the examination mark scheme with students to help them to analyse why they had achieved the marks they had been awarded and how they might improve. Peer and self-assessment were integral to the lesson as students evaluated their work against the criteria. These opportunities were interspersed with pertinent questions and comments from the teacher to extend students' understanding. Their comments indicated their very secure ability to appraise their own work, including identifying their own strengths and areas for improvement. The lesson

was effective because of four main factors. First, the teacher had expert knowledge both of history and the requirements of the examination. Second, the teacher knew the students very well and had structured the lesson to target their needs carefully. Third, relationships between the teacher and students were excellent and so the students had confidence to be open about the weakness in their performance as well as the strengths; there was excellent and appropriate use of humour to reinforce learning. Fourth, students' attitudes to learning were excellent and firmly rooted in the confidence they had in the teacher and in their experience of enjoyable and worthwhile history throughout their time in school.

65. In some schools and subjects, the surveys noted improvements in tracking the performance of individuals and groups of students. At its best this enabled teachers to identify common areas of weakness as well as to shape curriculum planning and approaches to teaching. In one school, for example, the modern languages department's tracking system showed that some groups of students studying GCSE French were not doing as well as they should in speaking and writing. Procedures were put into place to ensure that these students concentrated their efforts until they reached the required standard. This included extra help with their oral examination practice, resulting in significant improvements in their performance.

Notes

Inspectors visited 27 primary and 16 secondary schools between April and December 2007. Of the visits made, 26 focused on mathematics and 18 on English. (In one of the secondary schools, both subjects were observed.) Schools that had been judged satisfactory at their last inspection made up just over half the sample. This was intentional as these schools were more likely to have received support from the National Strategies through their local authorities, based on the analysis of where support was most necessary to raise standards and achievement. The overall effectiveness of 18 of the schools had been judged good or better at their last inspection. The profile of the primary schools was stronger than that of the secondary schools.

Evidence was also drawn from Ofsted's continuing programme of subject surveys. Inspectors visited 45 primary and 45 secondary schools for science and ICT, and 30 primary and 30 secondary schools for the remaining subjects.

During the visits, inspectors discussed assessment for learning with senior leaders and subject leaders, reviewed documentation and looked at samples of pupils' work. They also observed lessons in the relevant subject.

Further information

Publications

Assessment for learning: 10 principles, Assessment Reform Group, 2002.
Available in the publications section, www.assessment-reform-group.org/.

Assessment for learning: whole-school training materials (DfES 0043-2004 G), DCSF, 2004. (Note: secondary schools only.)
www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/secondary/keystage3/all/respub/afl_ws.

Pedagogy and practice: teaching and learning in secondary schools (DfES, 0125/2003), DCSF, 2004.
<http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DfES+0423+2004G&>.

2020 vision: report of the teaching and learning in 2020 review group (DfES 978 1 84478 862 0), DCSF, 2006.
<http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DFES-04255-2006&>.

Assessment for learning 8 schools project: summary of research, (DCSF-00067-2007), DCSF, 2007.
<http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DCSF-00067-2007&>.

The assessment for learning strategy (DCSF-00341-2008), DCSF, 2008.
www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primaryframework/assessment/dafl/ppl/dol/page005/.

Websites

For policy overview:
Department for Children, Schools and Families: www.dcsf.gov.uk.

For the Primary National Strategy:
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary.

For the Primary Assessment area of Primary Framework website:
www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primaryframework/assessment

For the Secondary National Strategy and the Secondary Frameworks with particular reference to:

English: www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/secondary/framework/.

Mathematics: www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/secondary/framework/.

Science: www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/secondary/framework/science

ICT: www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/secondary/framework/ict

For relevant publications and research
www.publications.teachernet.gov.uk.

Annex: Schools visited during the survey

Primary

Athersley South Primary School	Barnsley
Belmont Middle School	Harrow
Brampton Ellis Church of England Junior School	Rotherham
Comber Grove School	Southwark
Dalton Foljambe Primary School	Rotherham
Deansbrook Junior School	Barnet
Disley Primary School, Stockport	Cheshire
Field End Junior School, Ruislip	Hillingdon
Gateway Primary School, Carterton	Oxfordshire
Haxey Church of England School, Doncaster	North Lincolnshire
Herringthorpe Infant School	Rotherham
Holy Trinity Church of England Primary School, West Bromwich	Sandwell
John Rankin Junior School, Newbury	West Berkshire
Newport Church of England VC Junior School, Newport	Telford & Wrekin
Oldknow Junior School	Birmingham
Pallister Park Primary School	Middlesbrough
Peppard Church of England Primary School, Henley-on-Thames	Oxfordshire
Priddy Primary School, Wells	Somerset
Princethorpe Junior School	Birmingham
Royston St John the Baptist Church of England VA Primary School	Barnsley
Ryhope Junior School	Sunderland
Shireland Hall Junior and Infant School, Smethwick	Sandwell
St Helen's Primary School	Barnsley
St James' Church of England Primary School	Southwark
St Thomas' Church of England Primary School, Stockport	Cheshire
The Park Lane (Foundation) Primary School, Peterborough	Cambridgeshire
Wedderburn Infant and Nursery School, Harrogate	North Yorkshire

Secondary

Birches Head High School	Stoke-on-Trent
Fairfield High School	Hereford
Gosford Hill School, Kidlington	Oxfordshire
Hurlingham and Chelsea Secondary School	Hammersmith & Fulham
Manor High School (Foundation), West Bromwich	Sandwell
Marple Hall School – A Specialist Language College, Stockport	Cheshire
Perryfields High School, West Bromwich	Sandwell
Preston School, Yeovil	Somerset

Robert Blake Science College, Bridgwater
St Birinus School, Didcot
St Peters Church of England Middle School, Windsor
The Archbishop's School, Canterbury
The Heathcote School, Stevenage
The Neale-Wade Community College, March
The Willink School, Reading
Winterhill School

Somerset
Oxfordshire
Berkshire
Kent
Hertfordshire
Cambridgeshire
West Berkshire
Rotherham