Learners' Views on Assessment and Reporting: Research Report

Introduction

National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS) established a working group in 2014 to look at parents' needs and views in relation to assessment and reporting. One of its outputs was *Sharing Learning, Sharing Assessment,* a report which recommended that Scottish Government should carry out research into learners' views on assessment and reporting.

Scottish Government officials met with NPFS in December 2014 to discuss how this might be taken forward, and it was proposed that focus groups with young people would be an effective method of gathering learners' views on this topic. Children in Scotland was commissioned to carry out this work.

This consultation aimed to gather learners' views on how they are assessed, how they feel involved in the assessment process and whether they feel that feedback helps them progress and improve their learning. The focus groups also looked at how the learners perceive success and the ways that their learning progress is shared with parents and carers.

Time available for these conversations was limited and, therefore, in order to have a fair sample of children and young people, focus groups were established through existing networks of primary and secondary schools in Edinburgh and the Scottish Borders.

How we asked the children and young people what they thought

The researchers consulted with pupils from P6/7 and S2 in two mainstream Scottish Borders schools and pupils from S2 in one mainstream Edinburgh school.

It was anticipated that thinking about assessment and reporting in this way would be new and complex for many of the pupils and may be difficult to grasp. To address this, an awareness-raising session was delivered to each class prior to the focus group sessions. Sixty-five pupils aged 10-13 participated in these sessions.

The main aims of the **awareness-raising sessions** were:
- To gauge pupils' perceived knowledge of what constitutes 'assessment'
- To raise awareness of the multiple methods of assessment used by teachers
- To encourage pupils to think about who needs to know how they are doing in their learning, and why
- To encourage pupils to think about success and how they know when they have been successful

This session also provided the opportunity to ask the pupils whether they wanted to volunteer to participate in a focus group to explore the subject further.

Methods used in the **awareness-raising sessions** included:
- Agree/Disagree: choices activity
- A Post-It activity
- A presentation, including a PowerPoint

The main aims of the **focus groups** were:
- To find out how often pupils perceived they were assessed in different ways
- To gather pupils' views on the effectiveness and suitability of various methods of assessment
- To determine how pupils feel about reporting and if it helps them talk to their parents about their learning
- To find out if pupils felt their extra curricular achievements should be linked with school assessment and reporting

Methods used in the **focus groups** included:
- Card sorting activity
- Group mind-mapping and discussion
- Agree/Disagree: choices activity
- Carousel: key questions

What the children and young people told us

Awareness-raising sessions

Agree/Disagree Activity

The pupils were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statements. There were seven statements in total but not every group was asked every statement, meaning not all statements have the same amount of pupils responding.

What is assessment?

It's when you take a test
15 agreed
17 disagreed
23 unsure
One pupil disagreed and said that tests aren't assessment because *"you're being assessed all the time"*.
One pupil disagreed and said: *"you can be assessed on skills on a normal bit of work"*.

It's when the teacher tells you how you're doing
3 agreed
26 disagreed
18 unsure
Some pupils commented that this statement was *'just feedback'*.
"It's not proper assessment it's just like feedback that helps you to get better."

It's when other pupils tell you what they think of your work
3 agreed
30 disagreed
16 unsure
Some pupils came up with the term *'peer assessment'* and said they did this sometimes at school.
Those who disagreed more strongly said that other pupils were *'not in charge of you'* and that they would *'trust an adult'* but not their peers to assess them.
"Another child doesn't have the right to tell you what you're doing, they don't know either."

It's when you decide how well you've done with your work
0 agreed
29 disagreed
17 unsure
Every pupil in the P6/7 group disagreed initially but as we discussed the statement further someone mentioned the term *'self-assessment'* and the school's *'traffic light system'* and the pupils gradually moved towards the agree end of the scale.
"We have a sheet of criteria that you mark with."

"It works if you do it properly."

It's when a teacher watches you doing a presentation
5 agreed
17 disagreed
20 unsure
"It's like a dancing performance, the teacher gets to see how good you are."

It's when you collect examples of your work in your profile/learning log etc.
2 agreed
13 disagreed
21 unsure
"It's all your work for the whole year."
"It's assessing what you've learned."

It's when you decide your goals and targets with your teacher
6 agreed
8 disagreed
8 unsure
Only one group was asked this statement.
"If you reach that target then you know how you're doing."

There was no overall agreement amongst pupils that any of the seven statements constituted a form of assessment. Even for tests, the most commonly agreed method of assessment, 72% of pupils were unsure or disagreed that this was a form of assessment. No pupils agreed that deciding how well you had done with your work was a form of assessment.

Towards the end of the activity some pupils began to realise that all of the statements were methods of assessment. Many pupils changed their position on the agree/disagree scale as we discussed the different statements. While the data above was recorded as the initial reactions of the pupils, many changed their minds after further thought and discussion. This shows their developing understanding of assessment throughout the awareness-raising session.

Post-it Activity
Below are examples of some of the pupils' responses to the following two questions:

Who needs to know how you are doing in your learning and why?
38 pupils said that their parents and carers need to know how they are doing in their learning.
28 pupils said that their teachers need to know how they are doing in their learning.

Of the P6/7 group, only five pupils said teachers, the majority (n=) said their parents. High school pupils felt that teachers *and* parents needed to know.

Pupils also suggested themselves, social workers, school support staff and future employers as people who should know how they are doing at school.

"Your parents because they care about you and your education. They will help you if you are struggling."
"Me and my parents, because I need to know what I need to improve on and my parents need to see how I'm doing."
"Teachers need to know how you're doing in your learning so that they can provide work at the right level for you."
One pupil said: *"The government so that they can see how well youth as a whole are getting on and if they need to change the curriculum."*

How do you know if you've been successful in learning something?
18 pupils said they knew they had been successful in learning something when they got good marks on a test.
18 pupils said they knew they had been successful in learning something when someone told them they had done well, gave them praise or commented positively on their work.
12 pupils said they knew they had been successful in learning something when they felt they understood the topic or piece of work.

All pupils were able to highlight at least one way they would know they had been successful.
One high school group associated feeling successful almost exclusively with extra curricular activities such as sports or dancing, saying they felt successful when they won trophies, medals and competitions.

"Because you achieve, advance and you are praised."
"If you completely understand something and can explain your knowledge to someone else."
"Because your teacher will say well done or write something on your work like 'fab'!"
"You can get them right and your marks will get better."

Focus Groups
A total of 33 pupils participated in the focus groups from the three schools. This comprised 11 pupils from P6/7, and 11 pupils from each of the S2 classes. Each group had a good gender mix and they were inclusive of pupils with additional support needs.

Types of Assessment and Frequency
Pupils were given an envelope with nine cards, each displaying, in words and pictures, a different method of assessment. Pupils were asked to record the frequency in which they perceived they were assessed under each method.

	Every day	Once a week	Sometimes	Hardly ever	Invalid responses
Peer assessment	5	6	21	1	0
Talking w/teacher	5	1	11	14	2
Practical work or Projects	2	2	17	7	5
Setting targets	4	4	20	4	1
Self-assessment	8	11	13	1	0
Setting success criteria	14	3	10	2	4
Presentations or performances	1	2	22	7	1
Tests or exams	1	2	21	6	3
Learning Logs/folios/diaries	1	5	10	16	1

The most frequently used methods of assessment described by pupils were selfQ assessment (with 19 pupils indicating that they experienced this at least once a week) and setting success criteria (with 17 pupils indicating that they experienced this at least once a week). Least frequent forms of assessment were learning logs (with 16 pupils that these were hardly ever used) and talking with the teacher (14 pupils indicating that this happened hardly ever).

The majority of pupils who chose 'Hardly ever' for tests and exams were in the P6/7 group.
All but one of the pupils who chose 'Every day' for setting success criteria was in high school.
The majority of pupils who chose either 'Every day', 'Once a week' or 'Sometimes' for learning logs were in primary school.
One pupil who chose 'Every day' for tests and exams added: *"Feels like it."*
Two pupils added that they were 'Never' assessed through presentations or performances.
Responses were considered invalid if there was more than one option highlighted, there was no option highlighted or there was no option highlighted but a written response that did not clearly identify an option.

Mind Map and Discussion
The pupils discussed the positives and negatives about each method of assessment.

Examples of responses are:

Self-assessment
"It's really good because you can be honest with yourself as sometimes people are scared to be honest with you."

"Sometimes looking at your own work you don't realise that you've made a mistake."
"I can't really figure out what I've done wrong."

Talking with the teacher
"They can point things out that other people don't really notice."
"I find it harder to say things from your own mind in front of the teacher in case she disagrees or you say something wrong."
"I find it difficult to tell my teacher if I'm struggling."
"I like talking to my teacher so if you are struggling the teacher can talk to you and your parents."

Setting success criteria
"You can know exactly what you have to do and then you just go through them and make sure you have these in your work."
"Sometimes the teacher picks the hardest criteria, you worry about it and you're under pressure."
"It's better when we get a say in what the success criteria are."

Tests or exams
"I don't like when we're told to go and look back at what we got wrong because it makes me feel bad."
"I don't like seeing my other friends getting a better score."
"I really hate doing tests but they help me the most."
"They just make you stressed out it makes you think you haven't done well enough compared to everyone else."
"They are hard but they still do the job."
"Tests are bad because it can lower our self esteem when we get our bad results."

Presentations and Performances
"Good because it shows how confident you are and how you are improving."
"You practice so much. It stresses you out."
"I'm quite shy, I don't like standing up in front of other people so I could probably do better."

Setting targets
"If you set a target you have to work towards it to reach it and then you know you've done well."

Peer assessment
"You can hear other people's opinions about your work."
"You get a different perspective."
"If the person who is assessing it doesn't like the other person then it means they will write worse comments."
"Other people tell you how good you are. It's your team mates, teachers don't know how good you are."
"It's good because you get to see what others have done."

Learning Logs/Diaries/Folios
"They're not really much use because you don't really look in them."
"It's like having a backup of information you don't need."
"It's personal, some things you don't have to share except with the teacher."
"Teacher gets to see your work, what I've learned and what I've enjoyed."
"I liked them better when you could draw in them."

Practical work or projects
"I feel good at it, I'm better when I'm doing things."
"Imagination, choice, independence."

Agree/Disagree Activity

In this activity the pupils discussed the following statements. One of the groups did not do this activity. Overall young people were able to reflect on both positive and negative aspects across the range of assessment methods included in this activity, and were able to provide examples of factors (such as relationships and the degree of challenge required) which could help or hinder their success.

Examples of responses are:
Having targets or goals helps me with my learning
"If I don't beat my target I feel disappointed in myself."
"You should be able to achieve them but they should challenge you. You shouldn't be stressed out trying to achieve them."
"If teachers suggest a target it's hard to say 'no'."
"It gives me motivation and I'm working towards something."
I like talking with my teachers about my learning
"It depends what bond you have with the teacher, if you have connected with a teacher, it's about knowing you."
"If you're bad in a subject some teachers would just go to pupils who are really good and not tell you when you've improved."
"It doesn't matter which teacher, it depends on the subject and feeling more confident in certain subjects."
"If you talk to your teacher you can't say everything you want to say, you might get told off. You might feel ashamed for trying to talk to her."
"I like knowing what they think about how I'm doing."

Self-assessment lets me have a say about my learning
"Self-assessment is good but it can't really change my learning, the course is already set."

Peer assessment is important
"It's more comfortable, easier to hear from other young people."
"I would make it so you didn't know whose work it was so it was anonymous."
"People your age marking it is less embarrassing."

I am able to make decisions about my own learning
"It's normally textbook work, might be more exciting for students to have a say in how they would like to learn it."
"You might get to choose little things but not the big things, I'd like more of a say."
"Sometimes we get to choose our topics."

Carousel Activity
Below are examples of some of the pupils' responses to the following two questions:

How do the reports you get from school help you talk to your parents or carers about your learning?
Many of the pupils participating in this activity saw the value of reports as way of sharing progress, achievements and areas for further support. Others felt that reports could be clearer and were not always helpful
"My mum doesn't understand what I am doing at school so the reports are good."
"Reports help my mum and dad know what happens at school."
"Reports are good because they let my parents know what I need help with."
"The reports make my parents more proud of me!"
"Sometimes parents don't understand comments from the teacher."
"It helps them know how you are doing and if it is good they are proud. They can show everyone else in the family."
"If I get bad reports my parents aren't happy."

Should your school know about your achievements out of school? Why?
Again, many pupils felt that schools should know about achievements out of school to give schools a wider sense of pupils' lives and achievements:
"Yes because if they know about your achievements they could put you on the wall of fame or something like that."
"Yes because other people knowing what you've achieved makes you feel good about yourself."
"Yes because there's a better chance to get a reward at school."
"Most of my achievements are in school."
"No because it isn't anything to do with the teachers and school but if you're feeling proud and want to share it then you can tell them!"
"Some of your achievements could be personal."
"Yes so that school know what you are capable of."

Conclusions

It was evident that many pupils who participated in the consultation did not have a clear understanding of what constitutes assessment. While a few pupils thought assessment was a continuous process affecting everything they did, the majority of the children and young people consulted initially demonstrated uncertainty and only through activities and discussion were able to clarify their ideas and opinions. Some had difficulty in making associations between terms such as self or peer assessment and what they actually mean.

Opportunities to talk to their teachers about their learning were interpreted by some as '*getting feedback*' and they did not necessarily see this as a form of assessment. Teachers were identified more by high school pupils as people who need to know how they are doing in their learning to provide the help and support they require but also to set work at appropriate levels. However, 75% of pupils reported that they talk to their teachers about their learning only 'sometimes' or 'hardly ever'. Many pupils said they found it difficult to talk to their teachers about their learning, especially if they were struggling and felt they needed help. They highlighted the importance of having a connection with a teacher. They wanted to be able to discuss their learning with teachers who knew them well and recognised their strengths and weaknesses.

Both primary and high school pupils frequently mentioned feelings of stress and pressure. Pupils said they thought it was good to be challenged in their learning and gave examples of tests, targets and success criteria. However, they thought that goals should be achievable to avoid stress and disappointment. Some children and young people found it hard to disagree with a teacher when setting targets. They said that not achieving targets or getting poor marks in a test affected their self-esteem and some reported being keenly aware of comparisons with their peers. Pupils wanted to be involved in setting targets or establishing success criteria so that they felt comfortable with what they were trying to achieve and had a clear pathway of how to do it.

Pupils had very divided views on the benefits of self and peer assessments. Some appreciated the opportunity to assess their own work and to be honest about its quality. However, many pupils reported that they found it difficult to identify whether they had made mistakes and what standard their work was. Even those who were positive about this method of assessment thought it would not change anything about their learning. Some pupils said they liked peer assessment as it gave them a different perspective on their work or allowed them to see another pupil's work. Other pupils highlighted a concern that the assessment could be affected by the relationship between the pupils and suggested that anonymity when peer assessing would be fairer. While some pupils thought peer assessment was more comfortable and less embarrassing than talking to a teacher, others trusted an adult more and did not agree that another pupil of the same age had the ability or right to

tell them what they were doing. These forms of assessment were perceived as the most frequently used in the classroom.

Some pupils recognised that learning logs, folios and diaries are a means of assessing what they have learned and saw the benefits of gathering a whole year's work. They liked the opportunity to share with teachers what they had enjoyed and expressed pleasure in having some ownership of the content. Others disagreed about their effectiveness. They said the logs or folios were seldom looked at and thought it created an unnecessary back up of information. 78% of the pupils consulted reported that they used learning logs, folios or diaries only 'sometimes' or 'hardly ever'.

The pupils perceived the least used form of assessment in school was presentations and performances. Some reported that this was dependent on individual teachers and was not used consistently. Pupils were divided in their opinions on this type of assessment as it could create pressure publicly. A form of assessment they were enthusiastic about was through practical work or projects as it gave them 'imagination, choice, independence'.

Most pupils equated good marks in tests and exams as the clearest way of knowing they had been successful in their learning. However, feedback, positive comments and praise from teachers or parents and carers were all highlighted as important indicators of success. Some pupils found it difficult to identify what success looked like at school. Although those pupils who were regularly involved in setting success criteria said this helped them to recognise what they needed to do to achieve these goals.

For some pupils success was more readily identified when talking about their wider achievements out of school. Tangible evidence such as medals, trophies and certificates were appreciated and reported with pride. However, the majority of pupils regarded these achievements as very separate to success in school. They were seen as personal achievements and they questioned why school should know about them unless a pupil wanted praise or recognition by being placed on a 'Wall of Fame', for example.

In addition to teachers, pupils identified parents and carers as the key people who should be involved in their learning. Many pupils saw parents and carers as people who would support them and provide help, especially if they were experiencing difficulties.

Pupils wanted to be more involved in the reporting process. They wanted verbal feedback from teachers about their progress when reports were being prepared for parents. Pupils said parents and carers often did not understand what was happening at school and reports helped to explain this and keep them up to date. However, pupils thought they could have more of a role in explaining the report to parents and carers if they were more prepared themselves.

Key insights

- There should be improved clarity and understanding by pupils of assessment and how the various forms link to create a full picture of a pupil's progress
- Pupil-teacher relationships are key to successful and meaningful assessment
- Involving pupils in setting achievable targets or success criteria will offset negative effects on pupils' confidence and self-esteem
- Some peer assessment should be anonymous
- Pupils should be more aware of the benefits and purpose of learning logs, folios or diaries
- Pupils need support to develop a clearer understanding of the importance of their wider achievements, especially at key transition points
- Pupils should be more involved in the reporting process
- Pupils should be supported to become more confident communicators about what is happening in their learning as part of assessment and reporting

For more information, please contact:

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