

## Alyson Mitchell, Liz Sims and Hetal Sitaram's Development Work **Assessment for learning** at Brookmans Park Primary School, Hatfield

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Assessment for learning was identified at a staff meeting as being a priority for development. Alyson, who was teaching Year 1 children, agreed to collaborate with Liz and Hetal who taught older children in Years 5 and 6. They would lead the way with the development of assessment for learning practice. In the staff meeting colleagues had discussed the way children receive feedback on their learning. Typically, this was done through written comments on children's work. These comments were often quite lengthy and so the process is very time consuming. It was also noted that a recent OFSTED inspection had highlighted the relative lack of verbal feedback. Colleagues began to question the usefulness of this approach.

Alyson, Liz and Hetal formed a project group and focused on ways of adjusting the balance by providing effective oral feedback. This would need to be manageable. Written marking of children's work would continue but would be supplemented with more deliberate oral feedback.

A first step was to consult pupils about their views on the comments they receive about their work. The results of a group discussion with pupils were recorded on large sheets of paper. Pupils were also asked to write comments on a simple feedback sheet. The project group reviewed this feedback both as individuals and then as a group, exploring different interpretations of what the children had said.

Year 1 pupils said that they usually knew what they needed to do to improve their work, but could not really say how they knew this which suggested that their understanding might be insecure. Other children expressed dissatisfaction with feedback and said that they were not clear about their next steps. This was puzzling since the teachers had written these down below the work. One surprising

point made by the children was that verbal feedback left them uneasy because they did not have a record of it.

At first Alyson, Liz and Hetal found these responses disappointing and somewhat contradictory. Their perceptions were that they had been conscientious about assessment feedback and so they were very concerned that the children were not finding their marking helpful. They then read more about assessment for learning and found Shirley Clarke's (2001; 2005) work to be particularly helpful.

Having read more about assessment for learning and discussed what the children had told them, they decided to adopt a variety of strategies including the following:

- Written feedback will be shorter, explicit and to the point (e.g. smiley face, straight face and 'have a go'; 3 stars and a wish highlighted in pink and blue).
- Guidance on next steps will be included in the written feedback.
- More time will be given to providing verbal feedback.
- More use will be made of the visualiser<sup>1</sup> to allow pupils to discuss the feedback process.
- Peer marking will be introduced in Year 5, along with 'learning journals'.
- Year 1 pupils' targets will be put on a 'Smart Notebook' and colour coded – pupils will then have easy access to their targets.
- Specific time will be allowed for children to review and improve their work following the feedback.

The decision to make time for review and improvement is very important. It has tended to be squeezed because of the pressure to cover the curriculum.

Following the development of these strategies, informal feedback has been positive, particularly with Year 5 children. Through the target setting they are now more involved and are taking more responsibility for their learning. The pupil consultation exercise will be repeated once the strategies have all been tried out for a substantial period of time.

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<sup>1</sup> Visualiser: a machine which projects an image on to a screen – e.g. a page of a pupil's work book.

The project group arranged a staff meeting to explain what they were doing and some other members of staff agreed to try out some of the approaches that were presented to them. Members of the senior leadership team were very positive and the Head observed a pupil review session and responded favourably. This support at senior level is very important in enabling these ideas to develop further. Alyson, Liz and Hetal planned a second staff meeting to present their ideas and the outcomes of the project. At the time of writing they were considering further strategies such as:

- For Year 1 pupils – using the pink / blue colour code to highlight achievement and indicate parts of the work which could be improved.
- Extending peer marking and the recording of verbal feedback to reduce teachers' workload and improve pupils' ownership.

This project has opened up space for reflection on the part of both teachers and pupils and it has brought assessment feedback alive. The children are far more independent as learners because of this.

## **References**

Clarke, S. (2001) *Unlocking Formative Assessment*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Clarke, S. (2005) *Formative Assessment in Action: Weaving the elements together*. London: Hodder Murray.