

Primary Assessment and Accountability Conference

Radisson Blu Hotel, Durham – Friday 10th July 2015

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In English primary schools we are in a period of considerable change in relation to assessment. This is the last year that National Curriculum levels will be the accepted currency of progress and attainment. Schools are being encouraged to develop their own replacements with relatively little guidance. The expected outcomes at the end of Key Stage 2 are an unknown quantity. The Reception Baseline has replaced the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. All of this against a backdrop of a fractured support system for schools and less than satisfactory levels of teacher training on assessment.

In July, ASPE and CEM at Durham University brought together a diverse group of speakers to explore the current environment and draw out some knowledge and understanding to give confidence to the profession in these turbulent times.

This Durham-based event was attended by over 50 educators from diverse backgrounds and focussed on the relationships between assessment and accountability in primary schools. The diversity of the speakers and audience stimulated much fruitful discussion around the current pressures in the system and the role that evidence might play in driving improvement.

Professor Paul Leseman gave the keynote address. Coming from Utrecht University in the Netherlands, Professor Leseman recounted his work on the assessment of young children and the way that colours our perspective of their education. Considerable discussion followed his note that the children of teachers who encouraged free play do not make good progress. There was a general agreement among the group that there should be a clear focus to play.

Based on her 20 years experience of assessment development, Dr. Christine Merrell, talked about what has been learned from the Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) project. This system was first developed in 1994 and has now has involved more than three million assessments. Dr Merrell addressed the importance of getting an early understanding of what children know and can do and how that is related to our expectations for them at the end of primary school. Importantly, she outlined how effective a computer-delivered assessment solution can be for this purpose, particularly pertinent to the introduction of more objective assessment being introduced this year as an official baseline for state schools.

In the afternoon, Russell Hobby, General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers added a broad and refreshing perspective of the policy changes ahead. Of great interest to the audience was Russell's account of the NAHT's lobbying activity and how they have been able to use their understanding of the needs of teachers and the demands placed on them to exert influence when it really matters. He was able to point to several instances when their pressure has prevented ideas moving forward that they considered detrimental to the profession.

The last talk by Professor Peter Tymms addressed the international study of children starting school (iPIPS project) which is operating across the world, gaining traction among policy makers. It is beginning to generate some really interesting data including comparisons between Russian children starting school and their progress in the first year with those in England and Scotland.

The plenary session drew together a range of topics from the day including discussion of international test results and how countries can learn from each other. A PhD student of Chinese origin provided an poignant observation that drew the day to a close. She commented that she had a young child who had been to school in England and in China. When she goes on holiday to China her boy is insistent on only one thing – he must not go to school there. School are much nicer places in England.