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Using TAPS Focused Assessments as part of our teacher assessment approach

Kerry-Anne Barber looks at the Focused Assessments in action and her experience of them being translated into practice

As the Science Co-ordinator at St Paul's RC Primary School, I have been involved in producing and trialling resources for the TAPS project over the last four years. The following article explains how St Paul's has used the Focused Assessments (FAs). I have always tried to promote enquiry-based teaching, which addresses the needs and curiosity of the cohort whilst ensuring that all statutory content is covered, so felt that this should also be reflected in encouraging staff to employ a range of assessment methods. FAs are a resource to support, but not dictate, science assessment.

Use of Focused Assessment tasks at St Paul's

The FAs have been introduced to all

staff and revisited through INSET training and staff meetings, where I felt that it was important to give teachers the time and opportunities to explore the assessments that were most relevant to their year groups. I emphasised that FAs are a good bank of resources, which address specific assessment strands, but that teachers should tweak them and shouldn't use them for the sake of it if they had a more relevant method of making a professional judgement. Throughout the four years, staff members have felt confident dipping into the bank of FAs and have used them to inform their judgements alongside many other methods of assessment.

Validity and reliability of Focused Assessment tasks

Each Focused Assessment task is set out with reference to the 'working scientifically' and 'conceptual knowledge' strands that they

address and really capture a clear picture of the children working in a practical task. The activities are detailed enough to follow clearly, but ideas for adapting the tasks are also provided. For each FA there are clear assessment indicators and key questions that are designed to determine whether there is evidence that pupils have 'not yet met', 'met' or are 'exceeding' the assessment focus. Personally, I believe that the most relevant of these three is the meeting indicator, as this is the level that children are expected to reach, whilst the exceeding strand may be too narrow and restrict teachers to specific extension activities, when often the pupils will suggest their own ways of extending a task that are more pertinent to what they want to explore.

The assessment indicators are ideal for use as part of whole school moderation. These are also reinforced by the exemplar materials showing evidence of work that has met the standard.

Currently, we are in what could be deemed a more fortunate position in primary science, where end of key stage assessment is rarely used for performance management or school targets but, with the right leadership, can be monitored to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning. At St Paul's, regular monitoring of each year group's assessment grids ensures that gaps can be analysed and, through discussion with the teacher, it can be determined what needs to change to address these gaps. This may involve further training, resources, identification of a suitable assessment method (such as an FA), or juggling the curriculum to ensure that there is enough time to address each assessment strand. This is where the roles of the Science Co-ordinator and the Senior Leadership Team are so important as, when teachers feel supported rather than judged, teachers are more honest in their judgements and there will be less possibility of bias affecting grades – their assessments will be more valid and reliable.

Manageability

Generally, staff have felt that Focused Assessments are easy to use and adapt, as there is a wide variety from which they can choose to address particular 'working scientifically' assessment strands. Manageability of the FAs all depends on picking the right activity and not just using an FA for the sake of it if you've already covered the strands in another way.

For those teachers who are less experienced in science, as well as trainee teachers, I feel that the FAs have been a great bank of resources to dip into and that they provide reassurance in their judgements. They are not onerous to plough through, as they have only the key points included and the database is easy to search. The inclusion of examples of work meeting the assessment criteria also provides clear guidelines to teachers as to what to look for.

At the other end of the spectrum, experienced science teachers are confidently using the key questions and activities as a general guide and adapting them according to the needs of their cohort. The activities are straightforward to adapt and, as long as you are clear about the assessment criteria you are addressing, the tasks, key questions and assessment indicators can easily be changed to respond to the needs of a particular cohort of children. For example, I taught a child who had very poor literacy skills, struggled to write a sentence and who was hard to generally engage in learning. However, he soon displayed a real aptitude and love of science, so it was very important that my assessments of him were based upon his scientific ability rather than his literacy skills. I adapted the Focused Assessments to ensure that there were enough opportunities for him to express himself through multimedia approaches and, at the end of the year, we were both very proud that he had met all the end of Year 6 (age 11) interim assessment criteria in science.

Conclusion

Whilst the staff at St Paul's have found the Focused Assessments a good bank of assessment resources to use and support their judgements where needed, it is important to also instil in staff a sense of professional responsibility for their own judgements and reassurance that they do not need to provide evidence for everything. The teacher is best placed to assess the pupils in their class and many judgements can be provided through discussion and assessment opportunities that often arise at the most unexpected moments! The inclusion of key questions and assessment indicators are generally a very clear, supportive assessment tool, but teachers shouldn't restrict themselves to just looking for modelled answers to the detriment of other assessment opportunities. Due to the very nature of a good science lesson, children will choose their own methods of exploration and investigation and it is important that teachers are well organised and flexible to go with the children's ideas, even if this does go 'off plan', as these will provide better learning opportunities for them. When conducting such a child-centred investigation, children may provide good evidence of meeting several 'working scientifically' objectives, not just those that are of a particular focus for that lesson.

At St Paul's, the use of Focused Assessment tasks has certainly enriched our science assessments as part of a wider, more holistic bank of assessment strategies and resources. Ultimately, all teachers need to be clear about what it is they are trying to assess and what is the most appropriate and exciting method for the individual needs and curiosities of their cohort. As soon as assessment becomes prescriptive, however brilliant the resource, then that is when it will fail to address the needs of all pupils.

Kerry-Anne Barber was Science Co-ordinator at St Paul's Catholic Primary School in Yate.