

Back to School: Diagnosis Over Assumption

Last week, students up and down England returned to school. For many of them, this will be the first time they have been in a classroom with a teacher for six months. Today the [NFER](#) published '[Schools Responses to Covid-19 - The challenges facing schools and pupils in 2020](#)'. Two of the findings from this paper follow:

"1. Nearly all teachers estimate that their pupils are behind in their curriculum learning, with the average estimate being three months behind. Over half of teachers estimate that the learning gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has widened.

2. Teachers in the most deprived schools are over three times more likely to report that their pupils are four months or more behind in their curriculum learning than teachers in the least deprived schools."

There has been much talk of the learning gap in recent months and undoubtedly, children will have been affected by missing so much school. However, the danger is that we assume what these learning gaps are and that they will be the same for all children. They won't be. Children will have engaged differently with the work set for them during lockdown, had different levels of support with the work and interpreted information presented to them remotely differently. It's for this reason that rather than *assuming* what and where the learning gaps will be, we need to effectively *diagnose* the gaps. This is important for all students, but is especially important for students who come from a disadvantaged background.

The [EEF](#) have recently published '[A guide to supporting school planning: A tiered approach to 2020-21](#)'. This guide suggests that schools should be focusing on three key areas to support children as they return to school:

1. Teaching
2. Targeted Academic Support
3. Wider Strategies

It's a really useful document for leaders and provides a number of signposts to other resources to support them in their work. The teaching section talks a great deal about the importance of diagnostic assessment and it's role in addressing the learning gaps that will have developed during the lockdown period. Whilst summative assessments will provide us with broad information about possible gaps across groups of pupils, they won't enable us to effectively diagnose the specific learning gaps of individual students that we teach. It is this information that is so useful to classroom teachers, as they plan the 'Covid recovery' for their classes.

With this in mind, it will become even more important than ever that effective diagnostic assessment becomes rooted in our everyday classroom practice. Only then will we be able to accurately diagnose where the learning gaps are and then plan how to address them. The report suggests some effective teaching approaches to achieve this:

Increasing the use of open-ended questioning, when sharing a text with children, can provide numerous opportunities to assess vocabulary, background knowledge and reading comprehension.

High frequency of verbal questioning - used throughout the lesson to assess understanding.
Short answer quizzes - a really useful way to start a lesson, especially if you have had to travel from one bubble to another and need an activity for students to do immediately (another tip is to actually set these at the end of the previous lesson, so students can get on with them straight away).

Multiple choice quizzes - these also have advantage of helping to identify misconceptions (there is a good article on Multiple Choice Questions [here](#)).

Many teachers have become very familiar with Google Forms Quizzes in recent months, as a part of their distance teaching. This is an excellent way to set quizzes and gather information about what pupils do and don't understand. This can be done prior to the lesson as a homework, and then be used to inform the lesson.

These low stakes approaches will allow teachers to diagnose the learning gaps with much greater precision than broad exam style questions. Teachers can then use this assessment information to make informed decisions about the next steps in their teaching - *Can I move on? Do I need to go back over points X and Y with specific students? Do I need to reteach the whole topic? Do I need to plan an out of lesson intervention to address this for some students?*

It's great to have our young people back in our classrooms and to be able to start the process of filling the learning gaps that will have developed in recent months. There is much to do over the next year, but one thing is for sure, school staff all over the country will rise to the challenge - because that's what we do!

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