



Using BASE to support personalised learning

Supporting pupil progress

Dr Rebecca Jellis, Head teacher

Cotherstone Primary School is situated in the centre of a peaceful and idyllic village on the River Tees, just outside Barnard Castle in County Durham. In addition to the village school, Cotherstone comes complete with archetypal stone cottages, overflowing gardens, the village pub, the sleepy church and cemetery, and the village green with its parish notices and reminders for coffee mornings. It's the classic leafy rural village school.

At present there are 57 pupils enrolled from Reception to Year 6 and the school's 3 classes are taught in mixed age groups. Great care is taken to ensure collaborative learning with a number of other local schools. The pupil population is derived from surprisingly diverse backgrounds and some of the pressures on the school come from the preconceived notion that a small school with small class sizes should automatically produce exceptionally high results in comparison with other schools. 'Parental expectations are very high here' head teacher, Dr Rebecca Jellis explains. Indeed, the school strives to exceed expectations and is considered 'outstanding' in all categories of the Ofsted inspection.

Challenges of assessment

Dr Jellis and her colleagues have worked hard to implement an effective, appropriate and uniform assessment framework. Dr Jellis has well-defined requirements: 'We need a clear system that is suitable for accountability, tracking pupil progress and transition between key stages.'

This is clearly a necessary, yet imposing task for any individual school to achieve. In this small rural school the staff is limited to a dedicated team of just four teaching staff and one teaching assistant, all of whom have multiple responsibilities already, and therefore the undertaking of creating a reliable, efficient and robust assessment framework becomes an even greater challenge.

Building blocks in place

The staff and pupils of Cotherstone, however, are fortunate in that the building blocks of clear assessment principles and practice are already in place as, among other measures, the school has been engaged in assessing pupils against objective and agreed criteria for the last decade by using CEM's personalised, diagnostic assessments in reading and maths, PIPS Baseline, and now use BASE, CEM's updated reception baseline assessment, to assess pupils on entry to and exit from reception.

Dr Jellis administers the computer-adaptive assessments herself with each child individually on entry to the school. 'It gives you a chance to really get to know each and every child in the whole school this way,' she explains. The assessments are given to pupils on entry in September and the results of the computer-adaptive tests are generated within a few days.

'The assessments give you a base level of understanding' Dr Jellis explains and she is keenly aware of the power of the assessments in providing a distinct profile of each pupil. This profile enables them to identify specific individual potential and learning needs, as well as serving as the basis for discussion in adjusting and adapting the curriculum delivered to each child, as well as the resources and support allocated to the classes.

'Our intake comes from all over', Dr Jellis explains. 'It's a really diverse population. The CEM data helps us to see the spread of ability and then we can make sure we use our support assistant and resources appropriately.'

Understanding the narrative

Like many schools, Cotherstone Primary uses a combination of CEM's standardised baseline assessments, along with school-based formative assessment, like stepping stones evidencing the pathway to progress. The 'on-entry' BASE assessment feedback, plus the full range of teacher observations and formative assessments over the course of the year are combined with the feedback obtained from the end of year BASE assessment and help to provide the narrative of each child's progress over the whole of the vital first year of formal education: 'You get to understand the whole story and see how far they have come', Dr Jellis enthuses.

Positive outcomes

CEM offers further support by ensuring that all BASE assessment data can be viewed interactively, downloaded in pdf format and imported to the school management information system. Indeed, Dr Jellis also has the flexibility of deciding to import some or all aspects of the feedback, enabling her to match it up with the range of results from in-school formative and summative assessments and therefore examine and confirm correlations between them, providing a detailed, comprehensive and multi-faceted pupil and cohort profile.

Crucially, given the small size of pupil intake each year, Dr Jellis is also able to use the cohort profiles from the CEM feedback to identify tendencies over the course of the years. 'We are able to identify the trends in our cohorts year on year. In small schools it is usually really hard to see the trends – simply because there is ordinarily less information to work with. But with the CEM data we actually have the evidence' she explains.

Regardless of the national uncertainty surrounding the ongoing educational reforms, staff and pupils at Cotherstone clearly benefit from using CEM's standardised assessments in supporting target setting and monitoring attainment. Dr Jellis and her team's devotion to ensuring their pupils exceed the expected levels of progress are made clear in the most recent Ofsted report (2013) which highlights the fact that 'Teaching is outstanding because teachers know their pupils well and plan carefully to meet the needs of all in the mixed-age classes... pupils' progress is tracked very carefully by the head teacher to ensure that all pupils are set challenging, attainable targets'