



Standards
& Testing
Agency

Piloting the 7 aspects of engagement for summative assessment: qualitative evaluation

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Contents

Contents	2
Acknowledgements	4
Glossary	5
Executive summary	7
Background	7
Implementing the 7 aspects approach	8
Views on using the 7 aspects approach for formative and summative assessment	9
Experiences of the hub school model	10
Conclusions	10
Chapter 1 – introduction	12
Rochford Review	12
7 aspects of engagement pilot	13
Aims and objectives of this research	14
Summary of the methodology	15
Structure of this report	16
Chapter 2 – implementing the 7 aspects approach	18
Existing methods of assessment	18
Approaches to implementing the 7 aspects	22
School-directed	22
Hub-directed	22
Hub-influenced	23
Evidence collection	23
Involvement of school staff	23
Involvement of other professionals	26
Involvement of parents	27
Engagement4Learning (E4L) materials	27
Engagement profile	28
Use of the E4L 28-point scale	29
Engagement ladder	31

Other methods of recording observation outcomes	31
Changes to approach between the baseline and summative assessments	32
Approaches to information sharing	33
Parents	33
Other professionals	36
Governors	37
Ofsted and local authorities	37
Chapter 3 – views on using the 7 aspects approach	39
Understanding of each of the aspects	39
Practical challenges	42
Views on suitability as a method of assessment	44
The schools’ view	44
Other stakeholder views	48
Chapter 4 – experiences of the hub school model	52
The hub school experience	52
Participating school experiences of the hub model	56
Effectiveness of the hub model	59
Future learnings	60
Conclusions	62
Use of 7 aspects as a summative assessment approach	62
The hub school model	64

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Glossary

Rochford Review – an independent review of how pupils, who are working below the standard of the national curriculum assessments, are assessed.

Subject-specific learning – the Rochford Review has recommended dividing pupils working below the standard of the national curriculum assessments into 2 groups - those engaged in subject-specific learning and those not. The latter is the group for which DfE are trying a different approach - assessing against the 7 aspects rather than “standards” of teacher assessment.

P scales – performance attainment targets for pupils aged 5 to 16 with special educational needs (SEN), who are working below the standard of the national curriculum assessments. Currently, it is a statutory requirement to use P scales 1 to 4, but the Rochford Review advised that these should be replaced. The pilot focused on pupils working at P 4 and below.

Cognition and learning – cognition refers to the thinking skills and thought processes that a child/young person has acquired through their prior experience. Learning needs are on a continuum and can vary across subjects and situations. Children with learning needs may learn at a slower pace than their peers, despite appropriate differentiation.

Pre-key stage standards – these are a series of standards designed to be used for pupils working below the standard of the national curriculum assessments but engaged in subject-specific learning (they sit ‘above’ the 7 aspects). They will be introduced in the 2018/19 academic year to replace P scales for this group of pupils (broadly P 5 to 8).

Engagement4Learning (E4L) – a team of researchers involved in the original DfE-funded Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities Research Project (2009 to 2011), led by Professor Barry Carpenter. They have produced a suite of published resources for schools using the 7 aspects of engagement.

Engagement4Learning (E4L) framework – the umbrella term covering E4L’s guide to teaching and assessing using the model of engagement. This is predominantly a teaching tool currently. This pilot explores adapting it as a summative assessment tool. Schools in the pilot did not have to follow every aspect of the framework or use its resources.

Engagement profile – a personalised profile for each pupil, setting out how they demonstrate engagement.

Engagement scale/28-point Scale – a 28-point scale that E4L suggest using to measure the progress pupils make against the 7 aspects (a maximum score of 4 for each). It is not standardised, but individual to each child.

Engagement ladders – a tool that E4L offer teachers to present information on the levels of engagement for different pupils in their class.

Formative assessment – assessment procedures conducted by teachers during the learning process in order to modify teaching and learning activities to improve pupil attainment.

Summative assessment – assessment to evaluate pupil learning at the end of a period of time, for example, the end of the school year, by comparing against a previous baseline.

Hub school model – schools in the pilot were divided into 8 ‘hubs’ based on geographical location. Pilot information and training was delivered through the hubs.

Hub school – each hub was led by a hub school. These schools received additional training and support from DfE to allow them to support and train the schools in their hub. All hub schools were special schools.

Participating school – schools taking part in the pilot that were not hub schools. The participating pilot schools were a mix of special schools and mainstream primary schools with significant SEND provision.

Education, Health and Care plan (EHC plan) – for children and young people aged up to 25 who need more support than is available through special educational needs (SEN) support. EHC plans identify educational, health and social needs and set out the additional support to address those needs. EHC plans replaced SEN statements.

Executive summary

This report presents findings from the qualitative evaluation of a pilot designed to explore the use of the 7 aspects of engagement approach as a method of summative assessment for pupils not engaged in subject-specific learning.

The research was commissioned by DfE and conducted by IFF Research, an independent research agency, working in partnership with Dr. Debs Robinson (University of Derby), between March and July 2018.

Background

The Rochford Review¹ recommended removing P scales as the statutory assessment tool for pupils working below the standard of the national curriculum assessments. It suggested replacing these with 2 new forms of assessment – pre-key stage standards for pupils engaged in subject-specific learning and assessment against the 7 aspects of engagement for cognition and learning for pupils who were not engaged in subject-specific learning.

The 7 aspects of engagement (responsiveness, curiosity, discovery, anticipation, persistence, initiation and investigation) were developed in 2011 as part of a research project into children with complex learning difficulties and disabilities.² The research team developed an engagement profile and scale based on the 7 aspects of engagement as a resource for educators. The purpose of the engagement profile was to provide a robust, effective and meaningful tool for personalised assessment and planning for those pupils with profound and severe learning difficulties.

The Rochford Review recommended the adoption of the 7 aspects of engagement as a basis for statutory assessment. As it has never been used before as a summative assessment tool, DfE confirmed it would pilot the approach during 2018 before deciding on whether to introduce it on a statutory basis.

The pilot ran from January to July 2018 and was based on a hub model involving one lead school per region, working with a small number of participating schools. In total, 55 schools³ took part in the pilot, including a small number of mainstream schools with pupils who had severe and profound learning difficulties. The hub schools received additional training and support from DfE to support other pilot schools in their region.

¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/rochford-review-final-report.

² Carpenter, B., Egerton, J., Brooks, T., Cockbill, B., Fotheringham, J. and Rawson, H. (2011), *The complex learning difficulties and disabilities research project: Developing pathways to personalised learning*: Final Report. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED525543>.

³ 56 schools began the pilot, but one dropped out as they no longer had any children who were not in subject-specific learning.

The main aim of the research was to assess the extent to which the 7 aspects of engagement can offer an effective tool for providing summative assessment on pupil progress, and thereby to inform DfE's decision about whether to extend it as a statutory assessment tool for use at the end of key stages 1 and 2.

The research was conducted in 2 phases. Phase 1 focused on how the hubs were set up, schools' understanding of the 7 aspects approach, and their experiences of using it for baseline assessment. It involved qualitative telephone interviews with 40 of the 56 pilot schools, covering all 8 hub schools and 32 participating schools, during March 2018.

Phase 2 focused on experiences of using the 7 aspects approach for summative assessment. It involved qualitative telephone interviews with 47 schools, and more in-depth, case study visits with a further 7 schools. This included interviews with 3 to 4 teachers involved in implementing the approach, a school governor, and (where possible) 1 to 2 parents. This stage also involved interviews with a small number of local authority representatives.

Implementing the 7 aspects approach

DfE allowed pilot schools to have flexibility in how they implemented the 7 aspects, and in keeping with this, pilot schools took a variety of approaches. Around two-thirds decided on their approach independently of the hub, while around one-third implemented their approach in agreement with their hub school.

In the majority of pilot schools, class teachers, teaching assistants and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) were primarily involved in conducting assessments. Some schools also involved senior members of staff, such as deputy headteachers. Only a very small minority chose to involve other professionals or parents in conducting assessments.

Nearly all schools used a least one of the Engagement4Learning (E4L) materials during the assessments. The engagement profile was most commonly used, followed by the 28-point scale. Schools found the engagement profile a helpful way of recording what engagement looked like for each pupil. Schools investigated the use of the scale, but many had concerns about the way that scores varied for each pupil and about the appropriateness of taking what they perceived to be a quantitative approach to assessment of this pupil group.

Only a minority of schools shared or planned to share 7 aspects assessment outcomes with parents or professionals involved in the pupils' wider care. Where schools had not shared specific information on the 7 aspects, this was due to concerns about the complexity of the information produced, giving rise to uncertainty about how it could best be communicated, perceived lack of parental interest in the specifics of the approach, and some schools' own lack of experience and confidence in using the approach.

Views on using the 7 aspects approach for formative and summative assessment

Schools recognised the importance of developing a strong understanding of the approach, and of each of the 7 aspects and how to assess against them. On the whole, schools found that they were able to develop this understanding over the course of the pilot, although – like any new method – it took time for many of them to get to grips with.

Moderation and discussion between teachers were viewed as central to developing a shared and consistent understanding amongst staff, but not all schools felt able to dedicate the time needed for this.

Many schools found the workload associated with implementing the 7 aspects approach to be challenging and reported that the accumulated number of staff hours spent implementing the approach was very high. Some schools adapted their involvement in the pilot as a result, for example by reducing the frequency of the assessments that they planned to conduct.

Many pilot schools had concerns about how they would manage the workload if it became statutory for them to use the approach to assess all of their pupils in the relevant year groups who were not engaged in subject-specific learning, rather than the small number of pupils covered by the pilot. This was even with the knowledge that they would no longer need to use P scales, if the 7 aspects approach was introduced as a replacement. Schools who did not find the workload a challenge were already using approaches with similar levels of staff input (alongside P scales) and were already very familiar with the 7 aspects.

Overall, many schools found the 7 aspects approach extremely useful for formative assessment and would continue to use it for this purpose, but they were uncertain about its usefulness for summative assessment.

Schools found conducting the assessments very helpful as a tool to improve the quality of teaching and were enthusiastic about how it helped them to increase their knowledge of individual pupils and identify personalised ways to develop pupil engagement. However, most schools were concerned about the suitability of the approach for summative assessment. This was due to additional workload, the amount of variability observed amongst these pupils, knowing that some pupils will not be able to make much or any observable progress due to the nature of their disability or condition, and lack of clarity around what observed 'progress' showed them. Some of these are similar to the criticisms made of P scales. Many schools were positive about the value of the 7 aspects approach alongside their current (non-statutory) assessment processes and supported the decision to remove P scales but they did not consider the 7 aspects approach to be adequate for summative assessment on its own.

Local authorities' views on the approach were broadly similar to schools'. They recognised its value as a tool for informing high quality teaching, but were unsure how

they could interpret its results in terms of demonstrating pupil progress. Ultimately, they found the summative assessment information that schools provided to them of only limited use, as it did not give them an accurate idea of progress made by pupils.

As only a small number of parents and governors saw assessment information, it has not been possible to draw firm conclusions about their views. However, we did identify some good practice examples of how case study schools shared the information with parents, who appreciated a qualitative, narrative-based approach rather than being provided with a score on a scale.

Experiences of the hub school model

Overall, hub and participating schools alike deemed the hub model to be an appropriate and effective method for implementing the pilot. Hub schools were able to apply their previous experience as teaching schools and found the budgets manageable. However, finding sufficient time for providing support to participating schools was a challenge for some hubs, especially where this covered a large geographical area, which constrained the scope for regular face-to-face meetings. Although none of the hub schools raised this directly with DfE during the pilot, in hindsight some of them would have welcomed more ongoing contact with DfE in terms of support and opportunities to provide feedback.

Participating schools felt reassured by the support that they received from hub schools and appreciated having a dedicated contact in case of any queries.

Conclusions

Most pilot schools were enthusiastic about using the approach for formative assessment. The approach enabled them to deepen their knowledge of pupils' responsiveness and identify ways they could increase engagement levels on an individualised and pupil-centred basis.

However, most pilot schools were apprehensive about the use of the approach as a means of statutory summative assessment at the end of key stages 1 and 2. This was in part due to concerns about variability amongst this group of pupils, as the same pupil can display very different levels of engagement from one assessment to the next due to different medical, environmental or even circumstantial factors. Notably, when a pupil's engagement increased over time, schools did not necessarily feel this resulted in the pupil making progress in learning outcomes, but it was instead a reflection of how the approach helped them to improve their teaching practice. This raises questions about the validity of the approach for summative assessment. Schools were also uncertain about how to use the assessment results to make decisions about when pupils were ready to move on to subject-specific learning.

Schools held varied opinions on using the approach for tracking progress against EHC plan outcomes. Those who felt most positive about this had linked their use of the 7 aspects directly to progress in achieving EHC plan outcomes. However, schools noted that it would not be possible to use the 7 aspects approach for tracking EHC plan outcomes that were outside the scope of cognition and learning, for example physical outcomes.

Schools' concerns were echoed by the small number of local authority representatives interviewed. Local authority representatives also felt that the approach was very useful for formative assessment, but they were unclear about its usefulness for summative assessment, in particular whether and how it could be interpreted at school rather than individual pupil level, and its limitations to certain areas of development.

If it was to be rolled out nationally, local authority representatives also highlighted the need for intensive resourcing in terms of extra staff training and moderation to enable a consistent interpretation across local authorities.

Chapter 1 – introduction

This report presents findings from the qualitative evaluation of a pilot designed to explore the use of the 7 aspects of engagement approach as a method of summative assessment for pupils not engaged in subject-specific learning (broadly, those working at P scale 4 and below). The research was commissioned by DfE and conducted by IFF Research, an independent research agency, working in partnership with Dr. Debs Robinson (University of Derby), between March and July 2018.

Rochford Review

The Rochford Review⁴ recommended removing P scales as the statutory assessment tool for pupils working below the standard of the national curriculum tests and replacing these with 2 new forms of assessment – pre-key stage standards for pupils engaged in subject-specific learning and assessment against the 7 aspects of engagement for cognition and learning for pupils not engaged in subject-specific learning.⁵ A survey carried out by the Rochford Review showed the majority (78%) of respondents felt that P scales were not fit for purpose and over 60% of parents and carers who responded did not think they provided useful information about their child.

The 7 aspects of engagement (responsiveness, curiosity, discovery, anticipation, persistence, initiation and investigation) were developed in 2011 as part of a research project into children with complex learning difficulties and disabilities.⁶

The research team developed an engagement profile and scale based on the 7 aspects of engagement as a resource for educators. The purpose of the engagement profile was to provide a robust, effective and meaningful tool for personalised assessment and planning for those pupils with profound and severe learning difficulties for whom subject-specific learning was not yet relevant or possible. This was on the basis that engagement is the foundation of effective learning, effective teaching and quality progress (Carpenter *et al.* 2016). The aim of the engagement profile and scale was to identify children's engagement for learning behaviours during their highest interest activity so that strategies could be implemented to increase deep learning in low interest activities. The engagement scale included scores for each of the 7 elements to form a total engagement score and provided qualitative and quantitative accounts of engagement levels. Carpenter *et al* (2016, *ibid*), trialled the engagement scale in 95 educational settings and

⁴ www.gov.uk/government/publications/rochford-review-final-report.

⁵ Department for Education (2018a) *Pre-key stage 1: pupils working below the test standard*. London: DfE. Available at [online] www.gov.uk/government/publications/pre-key-stage-1-standards and Department for Education (2018b) *Pre-key stage 2: pupils working below the test standard*. London: DfE. Available at [online] www.gov.uk/government/publications/pre-key-stage-2-standards.

⁶ Carpenter, B., Egerton, J., Brooks, T., Cockbill, B., Fotheringham, J. and Rawson, H. (2011), *The complex learning difficulties and disabilities research project: Developing pathways to personalised learning*: Final Report. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED525543>.

found that where educators commit to these indicators in facilitating, designing and adjusting pupils' learning experiences, the outcomes could be transformative.

For these reasons, the Rochford Review recommended the adoption of the 7 aspects of engagement as a basis for statutory assessment, since there was evidence that they were more meaningful for pupils with complex learning difficulties. They also have the potential to provide for continuity and progression in linking with the proposed pre-key stage standards for subject-specific learning.

As the 7 aspects of engagement have never been used before as a summative assessment tool, DfE confirmed it would pilot the approach in 2018 before deciding on whether to introduce it on a statutory basis.

7 aspects of engagement pilot

Eight hub schools, 1 for each region, were selected from teaching schools through a short expression of interest process and were given some funding to perform their role. The other participating schools were chosen through a mix of methods – a proportion were schools that the hub school had a history of working with and the others were drawn from schools that had expressed an interest in working with DfE on the Rochford Review reforms. There were 6 participating schools in each region, so 56 schools in total, counting the 8 hub schools. The participating schools were also a mix of mainstream and special schools and they were eligible as long as they had children of primary-school age not in subject-specific learning in their cohort.

The pilot ran from January to July 2018. It was based on a hub model involving one school per region in the role of a 'teaching school hub'. The hub schools received additional training and support from DfE at the start of the pilot to support other pilot schools in their region in delivering the 7 aspects approach to assessment. The hub schools then used this knowledge to train the other participating schools in their region. This is a tried and tested model for delivering reforms, and complements the findings of the Rochford Review, which recommended that schools should work collaboratively to develop good practice in assessing pupils working below the standard of national curriculum tests.

While pupils were assessed against the 7 aspects of engagement, there was no prescribed method of conducting these assessments, and schools had autonomy to develop their own approaches according to the curriculum they use and, importantly, to the needs of individual pupils. Schools were expected to use the approach for at least 2 assessments – an initial baseline assessment at the start of the pilot, and a summative assessment at the end of the school year.

Aims and objectives of this research

The main aim of the research was to assess how the 7 aspects of engagement could offer an effective tool for providing summative assessment on pupil progress, informing DfE's decision about whether to extend it as a statutory end-of-year assessment tool for use at the end of key stages 1 and 2. Beyond this, the research has addressed the following objectives:

- exploring the efficacy of the 7 aspects of engagement as an assessment tool
 - does the approach allow schools to make valid judgements about pupils' progress towards sustainable or subject-specific learning?
 - do schools have sufficient flexibility to assess pupils against these 7 aspects in a way that best reflects the needs of the individual pupil and the curriculum?
 - is this an appropriate model to assess cognition and learning, and is it appropriate for use in statutory assessment? If not, what developments are needed to make this an appropriate model for use in statutory assessment?
 - are there limitations to flexibility that would make the model a more robust basis for statutory assessment, such as using a consistent scale?
- investigating whether the use of this approach improves accountability within the education system, for a range of audiences
 - does the 7 aspects approach provide useful and reliable information on progress towards sustainable or subject-specific learning for:
 - parents and carers?
 - those judging school performance (Ofsted inspectors)?
 - those assessing pupils' needs (for example, local authority SEND officers)?
 - does the new approach produce any comparable data that would be meaningful for DfE to collect? What needs to be developed to enable the model to produce comparable data?
- exploring whether the new approach creates any additional support needs or burdens for schools, and identifying good practice in delivery

- is the new approach compatible with schools' own assessments, and with wider provision in any other areas of need set out by the SEND code of practice?
- what are the workload and cost implications?
- what training and support will schools require from DfE and from the wider sector, including enablers and barriers to collaboration with other schools?
- evaluate the efficacy of the regional hub model
 - how did hub schools communicate with participating schools, and how effective were these communications?
 - what are the workload and cost implications for hub schools?
 - what are the key lessons to take forward if the hub model were to be used again?

Summary of the methodology

The research was conducted in 2 phases.

Phase 1 was conducted in March 2018. Forty qualitative telephone interviews were conducted with pilot schools. At this stage, all interviewed schools had used the approach for baseline assessments. The interviews explored early implementation, focusing on the schools' approach to using the 7 aspects, experiences of the hub model and early views on using the model as the basis for end-of-year summative assessments.

Telephone interviews – phase 1

	Special schools	Mainstream schools	Total
Hub	8	-	8
Participating	23	9	32
Total	31	9	40

Phase 2 was conducted from June to July 2018, following the final use of the assessment tool to provide a summative judgement. Schools participated in phase 2 in one of two ways:

- 47 qualitative telephone interviews were conducted with pilot schools (6 hubs, 41 participating)
- 7 case studies were conducted with pilot schools (2 hubs, 5 participating)

Case studies involved face-to-face interviews with school staff, alongside a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interviews with school governors, parents and local authority representatives. The original aim was to conduct 8 case studies, but this was not possible due to a sickness outbreak in the 8th case study school, which left insufficient time to rearrange the visit before the end of the school year. Despite this, phase 2 included almost all of the participating pilot schools.

The interviews explored implementation of the approach across the course of the pilot, experiences of and views on use of the approach for end-of-year summative assessments, and experiences of the hub model.

Telephone interviews – phase 2

	Special schools	Mainstream schools	Total
Hub	6	-	6
Participating	33	8	41
Total	39	8	47

Case studies – phase 2

	Special schools	Mainstream schools	Total
Hub	2	-	2
Participating	3	2	5
Total	5	2	7

On average, schools involved 5 to 10 of their pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties in the pilot. Some schools involved only 1 or 2 of their pupils, due to having only a small cohort relevant to the pilot. It is notable that the majority of pilot schools involved only a small subset of their relevant pupils.

Around one-third of special schools involved in the pilot had used the 7 aspects of engagement prior to the pilot (although not as a summative assessment tool), with some being involved in previous research investigating the approach. A further third of special schools were aware of the 7 aspects approach, although they had not previously used it. None of the mainstream schools in the pilot were familiar with the approach.

Structure of this report

The remainder of this report explores the findings from the research as follows:

- chapter 2 explores the approaches that schools took to implement the 7 aspects of engagement

- chapter 3 discusses the views of schools and other stakeholders on ease of understanding the approach, any practical challenges encountered, and suitability of the 7 aspects of engagement as a method of formative and summative assessment
- chapter 4 focuses on schools' experience and effectiveness of the hub model, from both hub and participating schools' perspectives

The concluding section draws together the important findings from the research to inform DfE's decision about whether to introduce it as a statutory end-of-year summative assessment tool to replace P scales 1 to 4.

Chapter 2 – implementing the 7 aspects approach

This chapter explores the ways in which schools implemented the 7 aspects of engagement approach and the extent to which observation and assessment data was shared with parents and stakeholders. Firstly, it outlines the pre-existing methods schools used to monitor and assess progress among the target pupils and the extent to which schools found the 7 aspects approach complemented their pre-existing method(s).

Secondly, this chapter then describes how schools implemented the pilot, including who was involved in conducting and recording observations. It covers the various methods of evidence collection used, including use of the E4L materials to record observation outcomes.

Finally, the chapter explores schools' approaches to information sharing with parents, governors, Ofsted and the local authority.

Existing methods of assessment

Across all schools, a range of assessment methods were used to monitor progress and record outcomes among pupils with complex and profound learning difficulties. All schools continued to use their pre-existing method of assessment alongside implementing the 7 aspects approach for pupils covered by the pilot. As well as P scales, the other main approaches that pilot schools used among the target pupil cohort were:

- early years foundation stage (EYFS) assessment framework
- EHC plan targets
- routes for learning
- performance indicators for valued assessment & targeted learning (PIVATS)
- b squared
- mapping and assessing personal progress (MAPP)

Additionally, around half the pilot schools had used online platforms to monitor pupil progress and outcomes using their chosen assessment method(s). The majority of these schools used software packages to track progress in regard to the EYFS, including:

- earwig
- scholar pack

- footsteps
- tapestry
- dynamic progress reporting (DPR)
- evidence for learning

A minority of schools had attempted to assimilate their pre-existing assessment method(s) with the 7 aspects approach. Of these schools, a handful had framed the 7 aspects observations in the context of pupils' EHC plan targets or other individual learning outcomes. This method meant that some of these schools were able to personalise their implementation of the 7 aspects to each pupil's learning outcomes.

"We stayed close to the resources we were given [by the hub], we used the engagement scale [profile]...next to the child's name we have listed three learning outcomes from EHC plans. We asked the teachers to highlight the one they were going to be using as the context for further engagement observation [which is] different for different children."

Special school, participating, phase 1

Another special school described how they used the observation outcomes from the 'responsiveness' aspect to contribute to an understanding of how well the pupil was progressing in terms of their 'sensory and physical' EHC plan target. This shows that even though the 7 aspects were developed as a tool for measuring engagement in cognition and learning, they can be used for other areas, such as physical development.

"Our learning support plans are just like small versions of our EHC plan targets [for each pupil]. Our learning support plans are three, broken down termly, targets, which all make up the EHC plan target. So, if I look at one of my kids, her learning support targets, something like her physical target, so, '[the pupil] will respond to total body movement, using a range of equipment such as the stander, Acheeva Bed, swimming, rebound therapy'. Obviously, we've got the word 'respond' in there, so, that automatically has tied into the [7 aspect's] engagement profile. So, I've used that and [put] that with a physical target, and then assessed her responsiveness. So, it [7 aspects approach] would actually add up as being beneficial for her EHC plan target."

Special school, participating, phase 2

A mainstream school had also used the 7 aspects to inform their understanding of how well the pupils were progressing with regards to their EHC plan targets. This school used the 7 aspects observation data to identify ways in which the classroom environment or activities could be modified to present greater learning opportunities for the pupils. To illustrate, for one of the pupils at this school, their EHC plan 'sensory and physical' target was to increase their use of the head switch (assistive device). The school found the

persistence and anticipation aspects to be the most informative of the 7 aspects in regards to this EHC plan-related outcome.

Aside from the EHC plan targets, there were also examples of schools integrating their use of the 7 aspects approach with other methods of assessment. A special school used the MAPP assessment framework to frame the 7 aspects observations. The school also used the Tapestry app to record observation outcomes in regards to both MAPP and the 7 aspects.

“We [already] observe them [pupils] on a daily basis but because we already have an embedded formative and summative assessment, we have used the 7 aspects as part of this. We use Tapestry which includes taking pictures to gather evidence and we annotate it. We have also annotated it in line with the 7 aspects so we have used it [Tapestry] as a dual recording system. We use MAPP as a way of defining the goals for each learner and we use the 7 aspects as a way of understanding their level of engagement in their learning.”

Special school, participating, phase 2

A mainstream school conducted 7 aspects observations with regard to the EYFS criteria. The lead teacher commented how the data collected through the 7 aspects observations could contribute to assessment in the EYFS curriculum areas. This school was satisfied with their pre-existing assessment methods and while they found the 7 aspects tool useful for identifying activities to engage the pupils, they were concerned about the robustness of the data collected through the observations and the resulting scores. For this reason they chose not to include 7 aspects observation data in their end-of-year pupil assessments.

“We were substituting our observations of lessons [using the EYFS] with the use of the [Engagement4Learning] engagement profiles, so in that respect it did fit in alongside it. In terms of end of year reporting, [using] the early years framework and early years outcomes you could go into discussing, for example 'with communication and language, the pupil is very engaged with this particular aspect of these particular activities.' [The] early years framework is very play-focused, so you can talk about how engaged the child is in a particular type of play, but in terms of using this [7 aspects] as the basis for assessment it's not really needed if we're using the early years framework anyway.”

Mainstream school, participating, phase 2

In contrast, there were a handful of schools who thought the 7 aspects approach did not complement their pre-existing method of assessment. A few of these schools perceived their pre-existing methods to measure developmental progress, including in areas such as communication. They did not feel that engagement, which the 7 aspects assessed, was able to measure developmental progress. Following this, these schools perceived

that unlike the 7 aspects approach, their pre-existing methods provided the opportunity for teachers to set learning targets for each child and to identify the child's 'next steps'. These schools had used the P scales, Routes for Learning and EYFS assessments in conjunction with each other.

“It is problematic, most progress is measured against developmental stages – something like object permanence, I can remember where people [pupils] have just ‘got it’, but this [7 aspects approach] wouldn’t show anything like that.”

Special school, Hub, phase 2

Further, a mainstream school who used the EYFS framework thought that the 7 aspects approach could compliment it but staff would need further training and support to link and implement both approaches.

Of the schools who found it difficult to link the 7 aspects approach with the pupils' EHC plan targets, the main concerns were about how relevant and informative the 7 aspects are to each of the EHC plan target areas. A mainstream school was not confident about using the 7 aspects approach to assess progress against EHC plan targets, given that the EHC plan is a legal document. This school had concerns about the robustness of the data collected and how it would be received by parents.

In summary, while the majority of schools implemented the 7 aspects approach independently of their pre-existing assessment method(s), a notable minority had attempted to assimilate both approaches. Of these schools, opinion was divided as to the usefulness of linking and the compatibility of approaches.

Of those who had assimilated the 7 aspects with their current method(s), most schools found the 7 aspects to be a useful tool to inform how well the pupils were progressing in terms of their learning outcomes, whether informed by the EHC plan targets, MAPP or EYFS.

In these cases, schools reported that the 7 aspects allowed them to identify how well the pupils were engaged in their learning activities. Some teachers used the 7 aspects data to modify the environment to enhance pupil engagement and progress towards their learning outcomes. Related to this, schools commented that the 7 aspects did not provide a learning outcome or aim for the pupil to work towards, but it did allow them to identify how well the pupils were working towards targets identified by their pre-existing method(s).

While schools were positive about the 7 aspects approach's ability to provide contributory data to their main assessment approach, they tended to see the 7 aspects as offering more of a 'supportive' role for assessment using their main approach, rather than as an assessment method in its own right.

Approaches to implementing the 7 aspects

Participating schools tended to take one of three approaches to implementing the 7 aspects pilot within their school:

- school-directed
- hub-directed
- hub-influenced

School-directed

Around two-thirds of the participating schools decided on their own method of implementing the 7 aspects pilot within their school.

For the majority of participating schools, the hub school had limited influence on how the school conducted and reported the observations, or whether they were communicated to parents and stakeholders. A minority of schools implemented the pilot throughout the academic year, but did not use the data collected from the observations to contribute to their end-of-year progress reporting. Some schools reported that the hub had actively encouraged them to implement the pilot in a way that best suited their school.

“When we had the training from the hub, we expected it to be quite prescriptive and then it wasn't. They said that you can do what you want to do, and make it fit in with what you're already doing because obviously that's working for your school. We didn't really want to do something drastic.”

Special school, Participating, phase 1

A couple of schools raised specific points of dissatisfaction with their hub school, which may have affected the hub's influence on the schools' approach. For example, a senior leader at one special school reported that the hub had provided feedback to a wider forum on their behalf, but the views they reported were not reflective of all the pilot schools within that hub. Because of this, the senior leader no longer felt comfortable to attend the hub meetings and sent a lead teacher in their place.

Schools' experiences of the hub model are explored further in Chapter 4.

Hub-directed

Around one-third of schools implemented the pilot in agreement with the hub school, either at an overall level or by specific factors. For example, one special school agreed with the hub school to focus on communication as an outcome for each pupil and to frame the 7 aspects observations regarding this outcome. This school also agreed with

the hub that they would observe pupils each half term and video-record it, so the 7 aspects scoring could be moderated among colleagues.

Another special school was directed by the hub co-ordinator not to use the 28-point scale in the implementation of the pilot. When reflecting on this, the school said they would want to have the numerical component if they were to use the 7 aspects approach as a standalone method for end-of-year assessments. This hub school wanted the pilot schools to focus on the qualitative information that the 7 aspects provide, as they felt that this contributed to a better understanding of the child's overall well-being and response to learning activities, compared to the quantitative data provided by the scale.

Hub-influenced

The remaining few schools were influenced by the hub school, but in practice the method taken was one that best suited their school and set of circumstances. For example, a special school agreed with the hub to use the Engagement4Learning (E4L) materials, however, part-way through implementing, the school found the E4L materials to amount to 'too much paperwork', and so they modified the frequency of how often they made written records of each observation. Additionally, this school modified the reporting by creating one form to record both engagement scores and observations against the 7 aspects.

"We found they [E4L materials] were getting in the way of teachers enjoying using a good tool."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

Another special school was informed by the hub that the E4L materials were not a compulsory part of the pilot and so they decided not to use them for recording observation outcomes or tracking progress. This school used the Tapestry app to record outcomes from the 7 aspects observations, in addition to the information they uploaded regarding P scales.

Evidence collection

The following section describes the various individuals that were involved in implementing the pilot and the methods they used to assess and record progress against the 7 aspects.

Involvement of school staff

Across all schools, the number of staff members involved in making and recording observations ranged from 1 and 9, with the majority of schools utilising 2 or 3 staff

members. In most schools, class teachers, teaching/learning support assistants and SENCos conducted the observations and recorded the outcomes. These staff members were chosen as they were directly involved in teaching the pupils or working with them one-to-one and knew them well.

In a few schools, senior members of staff were involved in making and recording observations, for example the headteacher or deputy/assistant headteacher. In some of these schools, senior staff were involved in the daily implementation of the pilot anyway, while other schools wanted to obtain a range of staff input into the pilot, including from higher levels.

The majority of schools undertook joint observations between the teacher and teaching/learning support assistants and discussed the extent to which each of the 7 aspects was demonstrated before scoring. A few schools mentioned that scoring against the 7 aspects was reviewed further by more senior teaching staff.

Across all schools, there was wide variation in the number of pupil observations staff made using the 7 aspects. Some schools conducted observations several times a week, while others conducted termly observations. Others still conducted just 2 or 3 observations throughout the school year. This is in keeping with the pilot guidance, which afforded schools the flexibility to implement the approach as they saw fit, and in line with their own resources.

As the pilot progressed and staff became more confident with using the 7 aspects, there were more instances of staff independently observing and scoring pupils.

Within most schools, use and knowledge of the 7 aspects tended to be limited to those staff members directly involved in the pilot. One school mentioned that it was 'too confusing' to update all teachers on the pilot, whilst another mentioned that resource pressures meant that they could only involve a limited number of staff. While this is to be expected given the defined nature of the pilot, which was limited to a relatively small number of pupils in each school, it should be noted in relation to any future national rollout, which would involve the provision of training and guidance to a much wider group of teaching and support staff.

Case study – specialist unit in a mainstream school: an example of staff involvement in implementing the 7 aspects approach

One mainstream school conducted the 7 aspects pilot with pupils in 2 separate classes. In one class, the teacher delegated the 7 aspects implementation to the Teaching Assistant (TA). The TA had worked one-to-one with the pupil and knew him well.

The school had been using the Differentiated Early Years Outcomes (DEYO) and the Early Years Foundation Stage assessment framework (EYFS) for recording progress and learning outcomes for this pupil group. Because of this, the TA was familiar with making observations and recording learning outcomes through photographs. The TA found the 7 aspects approach 'much more detailed' compared to the DEYO.

At the beginning of the pilot, the class teacher gave an overview of the approach and each of the 7 aspects.

"We went through it at the very beginning, going through the 7 aspects and just working through what each one meant, so there's a poster up on the wall in his [pupil] little room that's quite useful to refer to. It's useful for me to refer to if she's [TA] talking to me."

Class teacher

Following this, the class teacher shared the learning goal for each lesson with the TA, who then devised relevant activities from which to conduct the observations.

"[The TA] has done most of the work herself. I give her the learning intention from the early learning goal and then she thinks of activities and adapts it, and then she's been doing the observations twice a week."

Class teacher

The TA recorded the observation outcomes using the engagement profile and took photographs to evidence the observations. The TA commented that working one-to-one with the pupil meant that the engagement profile had to be completed later.

"To start with, I think I just scribbled down anything I saw that might come in handy, because filling them in, there's very little time in the day to fill things in."

TA

"[We used] photos, but because he's a one-to-one, there's not really an opportunity to take

videos and things, because if I was doing that, I wouldn't be working with him."

TA

The TA raised some initial concerns about the level of detail required to complete the engagement profile and that she would have appreciated some guidance or training.

"Trying to work out what was required for each of the steps and thinking, 'What do they want from this?' and being a little bit worried that I wasn't doing it right, until you think, 'Actually, this is my view on him.' Realising there's no right or wrong, and working out in my mind what each of them [7 aspects] is."

TA

This school chose not to use the 7 aspects data to inform end-of-year assessments as they were satisfied with their existing methods (DEYO and EYFS) and found the 7 aspects approach more suited to formative, rather than summative, assessment. Despite this, one of the class teachers commented that the 7 aspects data collected by the TA could in theory be used to inform end-of-year assessments, alongside their pre-existing approaches.

"There's obviously lots of valid information in there that's not been tied up with my assessment, really, which is a shame, but I guess that's the first step."

Class teacher

Involvement of other professionals

There were only a couple of instances of schools having involved external professionals in implementing the pilot. For example, one special school aimed to take a 'holistic' view to implementing the 7 aspects approach by involving their visual impairment, speech and language, and occupational therapy teams in observations. These teams consisted of healthcare professionals, some of whom were based within the school, while others were external. The lead teacher commented that while there were a range of professionals involved in the pilot, they only had limited knowledge of the approach and struggled to implement the tool with the level of guidance that they had received. More guidance and training may have addressed this issue, but this would need to be considered in the light of the amount of resources required, on a national scale.

Additionally, some other schools mentioned that they would have liked to have involved healthcare professionals in the pilot. However, they had yet to 'work out the best way of doing it'.

Involvement of parents

Similarly, there were only a few instances where schools had involved parents in the pupil observations and assessments. Schools commonly reported that they did not feel confident enough in the approach's suitability as an end-of-year assessment to involve parents in the observations. Other schools said that they were not sure whether there would be value in involving parents, given the pilot status of the project and uncertainty about whether the use of the 7 aspects would be made statutory.

One special school held a meeting with parent governors and parent representatives and invited them to conduct observations of their child at home using the 7 aspects approach, to gain a fuller picture of the child's manifestations of engagement in each of the 7 aspects. The school had planned to include a 'parent portal' on their app, so parents could also access the schools' observation outcomes. Prior to the pilot, this school had used the 7 aspects approach as an intervention tool with pupils who were struggling to engage in learning activities and so there was already an existing level of familiarity with it among teachers and some parents.

Engagement4Learning (E4L) materials

The E4L materials are a suite of published resources, available online,⁷ for schools implementing the 7 aspects of engagement approach. The materials were developed by Professor Barry Carpenter and his team during the Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (CLDD) Research Project and trialled nationally and internationally with teachers, healthcare professionals and pupils.

At present, the materials are the only published resources for use with the 7 aspects approach. DfE made the hub schools aware of the E4L materials in the pilot set-up meeting however there was no imperative for schools to use the materials. This section explores the use of each of the E4L materials:

- engagement profile
- 28-point scale
- engagement ladder

Nearly all schools had used at least one of the E4L materials to record observation outcomes. A few special schools were already familiar with the E4L materials, having been aware of or used the 7 aspects approach prior to the pilot.

⁷ <https://engagement4learning.com>.

Engagement profile

The engagement profile was the most commonly used of the E4L materials. This profile was presented as a set of 7 circles representing each of the aspects (awareness, curiosity, investigation, discovery, anticipation, persistence and initiation) in which observers could record qualitative accounts of engagement in these areas. For example, an observation under 'anticipation' could read as follows, '[pupil] will make chirruping sounds to show anticipation when the water tray arrives'.

Class teachers and other staff who conducted observations used the engagement profile to record pupil behaviours that supported the presence of each of the 7 aspects.

Schools differed in how they completed the engagement profile. Some schools took brief notes during the observation and then completed the profile once the observation had been completed, whereas others video-recorded the observations and completed the profile while watching the video recording. There were also examples of schools completing the engagement profile during the observation, although this was more common in schools where multiple staff members were present during the observation.

"I [senior leader] would take part in observing the children initially with the class teacher. I filmed the activity and at the end of the day the class teacher and I would look at the video and do an engagement scale [profile] assessment, chat about it and agree the scoring [using the 28-point scale]. Filming allowed us to do moderation on it as well which was really useful. It helps us feedback to one another."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

Most schools who used the engagement profile found it a helpful tool to record what engagement looked like for each pupil. The visual layout of the engagement profile enhanced its appeal and made it easy to use.

"I think the [engagement] profile is really nice because anybody that comes into contact with that child can look at that and see, you know, this child might not look engaged but actually, if they're giving you eye contact, that means they are engaged and ready for learning. At that early level, it does help people to understand that child better. Having that engagement profile has been useful."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

A few schools had personalised the engagement profile for each pupil, for example placing a picture of the child in the centre of the profile, writing the child's learning outcomes from their EHC plan, and condensing the profile with the 28-point scale.

There were however, some concerns raised over the time required to complete the engagement profile. There were a couple of instances of schools modifying the

engagement profile so that it could be completed more quickly. One special school found it too time-consuming to record written descriptions for each of the 7 aspects, so they modified the engagement profile to record their observations of the 7 aspects at overall level, rather than for each aspect. Another school used the engagement profile to tick for the presence or absence of each of the 7 aspects, rather than writing descriptions of the pupils' manifestations of the 7 aspects.

Following on from this, a couple of schools had queried the target audience for the engagement profiles, given the time needed to complete them. These schools felt that it was not necessary for the teacher to record this level of detail for their own purposes.

“The other thing is with the engagement scales [profiles], you know, who's the audience for it, as it were? You know, if it's solely used for the teachers to know the engagement then do we really need to record it in so much detail? Is there a less paperwork-heavy way of recording it? So just maybe a bit of clarity about, you know, who's it for almost.”

Participating, mainstream school, phase 2

“What we kind of thought was that you were writing things down for the sake of it and I'm not sure who the target audience is, because it's certainly not the teacher, because any teacher who is worth their metal, they're doing that in their head, all day, every day”.

Special school, Participating, phase 1

Use of the E4L 28-point scale

The engagement scale is provided in the E4L materials and comprises 2 record sheets. The first sheet provides details about the context for the observed activity (type of activity, date, age, target) and spaces for the observer(s) to detail the extraneous factors that might influence engagement (environment, mood, medical issues), with an explanation of what interventions they made in the design of a task on the basis of the last observation.

The second sheet includes a 28-point scale from 0 (meaning no focus) to 28 (meaning fully sustained engagement). The 28-point scale represents the total of all 7 aspects for which a score of between 0 (no engagement) to 4 (fully sustained engagement) can be given. The majority of schools had also used the 28-point scale to record pupils' level of engagement with a particular activity, to note extraneous factors that may have affected the pupil on the day of the observation, and to note any salient points in how the activity was delivered and what modifications can be made for the next observed activity.

A special school appreciated the 'intervention' section of the 28-point scale, as it provoked reflection on how the activity could be modified for future observations to

increase levels of engagement in each of the 7 aspects. However, this school found it too time-consuming to enter an intervention for each aspect and so they modified the form by creating a general intervention based on observation of all the aspects.

It was common for schools to report that engagement scores fluctuated dependent upon the activity, as well as external factors such as time of day, mood and general well-being.

"There's variables of the time of day, whether the child's hungry or not, whether the child's not feeling well. All of those factors contribute to that [engagement] score, so it doesn't mean to say if they get a higher [engagement] score that they've actually learnt anything."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

For some schools, this came to light when they plotted the engagement scores onto a graph to track changes in scores across time. Several schools had noted a 'spikey profile' when tracking engagement scores using the 28-point scale.

Most of the schools who used the 28-point scale raised concerns about its suitability given the observational nature of the approach, in addition to its usefulness in providing an indication of pupil progress in the end-of-year assessments. A special school questioned the 'value' of providing a numerical score to the qualitative observations.

"We've used it [28-point scale] as a way to give us some data, because we knew we needed to report on it. But actually, it doesn't really tell us anything."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

In addition, there were a few schools who chose not to use the 28-point scale as they did not want to implement the pilot in a quantitative way and they wanted the assessment of the target pupils to move away from quantitative methods.

"Staff don't want to be number driven. We already had that with P scales, and we don't want to just replace like for like."

Special school, Participating, phase 1

One of the hubs had advised the pilot schools in their cluster not to use the 28-point scale. This hub perceived that providing a numerical score for the pupils could mask their strengths and take the focus away from the well-being of the pupils, and their quality of life. This hub school preferred to take a qualitative approach to implementing the 7 aspects.

"It's [recording progress numerically] against the spirit of it – we're not looking for numerical progress – it's the quality of life around these children...I don't want to

measure the things they can't do. A numerical scale is up and down, two minutes later it's different...what we need to know with these children is when they do their best."

Special school, Hub, phase 1

DfE did not advocate the use of the scale nor require any quantitative data to be provided by pilot schools. However, it is important to acknowledge the tension between schools' desire to avoid using a numeric score or scale-based approach, with the concern that stakeholders, such as DfE, Ofsted and local authorities, would require some form of quantified score or other output data from them to demonstrate progress. In fact, DfE did not require pilot schools to provide them with any quantitative assessment data at all, but some schools were confused about this during the pilot. This was potentially because the 28-point scale was made available to them and this suggested implicitly that the approach would lead to quantifiable data.

Engagement ladder

The engagement ladder was the least used of the E4L materials, with only a few schools having mentioned using it. In those schools it was used to identify which activities were engaging to pupils and to then conduct the initial observations in the context of these engaging activities.

"The engagement ladder was useful to go in and look at an activity where you want to increase engagement."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

"With both of the pupils we started off by using the engagement ladder, we plotted the two pupils on it just to identify the two areas in which we were going to use the engagement scales [profile] to focus on. So myself and one of the teaching assistants in my class completed the engagement scales [profiles] for the boy focusing on the areas that he had shown low levels of engagement with."

Mainstream school, Participating, phase 2

Other methods of recording observation outcomes

While the majority of schools used at least one of the E4L materials to record observation outcomes, several schools employed other methods. Most of the schools who used alternative methods had used an online app, for example Evidence for Learning, to digitally record outcomes and track progress. These schools were familiar with using apps to record pupil progress and the use of these apps was extended to the pilot as it complemented their existing processes.

“It’s [the method used] got to fit in with what the schools are already doing”.

Special school, Participating, phase 2

One special school described their use of the app as follows:

“We have an iPad with an app on that the teachers use to record the observation immediately. The app specifically allows us to take pictures, and capture evidence against each of the 7 aspects. The app then makes the reports for us, providing a score for each aspect, using the 28-point scale. We only use the iPad not any of the paperwork [E4L materials].”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

A mainstream school had started the pilot using the engagement profile but found it too time consuming, so they switched to using an app to record the observations and outcomes digitally.

Other than digital methods, some schools (or individual teachers) used post-it notes to record outcomes of the observations rather than the engagement profile. The post-it notes were displayed on the classroom wall and staff added to the wall each time an observation was conducted. This method meant that the observation outcomes were more visible to the staff and the 7 aspects could be incorporated into the wider learning environment. These teachers and their TAs found this approach easier and less time-consuming to use, during lesson time.

There were a couple of examples of schools creating their own form to record observation outcomes, in place of the engagement profile. For example, a mainstream school created their own form, which included each of the 7 aspects and the descriptive indicators of each, in addition to outcomes from their pre-existing assessment method.

Changes to approach between the baseline and summative assessments

Most schools took the same approach to observing and recording outcomes throughout the pilot. Only a small number of schools modified the approach used for end-of-year summative assessments, compared to the baseline assessments.

There were a couple of mentions of schools conducting independent observations and scoring as the pilot progressed, compared to moderated or joint observations. One of the schools said that at the start they were more ‘cautious’ in their approach, but as the staff become more confident in the identification of the aspects, there was less need for conferring and moderation. There was, however, no indication that the number of observations conducted per pupil differed between the baseline and summative

assessments. For example, if a school started with conducting three observations per pupil per week, this continued to the end of the pilot.

There were a few mentions of changes in approach due to time pressures. For example, one school stopped using the engagement profile to record outcomes for each observation and instead made use of more verbal discussion with other staff conducting observations. Another school had started with video-recording the observations but found this too time-consuming, so they transitioned to recording the outcomes through note-taking and verbal discussions instead.

"Videos are great, but what we've found in terms of time management, practically we weren't able to do it. Plus, it's quite difficult to get a video in a busy classroom."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

Approaches to information sharing

Only a minority of schools shared or planned to share assessment outcomes with parents or professionals involved in the pupils' wider care.

Parents

There was a general feeling among schools, both those that had already shared data and those that were yet to, that parents would be more interested in the qualitative data from the observations, rather than the numerical engagement score from the 28-point scale.

A special school provided parents with 7 aspects assessment outcomes in the pupils' end-of-year report. This school included descriptive evidence against each of the 7 aspects observed in the classroom, as well as parental observations conducted at home. This school did not use the 28-point scale in their implementation of the pilot as they wanted to report on it using qualitative data only. The school colour-coded the reporting to indicate to parents where progress in engagement had been made in each of the 7 aspects.

Another special school shared the completed engagement profiles with parents during parents' evening and used this as the basis for discussing pupils' progress in engagement, compared to the initial assessments at the start of the pilot.

"We've created a report for the parents and discussed that at the parents' evening. We shared their files that's got all their observations and their profiles in it. Yes, we compared where they were at the beginning of the pilot to where they were at the end of the pilot on the targets that we were checking through the 7 areas."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

Schools who shared assessment data with parents commented that in general parents either had a 'neutral' response or found the numerical data particularly difficult to understand, as the 7 aspects approach was perceived to be unlike their pre-existing assessment method.

"They found it difficult to understand as it's very different to the curriculum and the way that we assess that. That was the bit we found difficult – how we would share it with parents because it isn't subject-specific and they didn't find it as easy to understand."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

Of the schools who planned to share assessment information with parents, one special school perceived that the 7 aspects assessment data would provide parents with a more rounded understanding of their child's progress compared to other assessment methods which focus on academic achievement and what the pupil 'can and can't do'.

"I think it [7 aspects data] gives a much better picture of the child and their personality... It's more a celebration of their responses rather than what they can't do, it's what they can achieve."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

This view was supported by a special school who discussed the 7 aspects assessment approach at parents' evening. This school shared the child's learner file, which contained the completed engagement profiles. The school reported that the parents appeared to understand the approach. However, they were not as interested in what the quantitative data showed about their child's progress – the parents were more interested in hearing about their child at an overall level and that they were enjoying being at the school.

"All they were interested in was the lovely pictures. They really weren't interested in the data side [from the 28-point scale] of it whatsoever."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

In a special school, parents found the engagement profile (when shared and explained at parents' evening) to be very useful to them because it provided them with a colourful and detailed description of their child's experience at school during the year. One parent said

"That is my child, I can see it's him and it helps me understand what he is doing and how he is doing with it. It isn't cold, it's warm and it makes me feel happier because it shows what he can do. And it is so important for me to feel that there is some hope for him and that the teachers at the school really know him with all his quirks, and that they also focus on what he is doing and what he is learning on his terms."

Parent, Special school, Participating, phase 2

A mainstream school found that parents were more engaged in their child's learning as a result of viewing the videos of the 7 aspects observations. Additionally, teachers felt better able to provide feedback to parents about their child's progress and the videos helped them to do this.

A handful of other schools would have liked to involve parents in the pilot, but these schools perceived several barriers to parental engagement:

- complexity of the information produced
- ambivalence among parents
- lack of schools' confidence in the approach

Complexity of the information produced

A few schools were concerned that the language used in the 7 aspects approach may not be familiar to parents and was therefore a barrier to engaging them with the pilot. One special school shared the completed engagement profile with parents, but they found the information too complex and so the school decided to not involve them further in the pilot.

"It's always difficult discussing assessments with parents in professional terms and professional speak. They are more used to asking, "Can they write their own name?", "Can they read a book?" It's hard for parents so it's about trying to get them on board and to understand."

Special school, Hub, phase 2

Another school also commented that the language used in the 7 aspects is 'academic' and this was a barrier to engaging with parents where English was their second language.

Ambivalence among parents

A few schools mentioned that parents were more interested in their child's progress towards subject-specific learning, or the behavioural competencies that they would develop, than in their engagement. These schools decided not to share the observation and/or assessment information with the parents as they believed parents would be ambivalent towards it, preferring to see information on other areas.

"It is a shift because we are trying to get children engaged in their learning. It might be a literacy or a maths activity, but the focus is on the engagement not the subject. Trying to

communicate this to parents and governors has been hard as they want to know about subject-specific learning.”

Mainstream school, Participating, phase 2

One special school said they chose not to share 7 aspects information with parents, as they did not want them to get ‘bogged down in the detail’. This school perceived parents to be more interested in their child’s progress at an overall level and whether they were happy at the school, rather than the more nuanced detail of assessment.

Lack of schools’ confidence in the approach

A few schools wanted to involve parents in the pilot, but had concerns about the suitability of the approach for the target pupils and were concerned how this would be perceived by parents.

“If we had felt that it was successful as we were moving along then we would have informed parents, however we came across quite a few stumbling blocks and we didn’t want parents to feel that we weren’t doing the best for their child.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

A couple of other schools felt they did not have enough guidance to speak confidently to parents about the 7 aspects approach.

“A lot of our staff are very trepidatious about how to transfer and translate the [7 aspects assessment] information to parents...because there are pre-existing systems [assessment methods] that do a better job, they [teachers] don’t feel confident discussing it with parents. If the 7 aspects becomes a statutory tool they have no idea how to discuss it with parents.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

Other professionals

There were a few instances of schools sharing assessment data with other professionals involved in the pupils’ wider care. For example, one special school planned to share 7 aspects assessment data with the educational psychologist, to inform learning activities that the teaching assistant carries out with the pupils. Similarly, another special school shared the assessment data with the pupils’ speech and language therapist as this was felt to be relevant to their wider learning. Because of this, the occupational therapist planned to incorporate engagement data into the pupil’s occupational therapy sessions.

One special school shared the 7 aspects assessment data with the pupils’ social workers. The social workers fed back that they were positive about the approach as it

looks at learning 'in a different way' and that engagement relates to pupil well-being in addition to school progress.

Governors

There were only a few instances of schools having shared assessment data with school governors. One special school reported that their governors were concerned about any potential impact the 7 aspects approach may have on the school's Ofsted inspection and results, given the previous Ofsted inspection had praised their pre-existing (non-statutory) assessment methods, which the school felt would be at risk of being displaced if the 7 aspects approach was implemented as a statutory measure.

"Our last Ofsted referenced our assessment methods, so they [governors] were keen that we don't lose those [pre-existing methods of assessment]."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

Another school reported that the governors were interested to know what the 7 aspects assessment data is telling them about pupils' progress, in addition to any impact it will have on teachers' workload in the future. At the same school, a parent governor of one of the pilot pupils reported that the 7 aspects assessment data is more useful in informing parents about what their child enjoys at school, rather than the progress they are making with their learning.

Ofsted and local authorities

There were only a couple of instances where schools shared assessment data with Ofsted or the local authority.

One mainstream school conducted a trial Ofsted inspection – a 'Mocksted' – and the school's report included data from the 7 aspects approach. A few other schools were concerned whether the data collected using the 7 aspects approach would be sufficient to satisfy the inspection criteria of Ofsted officials. This was in part due to concerns about Ofsted's lack of detailed knowledge of the approach during the pilot (which would change if the approach became statutory), in addition to the school's own concerns about the data it generates and whether this effectively demonstrates pupil progress.

"To be perfectly honest I don't believe the Local Authority know anything about it [7 aspects approach]. I've never been asked about it and whenever I've mentioned it, no one in the local authority seems to know what it is, including inspectors. This is another reason why the tool concerns the school hugely, because if the inspectors aren't aware of the tool being used...Ofsted inspectors may not and I would imagine don't have an understanding of the tool as a framework. If it [7 aspects] doesn't adequately, in our

opinion, evidence [pupil] progress, then it will have an absolutely huge detrimental impact on an Ofsted inspection.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

While Ofsted and local authorities would be made fully aware of the 7 aspects approach if made statutory, this school’s concerns suggest that schools would appreciate being reassured that inspectors were fully trained in the approach ahead of inspections.

One of the case study schools were inspected by Ofsted during the pilot and had shared some of the 7 aspects assessment materials with the inspector. They reported that the inspector had been impressed by the thoroughness of their approach (for example, the frequency of the observations, conducted several times per week) and by the detail of the more nuanced observations of children’s responses in relation to each aspect. The school felt that, as a formative tool, the 7 aspects approach helped to strengthen the quality of teaching and this was recognised in the inspection judgement.

There were no mentions of schools having shared assessment data, or indeed their participation in the pilot, with their local authority representatives.

Chapter 3 – views on using the 7 aspects approach

This chapter explores the opinions of schools and other stakeholders on the use of the 7 aspects as a method of formative and summative assessment. Firstly, it reflects on schools' experiences of developing a clear and consistent understanding of each of the 7 aspects, any challenges they encountered, and how they addressed these. Secondly, this chapter examines practical challenges schools encountered, focusing on issues around staff workloads. Finally, it explores school, parent, governor and local authority views on the suitability of the approach as a tool for formative and summative assessment.

Understanding of each of the aspects

Schools recognised the importance of developing a strong understanding of each of the 7 aspects, and how to assess against them, seeing it as central to the use of the approach. On the whole, the schools were able to acquire this understanding over the course of the pilot. It is notable that schools' confidence in this grew as the pilot progressed as it took time for schools to develop this understanding, often over several months.

“It has got easier for staff to work with them as time's gone on. Just because they are less abstract and they have become used to them.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

Most schools acted to ensure staff involved in carrying out the assessments developed a clear and consistent understanding of the 7 aspects. Internal meetings were important in cases where not all staff attended the training conducted by the hub school. In these meetings, the hub school disseminated the training that they received to the other teachers and teaching assistants. Schools also used these meetings to make decisions about how they were defining and assessing for each of the 7 aspects.

Moderation and discussion of individual pupils' assessments were also important to how schools ensured that they had a clear and consistent understanding. Schools found these useful to help them determine how individual pupils demonstrated engagement under each aspect. Schools found that it was very important to take the time to do this, because of the way that pupils' complex needs affect the behaviours they display when engaged. Schools noted that pupils often display engagement differently to other pupils, or in very subtle ways that would be difficult to pick up on if staff did not know the pupils well. Many schools built moderation and/or discussion between staff into their approach to assessments for this reason.

“The more you talk about it and think about what that means, you get more clarity.”

Mainstream school, Participating, phase 2

"[Why knowing pupils well is important] we could be tuned into something so little as an eye flicker and that would show that that child is listening to us or responding to our voice...other people might miss that and would say they're not responding at all."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

However, it was not possible for all schools to include thorough discussion and moderation in their approach. Mainstream schools with small SEND units had relatively few staff they could involve in assessments, with one school only having one specialist SEND teacher who relied on part-time local authority support in conducting assessments.

Case study – mainstream school challenge with lack of available staff

One mainstream school found it extremely difficult to develop an understanding of the 7 aspects approach, and the best way of using it with their pupils. A key factor behind this difficulty was having very few teaching staff able to work with pupils with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD).

The SENCo running the pilot was the only internal member of staff involved, and her only source of support in conducting the assessments was a specialist teacher working for the local authority, who visited the school several times a term. Working in a mainstream school, the SENCo felt she had little support available from other staff in the school due to their lack of experience with these types of pupils. Even the headteacher had very little involvement or knowledge of the pilot due to their lack of expertise.

"When you've got more people there it's easier, because you can discuss and moderate and things like that...In mainstream it's more tricky."

If using the approach became statutory, this SENCo reported that she would need much more guidance as she was very unclear on a number of points.

"How many observations should you do? How do you pick the activity? There should be more guidance. Where do personalised targets fit into all this?"

She chose not to reach out to her hub school for support, because her experience from attending the hub training session led her to believe they would not have been able to provide the guidance she was looking for (due to the hub school explaining there was no prescribed method for how to use the approach). She also felt she would have benefitted from having another pilot school in her local area, as the hub school was quite far away. If the approach were to become statutory, schools like this would need to be supported through links with local special schools.

Those who conducted assessments found that some aspects were easier to assess than others. Most commonly, schools found responsiveness, persistence and anticipation the

easiest to assess. This was because these were the most straightforward in terms of identifying the behaviours displayed, and schools noted that these were the most discrete categories with little overlap with the other aspects.

When aspects were harder to identify, schools noted that this was either because of overlap between aspects causing confusion or due to difficulties identifying when pupils were displaying certain aspects. Many schools felt that it was particularly difficult to distinguish between curiosity and discovery. In practice, those carrying out assessments found it difficult to unpick the difference between these two aspects, with many questioning whether they were truly distinct categories.

"It's so difficult to say sometimes what is curiosity and what is discovery. You have to be curious to discover but you might discover things by accident. There's a lot of overlap in the areas."

Special school, Hub, phase 1

Some schools found it challenging to feel confident in identifying when pupils were displaying investigation, initiation and discovery. These schools had concerns around unpicking when pupils were displaying these themselves, versus when pupils were reacting to prompts from staff. This was of particular concern when more staff intervention was required, in cases where pupil abilities were limited, for example when pupils had limited or no eyesight, staff found it necessary to place objects in pupils' hands, which restricted the opportunity for pupils to initiate the activity themselves.

"A lot of students have got physical disabilities, and it's really hard to make a distinct judgement whether we're seeing discovery or investigation. And initiation as well, that's a really hard one to tease out. It's a very difficult area for children who can't physically do it themselves."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

"Are you providing the tools for them to discover and initiate? Or is it that you're providing everything for them already – so is it really initiation, is it really discovery?"

Special school, Hub, phase 2

A small number of schools in the pilot, a mix of participating special and mainstream schools, felt that they never developed a strong understanding of each of the aspects and how pupils displayed them. These schools reported finding the approach challenging to implement at a more general level, still feeling a lack of clarity around how to use the approach at the end of the pilot period. These schools also noted that time constraints, due to busy staff workloads, meant they were only able to carry out a small number of assessments across the pilot periods, usually only 2 or 3 per pupil. The relatively low

frequency of assessment may have contributed to a lack of understanding, as those schools had not used the approach enough to feel confident using it.

Practical challenges

Time was by far the biggest challenge that schools came across when piloting the 7 aspects approach. The majority of schools reported that it was a very time-consuming process, which they were attempting to incorporate into already busy workloads.

Although, as mentioned previously in this section, schools found moderation and discussion extremely helpful, they did also note that these were particularly time-consuming elements. The need to involve multiple staff meant that the accumulated hours of staff time dedicated to the approach were very high. Schools felt that a large amount of time was needed to sufficiently:

- develop a clear and consistent understanding of each of the aspects, and how individual pupils displayed them
- understand what the evidence collected meant
- quality assure assessments

Schools who did dedicate the time to these elements found them essential to the successful implementation of the approach. The schools who did find the time for moderation and discussion were typically able to do so because they were able to spread the workload between multiple teachers and teaching assistants.

Schools also struggled to find the time needed for the paperwork associated with assessments. They found that there was a lot of information to write up following each assessment, to ensure that they had satisfactorily covered off all 7 aspects and all evidence observed.

“It’s [impact on teacher workload] terrible. There are some very earnest teachers in special education...and they feel very duty bound to do what is expected of them. So they will spend hours and hours doing this paper work and that’s time that, as a leader in education, would be much better spent in planning the lesson for the next day.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

Many schools chose to combat the time impact of the pilot by reducing the workload. Schools did this in a variety of ways:

- reducing the number of assessments completed – if assessments and associated moderation, discussion and paperwork were taking longer than schools expected

or felt to be unmanageable, some schools chose to cut down the planned number of assessments. As mentioned above, conducting a lower number of assessments had implications for the extent to which schools felt confident that they understood the approach

- reducing the number of pupils in the pilot – a few schools found this an easy way of reducing the time spent using the approach. However, these schools consequently had concerns about how they would manage the workload if it became statutory to use the 7 aspects with all of their relevant pupils
- streamlining paperwork – some schools opted to cut down or remove paperwork from their internal approach, instead relying on discussions alone

Many schools were apprehensive about the potential requirement that they use the approach with all their primary age pupils at P scale 4 or below. Most schools only included a proportion of their relevant pupils in the pilot, so for these schools the already challenging workload would significantly increase (even when the removal of the requirement for P scales 1 to 4 was taken into account). A few schools felt they could not envisage how they would manage the workload involved if using the approach was a statutory requirement or felt that it would be necessary to reduce or remove the use of other assessment and teaching tools.

“If it was rolled out it wouldn’t be workable for us. If it was dictated to us we’d be missing a lot that we collect through other assessment approaches.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

However, a small number of schools did not encounter challenges associated with time and workload. This was due to a combination of having previous experience with the approach, and the ability to embed the approach within their pre-existing systems for engagement and assessment. These schools had already developed their own approaches for assessment that involved a similar level of observation and discussion time, so it was easier for them to slot the 7 aspects into their workloads. Additionally, these schools had already used the 7 aspects approach with their pupils, some as part of previous research into the approach, or at the very least were very familiar through attending conferences where Professor Barry Carpenter or Diane Rochford spoke. This familiarity provided these schools with an advantage, as they needed less time to train staff in using the approach.

“[Regarding workload implications] No, it’s not been significant. It’s all part of our normal work.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

In the first stage of the research, a small number of schools reported issues that led them to reduce or stop their use of video to record the assessments. These schools reported that in order to record the video by tablet, at the same time as interacting with the pupil and taking notes, an additional member of staff was required to hold the tablet, which was not always feasible. Another school found difficulties storing the videos on their internal servers, something that would only increase if it was a requirement to extend the use of the approach beyond the pilot.

One mainstream school reported practical challenges of using the approach in a mixed ability setting. With such a variety of needs in the classroom, they found it necessary to conduct assessments individually outside of the classroom setting. However, they found this concerning, as it meant that they were not able to be as inclusive as they would like.

Schools did not find that costs were an issue. They were able to manage the pilot using equipment and resource that were already available to them.

Views on suitability as a method of assessment

The schools' view

Overall, schools found the 7 aspects of engagement very useful for formative assessment but they were uncertain about its use as a tool for summative assessment.

Use as a formative assessment

Many schools were very enthusiastic about the 7 aspects as a teaching tool. They recognised the value of understanding what their pupils were like at their most engaged, and what objects and techniques aided pupil engagement.

They saw formative assessments as having 2 main benefits:

- Getting to know their pupils better – schools found that the 7 aspects prompted them to take a new perspective on their pupils' learning, leading them to develop more in-depth knowledge of what engaged their pupils most. This was viewed to be particularly useful in scenarios where staff had not worked with pupils much before, either for pupils who had recently joined the school or as a tool for the start of the academic year when pupils moved into a new class.

"There's a real value in looking at how children engage. It's a really good thing for teachers to look at if they get a new student in their class."

Special school, Participating, Phase 2

"I've learnt so much about [pupil] through this, and I think if I were to do it at the beginning of the year when we didn't know the students coming in, I think we probably would have picked up more about what the students like and the best environments to teach them in."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

- Identifying ways to improve engagement – once teachers discovered what engaged pupils, they could use this information to identify areas where engagement could be improved. They would then use the approach's 'intervention' technique to try out new activities and objects, either with the aim of increasing engagement in one of the aspects (e.g. persistence) or increasing engagement in a certain activity.

"It is good as a reflective tool for practitioners to think about how I can increase the engagement for this particular child."

Mainstream school, Participating, phase 2

Case study – use of 7 aspects to inform new teachers

A special school operating as a hub in the pilot made the decision to use their end-of-year assessments in a formative as well as summative way, by using information from the 7 aspects summative assessments to inform staff about pupils they had not interacted with before. This school was already experienced in using the approach and made this decision before the pilot began. They planned to pass on the outcomes of the end-of-year assessments to the class teacher that was taking on the pupils in the next academic year. They felt the assessment information would be invaluable for teachers as a way to 'fast-track' their understanding of the pupils.

"As a school, we've been using it for at least four years, but what we've been doing is we use the 7 aspects and we update it annually. So, we have these which we update every year at the end of the school year, so if the child is moving class, then the teacher who has them for the following year will know what they look like when they're engaged."

Most schools were very positive about using the 7 aspects approach as a tool for formative assessments, due to the valuable information it provided them that would support them to improve their teaching practices. They felt this way despite their concerns about the high workload.

Use as a summative assessment

If DfE decides to make the 7 aspects a statutory requirement for summative assessments, the requirement will be limited to pupils at the end of key stage 1 (7 years old) and the end of key stage 2 (11 years old). However, schools in the pilot were using the 7 aspects for summative assessment with pupils across the primary age range. Additionally, the approach is designed to be used on an ongoing basis, so schools conducted assessments throughout the pilot period, and end of year summative assessments were conducted taking previous assessments into account.

Despite their enthusiasm for use of the 7 aspects for formative assessment, the majority of schools in the pilot had reservations about the appropriateness of the approach for summative assessment. They had 3 main concerns:

- the amount of variability observed amongst these pupils
- knowing that some pupils will not be able to make much or any observable progress due to the nature of their disability or condition
- lack of clarity around what observed 'progress' showed them

Many schools found that assessments using the approach only provided them with a 'snapshot' that showed them the pupil's level of engagement at that particular date and time. The nature of this type of pupil means that they are highly variable. They can be very sensitive to environmental and situational factors, for example temperature or time of day. Additionally, these pupils often have many medical complications that can have an effect on engagement. Medical interventions such as a recent operation or change in medication can result in pupils being unable to display more than a low level of engagement for a period of time. Another challenge is that many of this group of pupils are susceptible to seizures, which in practice can mean that a pupil can be displaying a high level of engagement shortly before suffering from a seizure, meaning the activity and assessment have to be immediately abandoned. This level of variability meant that schools found it hard to compare what they had found in each assessment.

"It's not reflective, it only shows a small bit of time and not the bigger picture."

Special school, Hub, phase 2

"The nature of these students means you won't always see the scores going up. It might be that the pupil is having a bad day, they're tired, they're not feeling well, it's a bit hot."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

Some of the schools recognised that a way to combat this variability would be to conduct a higher number of observations over time to obtain a more holistic picture. However, as

mentioned above, many schools struggled with time and resource implications that would prevent them from conducting a higher number of assessments.

Another concern that schools had with using the approach with this group of pupils was that in their professional opinion, certain pupils do not have the ability to make progress, either at all or within particular areas. Some pupils have regressive conditions, meaning that the best that they can achieve is maintenance. This speaks to a wider concern that schools have for measuring progress amongst this group of pupils, and is not limited to the 7 aspects of engagement as an assessment tool.

Additionally, many schools also felt that there was a lack of clarity around what a recorded increase in engagement for a particular pupil was showing them. Many teachers felt that an increased observed level of engagement following an intervention was not necessarily a sign that the pupil themselves had made progress, but in fact a reflection of improved teacher knowledge of how to engage the pupil. As such, they felt that this showed the approach was more suitable as a tool for formative assessment, and not useful for summative assessment.

“The final scores were higher than the beginning scores so there has been progress but not on a beautiful upward trajectory. Is that because of the assessment tool itself or is that because of good teaching and the task the pupil had been set to do?”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

“I think it is good as a method to help planning and development of new teachers as well as looking at these aspects of how a child engages and the importance of engagement of the child as opposed to going straight to what they are learning academically. In terms of assessing the child, I personally don’t think that would work because it is more of an assessment of how the teacher is teaching as opposed to how the child is learning.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

For those who made use of the 28-point scale, a few had questions about what a score, for example 24 or above, was showing them. These schools were unclear about whether a score of 28 indicated that the pupil was ready to move on to subject-specific learning. In practice, teachers did not feel that a high score indicated that the pupil was ready to move on. This was because they found that the high score would relate more to the activity that the staff gave the pupil for that assessment, and if they gave the pupil a different activity, they may not have achieved as high a score. Schools asked for more guidance on how to use the approach for making decisions about when to progress pupils on to subject-specific learning, if that is the way that DfE intends that schools use the approach.

Several schools drew the conclusion that the only way that they could use the 7 aspects for summative assessments was in combination with other tools, for example tools such as B Squared, that record a wider range of achievement steps, including social and physical characteristics, as well as engagement. They felt this way because in their opinion the 7 aspects approach did not cover all areas of pupil development, and because of their perception that assessments only reflected a 'snapshot'.

Potential for tracking against EHC plan outcomes

School opinions on the potential for using the 7 aspects of engagement for tracking outcomes on EHC plans varied. A small number of schools built their approach around EHC plan outcomes, using these as a basis for setting targets of what they wanted to achieve through the approach. These schools did find that they could use the approach in this way, and it helped provide them with a focus when they were using it. Some of these schools noted that qualitative assessment information from the 7 aspects could be potentially powerful additions to assessment information for EHC plans.

However, most schools were not approaching the 7 aspects assessments in this way. There were some schools that could see how they could potentially use the approach to track against EHC plan outcomes. However, they chose not to do so because they had other methods in place for assessing these outcomes that they felt were more efficient and appropriate.

Schools who felt that the 7 aspects of engagement approach was not suitable for tracking progress against EHC plan outcomes felt this way due to their overall concerns around using the approach for tracking progress. Additionally, many noted that as the approach only focused on cognition and learning, they could not use it for all EHC plan outcomes because some of those focused on other areas, for example physical or social and emotional development.

Other stakeholder views

As part of the school case studies, we interviewed parents, governors and local authority representatives to understand their views on the usefulness and ease of understanding of the assessment information they received from the schools.

Parents' views

As mentioned in the previous chapter, most schools chose not to share assessment information with parents. As such, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions about parent opinions on the use of the approach as an assessment tool.

Parent views on the current information they received from schools about their child varied. Some were highly satisfied with the information they received, both through end-

of-year reports and regular informal conversations with staff and felt no need for any further information.

“It was a very comprehensive, end-of-year report, when he recently had it, so it was about goals that he’d achieved, you know, basically, the things that I’ve mentioned in how he’s progressed, and about his personality, and how he is with other people.”

Parent, Special school, Hub, phase 2

Other parents were less satisfied with the detail of feedback they received from their child’s school, so felt positive about receiving information from the 7 aspects assessments, as they provided more detail about how much engagement their child displayed.

“[7 aspects information received] was really informative. I really liked that, so obviously it was better than it just being ‘Oh, your son is functioning at a P1 or a P2,’ and then a paragraph or a couple of paragraphs summarised by his class teacher. I liked having more information.”

Parent, Special school, Participating, phase 2

Governors’ views

Again, the amount of information shared by schools with their board of governors varied. Some governors were very well informed about the approach, with others much less so. As with parents, this makes it difficult draw conclusions about their views. Those that had been shown assessment information agreed with schools that the approach was most useful as a tool to inform teaching, rather than for summative assessment.

“As a tool I think it’s very useful for teaching. It enables staff to find the optimum learning environment, and for staff dealing with PMLD youngsters to be alerted to barriers and do some analysis of them and how they might overcome them.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

An issue for governors of mainstream schools is that most individuals on the board are unlikely to have much knowledge about PMLD pupils, as they are only a small proportion of the overall school population. This means that they will know relatively little about the type of pupil involved in the pilot, so any information that is shared with them about the 7 aspects of engagement will need to be very clear and easy to understand, to allow these governors to make use of it.

“I think my knowledge is much more about the rest of the school, than the [name of SEND unit]”.

Governor, Mainstream school, Participating, phase 2

Local authority views

We asked the schools taking part as case studies to share information with a local authority representative. Following this, we interviewed the representative to understand their views on how they would use the information. The local authority representatives' views on the approach were broadly similar to schools'. They recognised its value as a tool for informing teaching, but they were unsure if they could use it for summative assessments. Ultimately, they found the assessment information that schools provided to them of only limited use, as they felt it did not give them an accurate idea of progress made by pupils. They echoed the concerns of schools that each assessment only provided a 'snapshot' that is hard to compare to other assessments.

"It's too much of a snapshot. It's not enough to say they were engaged at that moment in time."

Local authority representative, phase 2

Local authorities had additional concerns about the consistency in use of the approach between schools in the area and across the country. They felt that in order for them to feel reassured that all schools were using the approach fully, and therefore meeting the needs of these pupils, there would need to be guidance provided to schools to ensure that it was being used in a consistent way. The local authority representatives also stressed the importance of local authorities and inspectors being trained in the approach, as well as schools. To enable them to effectively monitor schools, these individuals will need to be well informed of the 7 aspects of engagement, and how to use it.

Local authorities were wary of a situation where there was no requirement for schools to report data resulting from assessments. They had strong concerns about the risk of taking a backwards step in the education of this group of pupils. They felt that the system for educating these pupils had improved greatly in recent decades, through an increased focus on learning as opposed to simply maintaining pupil wellbeing. Local authorities were keen to ensure that pupils continued to learn as much as they could and believed if schools were not required to provide them with assessment data that would reduce transparency and prevent them from ensuring that this was happening in all schools in their area.

"If schools do not have to report there is a risk that schools may not be sufficiently challenging them or giving them the right learning opportunities."

Local authority representative, phase 2

"If it comes out that 7 aspects are the way forward, it's okay for outstanding schools. They will use it as a teaching tool, and probably continue to use other forms of assessment, but schools that only use the 7 aspects, it could be 'a retrograde step.' If we go back 30 years, these children who were working at P1 to 4, there used to be a feeling,

'As long as they're happy.' There wasn't a focus on learning. With this, there is risk that it could lead to 'As long as they're engaged'."

Local authority representative, phase 2

Local authorities stated that they would not need to receive quantitative information. Qualitative information would be sufficient in their view, provided that it contained enough information and that the format and level of detail did not vary too widely between schools. Local authorities would find it helpful if schools were provided with a template for this purpose.

Chapter 4 – experiences of the hub school model

If DfE were to introduce the 7 aspects as a statutory assessment approach, thought would need to be given to how this would be implemented and the amount of resources required to support training in it, not just in schools, but among inspection and local authority staff. The hub model was intended to test how a cascading rollout might work. This chapter explores experiences of the hub school model from the perspectives of both the hub school and participating schools. Firstly, the hub school experience is outlined by exploring the spread of approaches taken by hub schools when communicating and sharing information about the 7 aspects of engagement with participating schools, the perceptions of the support provided by DfE and the key challenges and cost implications experienced by hub schools. Secondly, this chapter outlines the participant schools' experiences of the hub school model and their overall level of satisfaction with the support and information received from their hub school. Finally, it explores the overall effectiveness of the hub school model and learning points for future studies.

The hub school experience

The majority of the hub schools involved in the pilot had applicable experience, due to all but one being a teaching school. This meant that the hub school model was a familiar and natural process for them. The hub schools were selected by DfE following a short open competition and were all highly experienced and engaged in working collaboratively with a range of schools and supporting and sharing best practice with them. Further, many of the hubs had a high proportion of relevant pupils who were able to take part in the pilot, and as a result, hub schools were able to put into practice all elements of the 7 aspects of engagement assessment.

“The decision was school-driven but as a teaching school we also had the infrastructure to write the bid.”

Special school, Hub, phase 1

Hub school approach

The approach to communicating and supporting their 6 or so participating schools varied greatly between the hubs. It was also clear that many hub schools planned to implement a certain approach at the start of the pilot, but due to time and distance challenges, they were unable to maintain their proposed approach at times.

However, there were some important methods that hubs used to engage with their participating schools.

Face-to-face meetings were perceived to be a beneficial communication tool for both hub schools and participating schools. They provided an opportunity to discuss any key concerns throughout the pilot and many hub schools spoke about the richness of information shared at the end of each meeting. However, as mentioned previously, time and distance impacted on how frequently meetings could take place. All hubs had at least one face-to-face meeting with all the participating schools in the hub, usually at the beginning of the pilot in January. In this meeting participating schools were introduced to the pilot. The 7 aspects of engagement were outlined using assessment examples and the hub school's approach to supporting and guiding them through the pilot was discussed. After the initial face-to-face meeting, the average number of regular meetings with participating schools held by the hub schools was between 2 and 4. Meetings were commonly scheduled to take place after assessments had been conducted in order for schools to share and discuss results and any key concerns, or half-termly as a form of quality assurance and opportunity to peer review assessments.

"They've found the debate around the table at the meetings really helpful."

Special school, Hub, phase 1

Sharing information digitally via online document sharing was an important aspect of the hub school approach because it maintained an open and consistent dialogue across all the schools. Email chains or Dropbox were commonly used. They were perceived to be easy and convenient methods for schools to share examples of good practice or useful pieces of information related to the pilot, and for the hub schools to communicate any key information from DfE. These tools were particularly relied on when hub schools struggled to schedule face-to-face meetings with participating schools due to time pressures affecting both parties.

"One of the other schools in the hub created a different report, and we shared those at the most recent meeting. We've given each other copies and shared things on the shared drive."

Special school, Hub, phase 2

All schools had a dedicated hub contact they could get in touch with about any queries or concerns. Dedicated contacts were usually teachers who led the hub but did not have any practical involvement in the assessments. Contact was usually via email, or by telephone when a more detailed response was required. There was one distinct case where a dedicated hub school contact visited participating schools individually to respond to any queries or concerns, which was of great value to those participating schools.

“We did visits for some [participating schools] which was invaluable for those that needed it and has been a more productive approach to delivering the hub because you can really see what schools are doing in practice.”

Special school, Hub, phase 1

However, some hub schools found it difficult to provide participating schools with the level of contact they required, and this was usually due to the dedicated hub school contact being the hub lead and practically involved in assessments, which as a result impacted the time available to support and guide the participating schools.

Case study – hub school approach to communicating with pilot schools

The hub school held four meetings in total with participating schools in December, January, March and June. These times were chosen to fit availability. The first meeting introduced schools to the 7 aspects of engagement by using video assessments from DfE, which schools found very useful. The second meeting was focused on schools peer reviewing assessments and essentially acted as a quality assurance session. The remaining meetings were spent discussing key queries and concerns expressed by the schools.

They received positive feedback from schools about the meetings and the outputs from feedback sessions with them. Further, the hub school lead ensured that he was always available to answer any pressing queries/concerns over emails outside of each of the meetings.

Challenges

Time was a challenge for the majority of hub schools, particularly for those whose dedicated hub lead was also practically involved in the implementation of the 7 aspects of engagement. Busy workloads alongside the amount of time needed to practically implement the 7 aspects pilot were a struggle for both the hub schools and the participating schools. As a result, it became difficult for some hub schools to maintain regular meetings with participating schools or to consistently use the online document sharing tools. This had an impact on overall enthusiasm for the pilot amongst some schools.

Sufficiently supporting the participating schools demanded a large amount of time and guidance from the hub schools. This was especially true at the beginning of the pilot due to concerns across the schools about the suitability of the 7 aspects as a summative assessment tool and its suitability for the wide-ranging needs of pupils. However, going forward it proved a challenge for some hub schools to engage participating schools who

came to the conclusion that the 7 aspects of engagement required a sizeable amount of time and resource without providing any useful benefit for the children involved.

“Across the board, schools felt very strongly about the idea of coming up with a number because these learners by definition are so variable and some sort of narrative would be much more appropriate. Further, it’s an additional, very time consuming piece of work on top of the systems. They felt because it wasn’t particularly valuable for all the learners, they felt quite negative towards investing time in something that would only be of use to only some children.”

Special school, Hub, phase 2

Geographical location was another key challenge. Some schools were located 2 to 3 hours away from the hub, which was a large travel time commitment. Hubs comprised of schools that were geographically further apart had less frequent face-to-face meetings and a lower level of engagement in hub communication compared with hubs with schools geographically closer together. One school decided to combat this barrier by clustering the hub into 2 or 3 schools based on geography and then encouraging those schools to peer review using videos and recordings and discussing each other's judgments. This proved to be beneficial for these schools who were able to work closely alongside a school nearby and share information and discussion best practice more frequently.

“Collaboration between the schools has been excellent, creating clusters that didn’t exist before.”

Special school, Hub, phase 1

“There are three schools that have met up as well, post-meeting, to ensure consistency in how expectations are met. And that has been really supportive. We devised the report for parents together. One of the other schools in the hub created a different report, and we shared those at the most recent meeting. We’ve given each other copies and shared things on the shared drive.”

Special school, Hub, phase 2

Support from DfE

Although none of them raised these issues during the pilot, in hindsight the majority of the hubs felt they would have benefitted from more contact from DfE, as many felt that the contact they did receive dwindled after their initial meeting. Schools would have appreciated more information and guidance throughout the pilot about the following:

- a more in-depth understanding of the 7 aspects indicators and key information sources to provide to participating schools

- more guidance on how to direct schools during the pilot – there were a few hub schools who were concerned that they were providing too much direction to schools, which could negatively impact the results of the pilot
- best practice approach to measuring progress of assessments and reporting to DfE at the end of the pilot
- regular meetings/webinars facilitated by DfE, between the hub schools, to provide them with the opportunity to share their experience of being a hub and any suggestions for good practice

Cost implications

DfE made a small amount of funding available to each of the hub schools, to facilitate their work with the participating schools. The majority of schools felt that the funding provided to hub schools for their involvement in the pilot was manageable and no additional financial costs were incurred.

"We knew it would be tight in financial terms but we just had to get on with it. Everyone was very willing."

Special school, Hub, phase 1

One hub provided each of the participating schools with a share of the funding in return for attendance at face-to-face hub meetings, and as a result, schools within this hub remained committed to engaging with the hub meetings and other forms of communication throughout the pilot.

Participating school experiences of the hub model

Overall, schools had a positive experience of the hub school model and the majority found their hub schools to be helpful and supportive throughout the pilot. Liaising with other schools and discussing thoughts on the assessment was valuable, especially for mainstream schools, who had fewer relevant pupils to take part in the pilot and limited expert SEND knowledge. Mainstream schools not only benefitted from close contact with the hub school but from other special schools in the hub sharing general SEND expertise, in addition to discussing their approach to the pilot.

"You go with one view of what you have got and it was nice to talk about our experiences and realise that we were having quite similar experiences. It was reassuring you, that you were on the right lines and not out there on your own."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

Level of contact

Level of contact with the hub school varied across the hubs and was largely influenced by the following factors:

- Time and distance – as discussed previously, time pressures and geographical location impacted the level of face-to-face contact hub schools were able to provide. However, most schools who had limited face-to-face contact with their hub schools remained satisfied with the overall level of contact with their hub school. This was because they received a high level of responsiveness, support and guidance both online and over the phone.

“For me it struck a good balance of not over the top hassling but equally a reminder that the [hub lead] was there if needs be for questions/queries. He was aware that the pilot was taking place in a busy operational school.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

- Rapport between the schools – some of the schools had previous ties with the hub school and other schools in the hub, which provided a level of familiarity amongst the schools. This generally developed an element of enthusiasm about the hub and schools made more of an effort to meet face-to-face regularly and make consistent use of the online document sharing tools.

Topics covered in face-to-face meetings

Face-to-face meetings were valued by participating schools and were used to discuss key queries and concerns with the hubs and share information. Common topics schools looked to discuss in more depth and gain more clarity on were:

- overall approach to assessment – many schools used the hub meetings as an opportunity to peer review by sharing video observations and discussing the key activities used and method of reporting

“It was great that there were people challenging it as it made us focus on our thinking.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

- 7 aspect indicators – many schools found this difficult to initially grasp and discussing this at the hub was a valuable exercise – in some of the hubs, the schools worked together to outline more detailed definitions of the indicators, as well as the differences between key indicators that were perceived to be similar, for example curiosity and discovery

“There's been three meetings and people have said the same kind of things, that it's very difficult to understand the terminology and then to isolate something to talk about it without the other aspects coming in. So, everybody more or less has been in agreement with that when we've been to the meetings.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

- suitability of the 7 aspects as an appropriate summative assessment tool – whether the 7 aspects was suitable for the wide-ranging needs of pupils was commonly discussed and resulted in tension within hubs, due to some schools being more positive about the approach than others

“[About discussions of suitability as a method of assessment] One of our biggest frustrations was that I think people in the hub were getting so bogged down with ‘what it wasn’t’ rather than seeing ‘what it was’.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

Level of satisfaction with information

The majority of schools were satisfied with the level of information provided by their hub schools in terms of the purpose of the 7 aspects approach as an assessment tool. Schools were regularly directed to important information sources by the hubs when a more in-depth understanding of the 7 aspects was necessary, for example Barry Carpenter’s website and information on the Rochford Review.

However, many schools felt that their hub schools should provide more guidance around best practice for practically implementing the 7 aspects. A lack of clarity in this area raised continual concerns for some schools (especially mainstream schools) about whether they were implementing the pilot in line with DfE expectations. Important pieces of information schools sought from hub schools were:

- The optimum number of children to include in the assessments to get a true understanding of the results of the pilot was unclear. Many schools were unable to include a large number of children due to the amount of time required for each assessment, but they wanted clarity from the hub schools around the optimum number of children to use in their assessment to meet DfE requirements. This led to initial anxiety among some schools at the start of the pilot, about whether they were doing things ‘correctly’.
- The methods of reporting progress in the pilot – many schools expected hub schools to have an understanding of the level of detail they needed to provide

when recording each assessment. The uncertainty meant that some schools felt they were unable to be efficient with their time. Schools wanted to know specifically, whether they should be measuring targets or engagement and the best way to report on scores and observations made.

Case study – extra support needed for mainstream schools

A mainstream school participating in the pilot found that it had less knowledge than the other schools in the hub and as a result needed more guidance from the hub school. It felt that compared to special schools it had fewer staff to implement the pilot which made it harder to allocate time to moderation within already busy workloads.

This school felt out of its depth from the onset and needed particular help understanding the type of activities it should be using within the pilot to assess each of the 7 indicators and the best way to report on this.

"You need quite a lot of knowledge about it to know what you're looking for."

It did find the hub to be open and willing to answer questions but found the pilot overwhelming and felt that its needs should have been taken into consideration at the start of the pilot.

Effectiveness of the hub model

Overall, both the hub schools and participating schools felt the hub model was an appropriate and effective method for implementing the pilot. The hub school model cultivated an open, honest and collaborative environment, which felt more comfortable in approach for participating schools, than seeking support and guidance directly from DfE.

"It has been a very positive and collaborative exercise. I've really enjoyed it."

Special school, Participating, phase 2

The presence of a hub-lead was a helping hand for participating schools who have been able to rely on the hub lead to drive the pilot and essentially keep them on track in terms of reporting delivery. Further, the hub provided participating schools with confidence and reassurance throughout the process. Without this, there may have been many incidences of frustration and disengagement in the pilot by participating schools.

The collaboration of schools within regions was an effective tool for engagement in the pilot. It provided schools with the chance to engage with schools they wouldn't usually get the opportunity to interact with, which was particularly true for mainstream schools. Working closely together with other schools in the hub acted as another point of contact

for support and guidance alongside the hub school, which relieved some of the pressure from the hub of having to be the only point of contact throughout the pilot. The connections developed between schools has been valuable and many hubs have planned to maintain their relationship and continue to collaboratively and supportively share and discuss SEND knowledge and skills on an ongoing basis.

“I think it's been really effective and we will continue to meet as a group, we have already planned to. We are going to go and visit the other schools too, so the hub will continue as a research group.”

Special school, Hub, phase 2

Future learnings

Despite the hub school model being positively perceived by both hub schools and participating schools, there were a number of key learnings that they felt should be taken on board when rolling out the hub school model across pilots in the future:

- Geographical location of schools within the hubs – it is essential that schools are located closely together. Schools are less likely to attend valuable face-to-face meetings if they are located a large distance away from the hub school. However, if the locality of the schools is insurmountable, then it works well for participating schools to be clustered, and encouraged to meet face-to-face with schools close by, with hub-leads visiting each of the clusters throughout the pilot.
- Ongoing support and guidance from DfE for hub schools – the hub schools had varying levels of experience and knowledge of the 7 aspects of engagement. Many would have benefitted from DfE support throughout the process, instead of solely at induction, to ensure they were able to confidently deliver information of value to participating schools.

“We wasted a lot of time trying to work out what we were doing. Our hub leader didn't have the knowledge to answer the questions, and it would have been so much more helpful to have a greater level of guidance...it felt a bit sloppy.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

- Consistency across the hub schools – it was apparent that the level of knowledge and engagement across the hub schools was inconsistent, which had great influence on how supported participating schools felt throughout the pilot. Further, there was a lack of clarity for hub schools around the level of direction they should provide participating schools, which resulted in the attitude and approach to the pilot of some participating schools being greatly influenced by the hub school. A

consistent approach to hub school involvement and direction through DfE - organised hub school meet-ups or peer reviews, in addition to equal distribution of information materials and DfE contact with hub schools, would ensure that the hubs run as consistently as possible.

“It’s ensuring there is that clarity amongst the hub schools. Some hub schools went away and clearly explained what was going on, whereas we didn’t quite have the information that we needed.”

Special school, Participating, phase 2

- Dedicated hub contacts – due to the time-intensive nature of the pilot, it is useful for hub schools and participating schools to have a dedicated contact who is actively engaged in hub school communication but not practically involved in the implementation of the pilot. This will appropriately spread the workload of taking part in a hub across resources available and as a result maintain engagement and contact within the hubs.

Conclusions

Use of 7 aspects as a summative assessment approach

Outside of the pilot, schools were using a variety of assessment methods and tools alongside P scales. This means that current practices (aside from P scales) are not comparable, suggesting a need for a more consistent approach to assessment for SEND pupils with complex needs.

Schools took a variety of approaches to the implementation of the 7 aspects approach as an assessment tool. This included the level of influence from the hub school, how they collected evidence, whether and how they used E4L materials, and the number of observations they conducted. This has positive implications regarding the flexibility of the approach as schools were able to adapt their use of the approach to suit their pupils and ways of working.

However, the variety of approaches has implications for comparability across schools. The lack of consistency would be problematic for local authorities, as it would make it difficult for them to understand assessment information, leaving them concerned about their ability to ensure that schools were meeting pupil needs. Providing standard templates for schools to use when providing information to local authorities would be found helpful.

During the pilot, most schools chose not to share much assessment information with parents. This was in part due to concerns about whether parents would understand the information, and doubt about whether parents would be interested in the information. Additionally, some schools wanted to wait until they were more confident in using the approach before sharing any information with parents. Parents had mixed views on receiving assessment information. Some felt they already received sufficient feedback about their child and anything further was unnecessary, while others found the 7 aspects information useful in giving them a different perspective on their child's learning.

Similarly, few schools shared assessment information with other stakeholders, including governors, local authorities, and other professionals working with pupils. Governors and local authority representatives that saw assessment information highlighted the importance of it being clear and easy to understand, and that those monitoring schools would need to receive training in the approach and interpreting the evidence it produced.

The majority of schools felt they were able to develop a clear and consistent understanding of each of the 7 aspects involved in the assessment, but this took time and developed across the course of the pilot. Moderation and discussion amongst staff were key in developing this understanding. However, these can be difficult for mainstream schools with small SEND units, due to a lack of staff with experience of this

group of pupils. Forming links with other nearby schools could be a solution for these schools. Another reason that schools found it challenging to develop a strong understanding was due to conducting only a small number of assessments, as a result of time constraints. This shows that experience using the approach is key, as it took time and practice to become confident in its use.

Time and management of workloads were big challenges for many schools, leaving some of them concerned about how they would manage if it became a statutory requirement for them to use the 7 aspects with all of their relevant pupils at the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2. A number of schools reduced the intensity of their observations and recording over the course of the pilot. This was because they were finding it difficult to fit in what they originally planned, and struggled to see how they could successfully expand the use of the approach to more pupils, even knowing that they would no longer be required to use P scales.

The majority of schools were enthusiastic about using the 7 aspects approach for formative assessments. They experienced benefits around increasing their knowledge of what their pupils were like when engaged and identifying ways that they could increase engagement levels on an individualised and pupil-centred basis.

However, most pilot schools were apprehensive about the use of the approach as a means of statutory summative assessment at the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2. This was in part due to concerns about variability amongst this group of pupils, as the same pupil can display very different levels of engagement from one assessment to the next due to different medical, environmental or even circumstantial factors. Notably, when a pupil's engagement increased over time, schools did not necessarily feel this resulted in the pupil making progress in learning outcomes, but it was instead a reflection of how the approach helped them to improve their teaching practice. This raises questions about the validity of the approach for summative assessment. Schools were also uncertain about how to use the assessment results to make decisions about when pupils were ready to move on to subject-specific learning.

Schools held varied opinions on using the approach for tracking progress against EHC plan outcomes. Those who felt most positive about this linked their use of the 7 aspects directly to progress in achieving EHC plan outcomes. However, schools noted that it would not be possible to use the 7 aspects approach for tracking EHC plan outcomes that were outside the scope of cognition and learning, for example physical outcomes.

Schools' concerns were echoed by the views of the small number of local authority representatives interviewed. They also felt that the approach was very useful for formative assessment, but were unclear about its usefulness for summative assessment, in particular whether and how it could be interpreted at school rather than individual pupil level, and its limitations to certain areas of development. If it was to be rolled out

nationally, local authority representatives also highlighted the need for intensive resourcing in terms of extra staff training and moderation to enable a consistent interpretation across local authorities.

The hub school model

Overall, both the hub schools and participating schools felt the hub model was an appropriate and effective method for implementing the pilot.

Hub schools were able to apply their experience from being teaching schools and from having a relatively large proportion of the type of pupil they were focusing on as part of the pilot. This experience helped them be effective in the running of the hub and in disseminating training to participating schools. Hub schools felt the budget DfE provided was manageable, partly because they had existing infrastructure in place from their experience as teaching schools. Many hub schools felt that they would have benefited from more support from DfE across the course of the pilot. They would have liked information sources to provide to participating schools, information about how to advise schools and more opportunities to provide their feedback. More contact with DfE would also have helped with ensuring consistency of information shared between hubs, so that all participating schools received the same level of information and training. Consistency of training would help to introduce more comparability between school assessment outputs.

Most participating schools had a positive experience of the hub model. They found the hub meetings useful and felt the presence of a dedicated hub contact reassuring. However, some participating schools, particularly mainstream, would have liked more guidance from their hub schools.

Distance between hub and participating schools was a challenge for some hubs. Face-to-face meetings were found to be very effective but when a participating school was located far away from their hub school they did not always attend these meetings, which meant those schools received less direct support.



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