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Feeding back the results of dynamic assessment to the child

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Abstract
The primary objective of this research study was to investigate the perceived effects of feeding back the results of dynamic assessment to the child verbally and through the medium of video. Fourteen children, aged 6 – 11 years, and their class teachers were involved in the research. The children and teachers were interviewed prior to the DA session, and then again approximately 6 weeks after a feedback session. Thematic analysis was undertaken for coding and interpreting primary data, using both a computer software package QSR NVivo 7 and manual methods of sorting and categorizing. Results demonstrated that feeding back the results of dynamic assessment to the child led to perceptions of positive change from both teachers and children, and that using video to feedback is particularly helpful. A number of methodological strengths and weaknesses are discussed, and implications for practice are explored. Further research, building on this study, could explore the outcomes of the educational psychologist consulting with the child about their perceptions of the support they require, rather than only feeding back assessment results to them. This could lead to the child being involved at the start of the assessment and intervention cycle, leading to their greater engagement with the change process.

Keywords: Dynamic assessment, video interaction guidance, involving children, feedback.

Introduction
Dynamic assessment (DA) is a theory-based methodological approach to assessment which aims to generate information about the learner’s responsiveness (modifiability) to different teaching strategies (mediation), or in other words about their potential capacity rather than current level of performance (Lidz & Elliott, 2000). The theoretical basis can be found in social constructivism, in Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), and in Feuerstein’s theories of mediated learning experience (MLE) and structural cognitive modifiability (SCM) (Feuerstein, Feuerstein, Falik, & Rand, 2002). The DA process is rooted in the interactive and social relationship between the assessor and the assesseee, bringing about change in the learner and generating intervention.

Dynamic assessment could be viewed as a form of formative assessment (also known as assessment for learning and used widely in education—see Black & Wiliam, 1998), since they share the same philosophy—namely, to inform future learning. Research using formative assessment has been shown to improve learning significantly (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

It demands some radical changes in pedagogy: in order to engage in the process, children must first judge their present understanding (metacognition) and then have a clear view of both learning objectives and assessment criteria (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003).

Feedback is a critical part of formative assessment, here referring to a cyclical process of evoking information about the child’s learning style and using this to modify the teaching and learning activities (Black et al., 2003). It should focus on what needs to be done to improve learning, rather than on “ability”, thus preventing students focusing on their comparative status (Black et al., 2003). The theory is that it is only through such feedback that one can expect improvement in the child’s learning. Frequently, educational psychologists, and others in education, neglect the child when feeding back assessment results. This can have a detrimental effect on the success of the intervention planned.

An objective of the current research was to focus on this aspect of dynamic assessment, namely, to include children in the feedback process, in order to investigate the potential effects on their subsequent learning.
The research combined the use of dynamic assessment with that of Video Interaction Guidance (VIG). Video Interaction Guidance is a specific “coaching” intervention which is collaborative rather than prescriptive, empowering rather than deskilling and conveys respect for the client’s strengths and potential (Simpson, Forsyth, & Kennedy, 1995).

In its original form, VIG is a method in which clients (parents, professionals or children) are given the opportunity to actively reflect and receive feedback on their interactions by reviewing a micro-analysis of video clips of their own successful communication (Kennedy, 2005). Before the first film, the client is engaged in the process of change by negotiating their own goals. During the feedback sessions, the client and VIG Guider look together at moments (from a few seconds to a minute) of success, particularly moments when the adult, or client, has responded in a positive way to the child’s, or communication partner’s, action or initiative using a combination of non-verbal and verbal responses. They reflect collaboratively on what they are doing that is contributing towards the achievement of their goals, celebrate success and then make further goals for change. These reflections move very quickly from analysis of the behaviour to the exploration of feelings, thoughts, wishes and intentions.

VIG was adapted for this project by using a video recording of the child's interaction in a dynamic assessment setting. The child then becomes the client. The key to change comes about through the quality of interaction in the feedback session of the guider with the child. Some change comes about through self-modelling but more lasting change takes place when the child has a chance to reflect at a meta-cognitive level and to develop a new deeper understanding of their own learning process.

Video Interaction Guidance is based on Trevarthen’s theory of intersubjectivity and Feuerstein’s MLE theory (Simpson, Forsyth, & Kennedy, 1995). VIG and DA are closely related; indeed, much of the literature on DA refers to the affective quality of parent-child interaction as a determinant of cognitive modifiability (e.g., Haywood, 1993; Tzuriel, 1997), and video is often used as a reflective tool with parents when observing their child’s cognitive behaviours (e.g., Kahn, 2000).

The aim of the research was to explore in depth one way of actively involving children in assessment of their additional support needs; that is, by feeding back to the child their DA results verbally and through using a VIG approach. The main research question was: does feeding back the results of dynamic assessment to the child bring about perceptions of positive change in the learning and teaching strategies which help that child? A second research question was: (a) what are the key themes that can be extracted from an analysis of the pre-DA and post-feedback questionnaires? (b) Did these show any change as a result of the research?

An “action research” approach, with a focus on perceptions of change rather than actual change, was taken for two reasons; firstly, the short time-scale of the project meant that measurable change in attainment would be unlikely, and secondly, ethical considerations of minimal intervention meant that normal EP assessment and intervention procedures alone were to be carried out.

**Methods**

Fourteen cases in the current caseload of three educational psychologists (EPs) were identified to be part of the study. The children all attended local authority mainstream primary schools (age range: 6 – 11 years). These were children for whom the EPs had already chosen DA as the most useful method of assessment, using their professional judgement. The three EPs met on four occasions to develop the DA materials and resources used in the research, and to ensure that a similar DA approach was taken during all of the assessments. They had varying levels of experience in using DA, from expert to novice.

Parental consent was sought before the children were able to take part in the research. Pre-assessment and post-feedback questionnaires were administered to both child and class teacher in each case (see Tables I and II). The EPs involved in the research adapted the language of the questionnaires through semi-structured interviews according to the child’s age and level of understanding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-dynamic assessment interview:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are your main strengths in learning at present?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are your main challenges to learning at present?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What does your teacher do to help you improve your learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any other comment?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-feedback interview:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Remind child of dynamic assessment and feedback session, then ask)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. What points can you remember from your dynamic assessment? Which of these do you think helped you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are your main strengths in learning at present? Describe any change since the dynamic assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What are your main challenges to learning at present? Describe any change since the dynamic assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What does your teacher do to help you improve your learning? Describe any change since the dynamic assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any other comment?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table I. Pre-DA and post-feedback interview questions (child).**
Specific DA materials were used by the EPs to conduct the assessments, namely, the Children’s Analogical Thinking Modifiability Test (CATM) (Tzuriel & Klein, 1990) and the Cognitive Modifiability Battery (CMB) (Tzuriel, 1995). According to Tzuriel (2001), the aims of the CATM are to assess the child’s strategies for learning and responsiveness to mediation, including the use of a variety of high-order problem-solving concepts and operations. The children are asked to familiarize themselves with the properties of 18 coloured blocks, which differ by colour, size and shape, through a variety of activities and games, before completing a series of analogical problems with graded levels of difficulty. The problems take the form of “As A is to B, so C is to D” where the child is given three blocks and asked to choose a fourth to complete the analogy. The CMB is a more complex test, comprising several sub-tests; this aims to cover both assessment and intervention through seriation, reproduction of patterns, analogy, sequence or memory problems. Here the child uses a wooden plate with “windows” in a 3 x 3 grid and a set of blocks which differ by height (four different) and colour (four different).

Checklists of cognitive functions (Feuerstein et al., 2002) and affective factors (Tzuriel, Samuels, & Feuerstein, 1988) were used as a focus for the assessment of the child. These cognitive functions and affective factors were re-written in child-friendly language, in order for them to be more meaningful to the child (see Lauchlan, Carrigan & Daly, in press, for more details). Thus, the recording of the dynamic assessment focused on the learning strategies (or in other words the positive actions, abilities and attributes) displayed by the child during the session, with notes on the child’s responsiveness to different mediations (or teaching strategies). Some of the dynamic assessment sessions were video-recorded in order to be used in the feedback to the child at a later date.

After a maximum of three weeks following the DA session, the EP held a feedback meeting with the child, during which they discussed the findings and looked at any video-recording together. The assessor used VIG principles in that the meeting focused on the child’s successful use of beneficial learning strategies and working points for the future. Sometimes the EP invited the class teacher to accompany the child at this meeting, so that, as a familiar and trusted figure, they could encourage the child to speak freely, and so that they could help the child to carry through their learning goals when back in class. At other times, the EP felt that the child could be more open in their discussion about their learning experiences without the presence of their teacher, or that the teacher was too busy. If the teacher was not included in the feedback meeting, they and the child’s parents were shown any video-clips separately, and given a copy of the recordings. Following the feedback meeting a plan of intervention was drawn up, based on encouraging the use of those beneficial learning strategies that demonstrated most potential for change, or modifiability. It was the intention that the child should play a significant role in deciding on those learning strategies that were most beneficial to them.

The core data for the research were taken from the questionnaires for both child and class teacher. These represented baseline data (pre-DA) and post-feedback data. The post-feedback data were gathered approximately 6 weeks after the feedback meeting in order to maximize the time possible for the intervention plan to have an effect, within the short time-span of the study. In most cases the questionnaires were administered as semi-structured interviews although some teachers preferred to fill them in themselves to save time. The questionnaires asked both child and class teacher what they understood about the child’s learning strengths and challenges, about the learning and teaching strategies that were helpful for that child, and in the case of the teacher, about the level of understanding the child had of these strategies before the intervention. After the intervention, similar questions were asked, but this time enquiring whether there had been any change from before.

During the course of the research it became apparent through discussions with stakeholders that
other valuable information could be extracted from the core data, thus enriching or deepening the inquiry as well as answering the primary research question. The data from the questionnaires were therefore processed several times, firstly and simply to identify any changes between pre-DA and post-feedback, and then in richer detail to identify key themes in the responses and to evaluate whether these also changed as a result of the intervention.

Thematic analysis techniques were followed for coding and interpreting primary data, using both a computer software package QSR NVivo 7 and manual methods of sorting and categorizing. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006), whereby data are organized in rich detail and then interpreted in the light of the research questions. The questionnaires were imported to NVivo7 computer software as sources, and key phrases were selected and coded as “free nodes”. These were printed out, separated and manually sorted and re-sorted into themes and hierarchies. The principal researcher (first author) found manual sorting assisted her more in the creative and interpretative process than coding and categorizing on a computer. A theme can be defined as being, in the judgement of the researcher, of core importance in relation to the research questions, and as showing a recurring pattern of meaning in the data, although prevalence is not necessarily the determining factor. Following this, the questionnaires were re-coded using the final thematic hierarchy.

Results

The core data (pre-DA and post-feedback questionnaires) were analysed firstly for the child’s and teacher’s perceptions of change from pre- to post-intervention. Each question was compared in the two versions and coded simply for positive change, no change, negative change, or nil answer/unclear response. An EP from a different local authority Educational Psychology Service was asked to perform the same exercise, to establish indications of inter-rater reliability.

In general there was a significant perception of positive change or improvement from both children (75%; see Table III) and teachers (73%) after the intervention. Breaking this down into the key areas of learning strategies (learning strengths and challenges to learning) and teaching strategies, it appears that, whereas both learning strengths and teaching strategies showed significant perceived improvement in approximately the same proportions from both teachers and children (86–93%), positive change in challenges to learning was perceived to be far less (teachers 43%; children 29%). Teachers thought that the child’s understanding about the learning and teaching strategies which helped them had improved in 71% of cases, and 93% of the children remembered positive aspects of their dynamic assessment session. It was interesting that for most questions, the child and their teacher were in agreement over their perceptions of change (varying between 7 to 11 out of 14).

The language used by the children was predominately in terms of improved achievement in curriculum areas using the word “better”; for example: “better with numbers . . . made progress”; “I’m doing better with my reading”; “A lot! Writing has got better; stories have got better”. Nine of the 14 children commented about their cognitive improvements in this way. The teachers’ language for describing positive change used the phrase “improvements in . . .”, comparatives such as “more . . .” or “-er” (“more relaxed”, “happier”), and negative statements of inappropriate behaviour (“not shouting out”, “less likely to get upset”) (11 out of 14). They also named the affective strategies from the DA feedback in almost every case, for example “worry box and time out seem to have worked” (12 out of 14). These positive changes were mostly in affective rather than cognitive domains, unlike the children’s comments. Notably almost all the teachers commented on the lack of change in the child’s areas of difficulty, such as “continues to have problems with understanding and following instruction” (13 out of 14). For example, the level of attainment for a boy with dyslexia in literacy was unlikely to have changed significantly because of the short timescale of the project; however, both his and his teacher’s understanding of what learning and teaching strategies were most helpful for him improved greatly, they believed, and the boy had a more positive self-image of himself as a successful learner.

Following the initial analysis of the questionnaires for perceptions of change, quotations were coded into “free nodes” using NVivo7 software. There were 199 free nodes on the first analysis, although further inspection showed that many of them used different wording for the same or similar nodes (for further details of the analysis, see Landor, 2006). Grouping them into themes gave five overarching themes (see Figure 1):

1. cognitive;
2. affective and social;
3. curriculum areas;
4. learning and teaching strategies;
5. project-related comments.

The initial categorization exercise gave rise to the perception that a key theme was the importance of affective factors in the cognitive area of learning and teaching. The final thematic hierarchy followed the questionnaire format closely and compared baseline (pre-DA) and post-feedback comments in three main categories: “learning strategies” (divided into strengths and challenges), “teaching strategies” and “child’s understanding of strategies which help them”. Phrases from the questionnaires were re-coded under these headings and then grouped together into tree node headings such as affective—“ask for help”—“task perseverance” and so on. The following were some of the issues that were extracted from this analysis.

A focus on affective and emotional factors rather than curricular issues

For the most part, incidence did not change dramatically between the two questionnaires, with three exceptions. Citings of affective strategies which, according to the teacher, the child understood nearly doubled (from 7 to 13). An example of this is coping with intense anxiety by use of a “worry box”. In another case, the setting up of groupwork through a “Circle of friends” was helpful. Six of these 13 teachers mentioned the child’s growing “awareness”—of emotions, relationships and strengths—and five of them described affective learning or teaching strategies such as asking for help, or taking time out. For example, one class teacher commented: “he is a bit more aware of his emotions and more able to identify when he is getting upset—he leaves for time out”. Also of note was a decrease in the citing of curricular areas as challenges to learning (from 32 to 15) and of the citing of support as a teaching strategy (from 28 to 17).

Similarly, the children seemed to be more aware of the affective elements to their learning following the DA and feedback meeting. They also made affective comments about their improvements: “I’m feeling better about myself, about what I’m doing”; “I’m doing better with my reading. I like reading now”; “I passed my level D test. I was really pleased”.

Issues around feeding back to child with or without presence of class teacher

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it appeared from the data that the child feels able to be more open about their teacher in their absence. One child commented that “The teacher is doing her work when I’m doing my reading . . . I’m just trying my best”. Indeed this child’s class teacher was not very positive in her perception of the child’s improvements: “No change really . . . I think it goes over her head. I don’t think she understands about the teaching strategies that help her”. However, it can be argued that in other cases a more positive relationship between teacher and child may be brought about through the skilled intervention of the Guider, if the teacher is present at the child’s feedback. Another child said: “I’m not scared to ask now if I can’t do something” and her class teacher reported: “Prior to assessment, she was unable to bring herself back out of a stressful situation . . . With lots of support she can now accept that when something seems difficult there are strategies/resources/people who can help”.

Figure 1. Thematic analysis. Key: Number of cases coded (number of sources coded).
Teachers’ comments on lack of change in learning challenges

Almost every teacher made comments on the lack of change with regards to the child’s learning challenges. For example, “X’s main challenges remain the same”, “still continue to work on...”, and “she still needs lots of support” are just some of the comments made in the post-feedback questionnaires.

Lessening of need for support (or growth of independence)

The number of comments on support as a teaching strategy from pre-DA to post-feedback was halved. In addition, teachers commented on the growth of independence: one class teacher said, “She independently moves on to the next activity...she is slightly less reliant on me during class activities”. Another class teacher commented, “He is being more careful i.e., checking things”.

Increase in transfer of learning

Sometimes this was mentioned explicitly, for example, one of the children stated: “We did a sheet with sizes and measuring and I got it all right. I remembered what we did with the blocks”. In most cases it was implicit in the perception of positive change both cognitively and affectively.

Discussion

Does feeding back the results of dynamic assessment to the child bring about perceptions of positive change in the learning and teaching strategies which help that child?

A significant majority of both teachers and children thought that, following the EP’s feedback of the DA session to the child, there was an improvement in learning and teaching strategies and in the child’s understanding of these strategies. It should be noted, however, that the positive outcome for this research question only means that children and teachers thought there was improvement; no measure was made of actual improvements in teaching methodology or in learning strategy or attainment. It could be argued that a Pygmalion effect may have boosted the results, where the extra attention given to the children and teachers, through inclusion in the research, led to their perceptions of positive benefit. However, it would have been impossible to measure attainment pre- and post-intervention meaningfully within the brief time-scale of the research. Staffing constraints in most Educational Psychology Services would make it difficult to provide intervention in sufficient numbers for positivist research and the complex nature of modern education would make it difficult to control for confounding variables. Nevertheless the question of real versus perceived improvement is germane.

What are the key themes that can be extracted from an analysis of the pre-DA and post-feedback questionnaires? Did these show any change as a result of the research?

The research answered this question in depth, giving a variety of analytic levels—from the large numbers of free nodes, to hierarchical tree nodes, to the extraction of key themes. The shift of focus from cognitive or curricular (pre-DA) to affective (post-feedback) perhaps reflects the researchers’ philosophical stance of involving children more actively in educational processes. Formative assessment techniques link in well, as practical aids such as prompt cards and pictures were used in the study, which help a child move towards understanding their own learning processes, and transferring knowledge from one situation to another.

Debate around feeding back to the child with or without the presence of the class teacher may be related to the dichotomy between good research practice and good educational practice when carrying out action research projects in an educational setting. Interviewing the child alone gave the EP better research information about the child’s attitude to their teacher, but may have missed an opportunity to transform the relationship for the better. Another research issue is that the extraction of themes was an obvious interpretative act on the part of the principal researcher, in line with the thematic analysis approach. However, interpretation entered at every level of the research, as presenting the questionnaire as a semi-structured interview meant that the EP selected the key data to record from the verbal responses.

Reflections on the use of video

An independent observer at one of the review meetings (another EP in the same local authority Educational Psychology Service) was invited to comment on the use of video as part of the reporting process. The observer was experienced in the use of DA but not of VIG. The first point made by the observer related to how powerful seeing video can be, for teachers and for parents. It gives teachers an opportunity to see the child working one-to-one, using specific dynamic assessment techniques which enable the child to perform better than they may do in class. Parents are given a unique opportunity to see their child in an educational setting without affecting their child’s behaviour, as may occur if they are physically present.

Because of the editing of the video, the observer felt it was a positive experience, where the child’s teacher and parents could see “evidence of him learning effectively”, and his strengths as well as his difficulties. “You could see the learning taking place” and the teacher and parent were given the opportunity to see what the EP was trying to do in mediating to the child. The observer commented...
that “a picture is much more powerful than a thousand words [in a report]”. It is likely that seeing the video engenders a more positive atmosphere at a review meeting.

At one level, the use of video shifts the balance of power, as everyone present can see the assessment session (which is the focus of the discussion) and make their own judgements. To this extent it may provide supporting evidence for the EP’s assessment, thus helping parents and staff to accept the EP’s feedback; it may on the other hand give the EP access to alternative constructions and enable a shared understanding to develop. Seeing the video also opens up the closed world of their child’s school environment to parents, which may be an unusual experience for them. At another level, the EP should be aware that viewing the video may have the unwanted effect of deskilling those adults in the child’s life who have other, perhaps non-educational, roles, or may result in blame for a child for not performing the same in different environments—“I know you can do it, you’re not trying”. It is important that when video is used to feed back or to report, the EP should exemplify the VIG philosophy of building positively on successful interactions in their own actions, so that any working points are set in a clear context of strengths.

Limitations of the research

It can be argued that the success of the research outcomes is diminished by several methodological issues. Three different EPs were involved in the collection of data, in administering the DA, and in conducting the feedback sessions. This inevitably led to some differences in mediation style and in the learning strategies identified for each child. However, one might argue that this is unavoidable and that differences would be expected even if the same EP assessed all fourteen children. The EPs were expected to use their professional judgement in all their interactions during the research on ethical grounds, so differences in style may reflect the differing developmental levels of the children, rather than the involvement of different EPs. Nevertheless, the presence of so many variables means that it is impossible to identify which factors led to the positive outcome. On the other hand, there was an obvious benefit of adding other EP contributors: this trebled the amount of data, thus increasing face validity.

In a few cases, teachers (2 out of 14) felt the research gave insufficient time for any benefits to have been noticeable, and some children (2 out of 14) felt they had become worse in some aspects of their learning. Both these outcomes may be the result of unrealistic expectations being aroused through the research, or else of a developing awareness of the child’s level of difficulties. VIG and DA approaches both recognize the importance of receiving and acknowledging problems before moving the discussion to strengths or solutions; it is possible that this was given insufficient attention in some cases. Finally, it may be argued that the absence of a control group resulted in the possibility that the same results may have been obtained through dynamic assessment alone, without the need for the results to be fed back to the child.

However, in defence of the research, a rigorous approach was taken to applying the criteria for qualitative research in general and thematic analysis in particular (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers were concerned to ensure that the research met strict ethical standards, that the methodology was congruent with the conceptualization of the subject matter at every level, and that the constructivist, exploratory and interpretative nature of the inquiry was made explicit. Whatever limitations there may be to the study, the outcomes were perceived to be beneficial by almost all the children, teachers and EPs who took part. In addition, the Educational Psychology Service (EPS), where the three participating EPs were based, has now embraced the concept of feeding back assessment results to children—a concept that can be developed and improved upon by the practice of its EPs.

Implications for practice and further research

The implications of feeding back assessment results to children, seen through the twin filters of DA and VIG, are apparent at different levels of EPS provision. It adds an extra layer to the procedure of assessing and reporting back, but this may make for greater efficiency in the longer term. However, it may represent a major mental shift for some teachers, and indeed some EPs, if they still see the purpose of assessment as diagnosis, or analysing the roots of a child’s learning difficulties in order to propose remediation. Instead, assessment is seen as an integral part of positive intervention. In this model, not only are the teacher and parents viewed as active partners in the process of bringing about improvements in teaching and learning, so is the child.

The research represents a small piece of a large body of research work in this area. It has given rise to several possible next steps. The simplest proposal is that the research could be repeated in a different EPS, this time with a control group. It would also be interesting to repeat the research with a longer timescale, comparing the effects of EP feedback of the results of different types of assessment, and using measurements of both stakeholder perceptions and pupil attainment.

Following the research outcomes to their logical conclusions, some further evaluative studies of innovative projects can be proposed. The first is to explore the outcomes of the EP consulting with the child about their perceptions of the support they require, rather than only feeding back assessment
results to them. This would mean the child being involved at the start of the assessment and intervention cycle, leading to their greater engagement with the change process. The child could be involved in preparing video for the review meeting, giving their point of view or showing their strengths in other contexts. Alternatively, a dynamic assessment consultation model could be used with a teacher, leading to a less intrusive intervention for a child. Finally, teachers could be trained in using DA and VIG approaches so that they could develop the study methodology as part of their own formative assessment “toolkit”.

**Conclusion**

Evaluation data collected in this study have shown that feeding back the results of dynamic assessment to the child leads to perceptions of positive change from children and teachers, and that using video in feedback sessions and at review meetings is particularly helpful. A key theme was the importance of affective factors in the cognitive area of teaching and learning.

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