



## IMPLEMENTING ASSESSMENT WITHOUT LEVELS: TWO YEARS ON



# INTRODUCTION

Schools have been given the freedom to design their own systems for formative and summative student assessment since the introduction of a new national curriculum in September 2014. These changes to the national curriculum and its assessment criteria signalled a fundamental shift in ideas about learning and assessment.

Educators and institutions welcomed the opportunity to revitalise the pedagogy of assessment. However, any transition to 'assessment without levels' presents a set of key challenges. Schools are now motivated to review their policies, procedures and technology regularly. More generally, the establishment of a coherent and consistent system is a priority.

Through collaborative study, teachers have begun to engage in critical reflection and discussion about the most appropriate assessment tools for different subject areas, age groups, and individuals. The result has been an approach that acknowledges external accountability as a necessity while also allowing teachers to have more ownership over planning for classroom assessment systems and allowing pupils, parents and governors to receive feedback that is more meaningful. Emphasis in some cases is placed on a collaborative approach to formative assessment, whereby pupils are granted greater ownership of their learning and progress.

Naturally technology will also play a key role in formalising the tracking and feedback process, with formative assessment more readily captured and shared with parents on digital platforms.

It's important to remember that this new approach to assessment goes well beyond changes to teaching content and materials – it triggers changes in the day-to-day nature of assessment, tracking and reporting.

**“The government’s announcement that it would no longer use levels for assessment was a shock... But, honestly, do we not believe that teachers and schools can design a better approach to assessment than government?”<sup>1</sup>**

Russell Hobby, General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)

<sup>1</sup>Info Mentor: National Curriculum 2014 – White Paper 1 (2014)

# DISCUSSION:

## Rationale for the removal of levels



**“Assessment should focus on whether children have understood key concepts rather than achieved a particular level.”**

Tim Oates, Group Director  
of Assessment Research &  
Development, Cambridge Assessment

Too often assessment by levels has dominated lesson planning, leading to **‘teaching for the test’** and acting against the best interests of educators and learners.

In addition, the practice of applying statutory national assessment levels during in-school assessment between key stages, in order to monitor whether pupils were on track, served to distort the purpose of in-school assessment, particularly day-to-day formative assessment. The Commission on Assessment Without Levels reported in 2015 that this has had a “profoundly negative impact on teaching”.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the Commission reported that levels became viewed as “thresholds”, with teaching “focussed on getting pupils across the next threshold instead of ensuring they were secure in the knowledge and understanding defined in the programmes of study.”<sup>3</sup>

The prescriptive nature of levels led pupils to compare themselves negatively with other pupils according to levels, encouraging young people to adopt a “fixed ability” mind-set that is now pervasive.

<sup>2</sup> Commission on Assessment Without Levels: Final report of the Commission on Assessment without Levels (September 2015)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* (September 2015)

# DISCUSSION:

## Principles of assessment

The Department for Education has established assessment principles to accompany the national curriculum changes. These state that schools must be clear why pupils are being assessed, what the assessment is intended to achieve and how the assessment information will be used. Good formative assessment might include a probing question during a particular challenge, quick recap questions at the opening of a lesson, scrutiny of the natural work of pupils through to formal tests.<sup>5</sup>

More specifically, guidance for schools can be summarised as a responsibility to:

- Give reliable information to parents about how their child, and their child's school, is performing
- Help drive improvement for pupils and teachers
- Make sure the school is keeping up with external best practice and innovation

The NAHT has responded with its own guidance on the principles of assessment:

- Assessment is at the heart of teaching and learning
- Assessment is fair
- Assessment is honest
- Assessment is ambitious
- Assessment is appropriate
- Assessment is consistent
- Assessment outcomes provide meaningful and understandable information
- Assessment feedback should inspire greater effort and a belief that, through hard work and practice, more can be achieved.<sup>6</sup>

The overriding principle of good assessment, as discussed by both parties, is that assessment should be clearly tied to its intended purpose, resulting in educational benefits for learners and improvements to the working practices of teaching professionals.



<sup>5</sup> Department for Education: Assessment Principles (July 2014)

<sup>6</sup> NAHT: Report of the NAHT Commission on Assessment (September 2014)

## DISCUSSION:

### The benefits of assessment without levels

By allowing schools to develop their own approach to assessment, teaching and learning can be more readily tailored to the curriculum.

This approach creates flexibility for tailoring according to circumstantial factors such as school locality, technical and technological infrastructure and the availability of school resources.

The provision of greater clarity for pupils, parents and carers has been a key driver. The end-goal would be more informative and productive conversations between teachers, pupils and parents.

By encouraging pupils to reflect on their own progress, they can take more responsibility for their achievements, gaining a greater grasp of their own strengths while identifying areas for improvement. Removing the 'labels' created by levels, we might also adjust counter-productive attitudes towards ability among those at both high and low levels.

Changes to formative assessment are also projected to relieve teachers of the burden of recording and tracking data, which was often found to be non-essential. Although this can be a positive result for teacher workload, it requires teachers to build their confidence in using a range of formative assessment techniques as an integral part of their teaching, and being able to monitor every child's progression.

### National College for Teaching & Leadership: next steps

In October 2013 the National College for Teaching and Leadership began small-scale research funding to explore assessment without levels, resulting in 34 studies across the country. This research resulted in a number of key recommendations, summarised below:

- Shift in culture regarding the nature, range and purposes of assessment in recognition of new opportunities provided by the new curriculum
- Conferences and seminars should be offered nationally, to enable a process of thought-sharing and more detailed understanding among teachers
- New tracking software should be developed to provide school leaders with 'at a glance' data<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> National College for Teaching & Leadership: Beyond Levels – Alternative Assessment Approaches Developed by Teaching Schools (September 2014)

# WHAT WILL OFSTED EXPECT?

Ofsted have published detailed guidance about how inspections during the transition to assessment without levels will take account of schools' reaction to those changes. During the transition, inspectors will:

- Spend more time looking at the range of pupils' work to consider what progress they are making in different areas of the curriculum
- Talk to leaders about schools' use of formative and summative assessment and how this improves teaching and raises achievement
- Evaluate how well pupils are doing against relevant age-related expectations as set out by the school and the national curriculum (where this applies)
- Consider how schools use assessment information to identify pupils who are falling behind in their learning or who need additional support to reach their full potential, including the most able
- Evaluate the way schools report to parents and carers on pupils' progress and attainment and assess whether reports help parents to understand how their children are doing in relation to the standards expected

Sir Michael Wilshaw has stated that schools are expected to track their pupils' progress and that no particular approach to assessment would be endorsed.<sup>8</sup>

Ofsted also specified that inspectors will not expect to see a particular assessment system in place and will recognise that schools are still working towards full implementation of their preferred approach.

## Good or Outstanding schools

According to Ofsted's latest guidance, a Good or Outstanding school will:

- Set targets for the children to achieve at the end of every key stage
- Use assessment to see if children are hitting those targets
- Use summative tests at the end of each year
- Not 'teach to the test'<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ofsted: School Inspection Handbook (2015)

<sup>9</sup> ibid (2015)

# HOW TO OVERCOME KEY CHALLENGES

Overcoming the key challenges to assessment without levels requires changes in behaviour, attitude and mentality among school leaders, teachers, learners and parents. However, this is less daunting than it appears and many schools have started adopting a common road map, as detailed by educational expert and consultant Chris Quigley:<sup>10</sup>

- 1.** Categorise the curriculum. Consider coverage (which should be monitored), processes (which should be informally assessed and not necessarily recorded), and outcomes (which should be formally assessed).
- 2.** Use the purpose and aims of study section of the national curriculum to identify key learning objectives. These are not year group-specific and will develop through all content across all the year groups. These will also form the key assessment foci.
- 3.** Use the programmes of study to create milestones for progress. For each of the key learning objectives, decide what children should know, do and understand at each milestone.
- 4.** Define cognitive domains to show depth or mastery of learning at each milestone. We call these domains Basic, Advancing and Deep.

**5.** Track pupils' depth of learning at each milestone.

**6.** Answer the two key questions that underpin progress: first, will pupils meet or master end-of-key stage expectations? And second, how well have pupils progressed from their starting points?

**'These six steps provide the basis for a coherent and useful assessment style that both acknowledges the shift in the progress paradigm and makes the process of assessment manageable.'**

Chris Quigley, educational expert,  
Headteacher Update blog

<sup>10</sup> Chris Quigley, Headteacher Update: Life After Levels - The Key Challenges (May 2015)

# HOW TO MEASURE SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION

Over time, the successful transition to assessment without levels should be measurable in a number of ways:

- Pupils should develop a better understanding of progress and areas for improvement, developing a sense of responsibility for their own learning. This could be recognised by more meaningful dialogue between pupil and teacher about attainment.
- Parents should recognise the link between the curriculum and assessment information. Discussions about progress should yield more helpful information and clarify how parents can support progress.
- Teachers' confidence using a range of formative assessment tools should grow. Teachers should also note more responsiveness to pupil feedback.
- The link between the three components of teacher expertise – curriculum, pedagogy and assessment – will be stronger.
- These changes should help to improve professional expertise across the board, including assessment techniques and day-to-day teaching practices, resulting in improved parent-school engagement and improved outcomes for pupils.





# CONCLUSION

It's clear that the complete picture about assessment is still emerging, while questions about accountability will continue to be raised.

However, as the NAHT's assessment commission stated, "don't panic". Schools are advised to take time to develop sound strategy through collaborative study. In the interim, there will be a mixed economy of assessment strategies in most schools as current pupils move through the final years of the old system and new cohorts are engaged with the new curriculum. It's recommended therefore that schools evolve new structures, rather than starting from scratch.

It's also vital that the culture of levels is removed in a way that enriches learning for pupils while enabling teachers to grow professionally. If the stated objective of improved pupil motivation and better use of teachers' expertise can be kept in sight, the shift to assessment without levels presents an opportunity the education sector cannot afford to miss.

**"It goes without saying that assessment goes hand-in-hand with the curriculum; but it is high quality formative assessment that goes to the very heart of good teaching"**

John McIntosh CBE, Chair of the Commission on Assessment Without Levels

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