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DfES - Making Good Progress consultation: a response from Edexcel

Details

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Consultation Questions

Section 1 - Summary

1. "The question raised in this document is what more we can be doing through the system of educational assessment, challenge and support to focus more on progress." Do you think we could and should be doing more?

Yes, there is a lot more that could and should be done to support pupil learning and progress through school, through better teaching and more focus on formative assessment.

2. "The document asks whether - without compromising the framework of tests, targets and performance tables which have helped drive up standards so sharply over the past decade - we can adapt the system to support a focus on progress as well as absolute standards." Do you agree?

The notion of promoting progression rather than absolute standards is a good one. However, the methodology outlined in the paper would do little to alleviate the perceived test culture, and could well atomise learning more than the present system.¹ The statutory testing framework needs to work alongside systems that promote the teacher as an assessor, not perpetuate the system of end users of externally marked tests.

Section 2 - What the Data Tells Us

3. **"Despite everyone's best efforts, there are still many children who fall behind their potential." Do you agree?**

This is true. Pupils at every level of the learning spectrum can and do fall behind their potential. This can be for a whole variety of reasons, some educationally based and some determined by factors outside the control of teachers and schools. The personalised agenda in the paper would help to focus attention onto non-target level pupils for a change. We ignore these pupils at our peril.²

Section 3 - Assessment for learning, and testing for progress

4. **"What is needed is a systematic approach which builds on effective assessment for learning practice and helps pupils and teachers to identify next steps in learning." Do you agree that this would be desirable?**

This is the key to the whole consultation paper, and the part that has the most potential in terms of addressing progress and attainment. It provides the opportunity for government to ensure that teachers systematically engage in AFL strategies and assessment, and act as teacher assessors, instead of continually relying on external mechanisms of assessment. External marking mechanisms have their uses, but they disengage and disempower teachers from assessment. This is one of the main reasons why understanding of progression is so poor.

5. **"We are interested to explore the impact of enabling teachers to enter a pupil for an externally-marked test as soon as they are confident (through their own systematic assessments) that the pupil has progressed to the next [National Curriculum] level." Do you agree?**
6. **"We are considering the potential benefits of a series of "single-level" tests which, although taken more frequently, are in total no more burdensome than the current end-of-key stage "multi-level tests". The model could be a powerful driver for progression, raising expectations for all pupils, motivating them, bringing a sharp focus on 'next steps' and perhaps especially benefiting those who start the key stage with lower attainment than their peers, or are currently making too little progress. Ultimately, these tests might replace the end of key stage arrangements." Do you broadly agree or disagree with this proposal?**

Q5 + 6 need to be addressed together. This is the area that is most problematic and needs the most discussion.

In the proposed model, there would be single level tests that would be certified in some way, and "ratcheted", in that an "achieved" level would not need to be revisited. Initially at least, there would also be an end of key stage assessment test. There are a number of reasons why, educationally and pragmatically, this would be a poor model.

For practical reasons, if the tests are externally marked, they cannot, by definition, be on demand. Also, if they are externally marked and contribute towards national statistics, they will be high stakes assessments, incur some stress and clearly add to the assessment burden as each pupil would be expected to take at least two progress tests throughout the key stage. "Systematic teacher assessment" in order to determine when pupils would be ready to sit a progress test would in all likelihood consist of some in-house form of "Test", so there is a real danger of the significant feature of the curriculum experience being one of test, test, test.

The current end of key stage tests have evolved over a number of years and have an established data intensive development and standardisation methodology. They have been designed to be as robust

and reliable as possible through extensive pre-testing of items and tests and year on year equating. Even with these systems in place, there have been research findings that question the reliability of the national curriculum data.³ Progress tests have two problems here. If they are designed to be shorter in terms of marks, it is unlikely that they will achieve even the reliability of the present end of key stage tests. Allied to this, the differences in terms of the development procedures of new shorter, single level tests would be significantly different from existing external assessments; hence there would be little direct comparability. In effect, there would need to be a re-standardisation of levels, as progress test data could not be equated alongside end of key stage data. The so called "ratchet" mechanism of progress tests and an end of key stage test could easily result in conflicting information.

A single level test can be viewed as a competency based approach to English and mathematics. Surely, we are not proposing that teaching, learning and assessment in these areas will focus on the acquisition of discrete skills to achieve a competency level? Currently when pupils take end of key stage tests, many demonstrate a "scatter gun" effect when their performance is analysed. It might be neat and tidy to assume that a pupil who achieves a Level 5 will get most Level 3 and 4 questions right, a high proportion of Level 5 questions right, and few Level 6 questions right, but that does not happen. A pupil achieving an overall Level 5 might display a variety of levelled success, but a best fit judgement is made to look at the most common skill areas achieved around a range of marks to assign a cut score for a particular level.

The best fit notion is an important one to remember here. It is the basis of levelled assessment in the national curriculum and should be applied to teacher assessment as well as it is in national assessments. The "ratchet" mechanism is, we believe, a misplaced notion. It implies an "exactness" to assessment which simply does not exist,⁴ and it also implies that a pupil achieves a mastery in all aspects of a level at the same time. This is never the case. Pupils might do enough to pass a test or exam, but there will always be areas that are weaker than others and will need revisiting. Even if a pupil achieves a Level 5 in an end of key stage assessment test, it does not mean that they should never need to revisit Level 5 concepts and skills.

Teaching through different programmes of study, concepts and contexts involves progression and continuity. Teaching and learning is a process of building on knowledge, understanding and skills, not treating them as stand alone entities. Suppose a pupil coming up from KS2 had achieved a Level 5. What that achievement means is that they have achieved a best fit level to describe their achievement at a particular key stage. Some people would argue that a KS2 Level 5 does not mean the same thing as a Level 5 at KS3. That is not true in terms of some of the skills that they have displayed, but the range of areas they have to display these skills is far broader at KS3.

The effects on the curriculum could be significantly detrimental if teachers and pupils were continually focused on obtaining a competency style certification. Teaching and learning would end up a fragmented affair, with a spiral of entries, retakes and revision of particular skill sets. This does not support an effective teaching and learning model.

This is not to say that "testing and assessing when ready" cannot be made to work. The main driver however, needs to be a formative approach and the inclusion of assessment as an on-going part of teaching and learning. It would be hugely beneficial to schools, teachers, pupils and parents to have information on attainment and progression throughout a key stage. If these assessments were high quality, informative, diagnostic, standardised and maybe even moderated, even better.

One model to exemplify how progress tests could work would be to incorporate high quality on-screen and/or paper based assessments to contribute towards and support teacher assessment and feedback to pupils. This is the area that Ofsted continually highlight as a weakness in schools. Whatever the medium, high quality assessment materials could be produced not only to assess through levels or skills, but also to give diagnostic feedback for teachers and pupils in order to raise standards and help progression. Assessments need to be linked to normal classroom practice, so that assessment is not seen as a bolt-on addition, but one that is workable, valid and provides an evolving profile of attainment and progression.

Whether to assess on paper or on-screen needs debate. On-screen assessments can be partly or wholly automatically marked, depending on the assessment needs. Partly marked on-screen

assessments provide teachers with mechanisms to actively engage with assessment criteria in a manageable manner, and also allows on-screen assessments to cover open-ended items, not currently available in automatically marked environments. These types of assessments can provide very fast and informative feedback. They could then be supplemented by paper-based/portfolio assessments focused on other areas, that would enrich the learning opportunities for pupils, the evidence base for assessment and also actively engage teachers with assessment criteria, standards and progression issues. However, care must be taken to ensure that on-screen assessment does not remove teachers' sense of progression and their ability to provide feedback to pupils in curriculum terms. Teacher input and judgement is paramount.

High profile and high quality formative assessment feedback of this sort could then be complemented by a holistic assessment at some stage. (KS3 can be a 2 or 3 year programme.) It may even be that information from formative assessments could be more than enough to give a national profile of attainment and progress. The purposes of assessments have to be clear. If the aim is to improve standards for all, then using formative informative in a public accountable manner is not going to work. Scotland's assessment policies support this notion⁵. Individual schools and pupils' progress and targets can be monitored through advisory or moderated procedures.

If the DfES want to know what the profile of attainment is throughout a key stage, this can be done either on a sampled basis, or through the LA, but individual school information should not be made public, as this detracts from treating every single pupil as equally in need of time, attention and progression. Government, schools and the media become fixated by certain criteria (eg target levels). This may be understandable at the end of a key stage, but not during it.

Section 4 - Personalised teaching and learning to support progression

7. If you wish please comment on the subsections entitled "The 2020 Vision Report" and "Teacher strategies: the personalised classroom".

8. If you wish please comment on the subsections entitled "Beyond the classroom - personalised support for all-round development" and "Next steps".

The emphasis in this section on encouraging personalised and AFL strategies to promote good teaching and learning is welcome. There is an increased awareness of these issues in schools, and evidence to show that these approaches have successful outcomes in terms of progress and attainment. That said, Ofsted do not find much evidence of effective practice in schools and therefore, not only does there need to be continual promotion of a personalized and AFL agenda in teacher training and in schools, there need to be far more supporting aids to show "how" to implement these strategies across the curriculum. The connection between the personalised agenda and monitoring progress is important, and clearly when it comes to understanding standards, identifying strengths and weaknesses, setting targets and monitoring progress, AFL can be seen to have tangible outcomes.

There is repeated emphasis in the paper about teachers making use of assessment information to shape teaching and learning. This is very welcome, and correctly identifies the need to work in partnership with the learner, providing frequent and timely feedback and setting small, incremental targets. It is asserted that "teachers already have a wealth of strategies for this..." (p16 para 3). Again, evidence from Ofsted would appear to dispute this, and QCA have developed models and supporting materials across the curriculum to try to develop and enhance the assessment strategies of teachers and encourage a move away from reliance on tests and crude data.

The effectiveness of assessing for progress and personalised learning will largely be determined by the quality of the progressional materials, the quality of information that they offer, and the transfer of short term learning objectives into high quality teaching and learning opportunities.

The inclusion of an explicit focus on Thinking Skills is welcome. Although this area is not new, it remains a Cinderella component of the national curriculum. The incorporation of Thinking Skills activities throughout the curriculum would enhance the development and use of transferable study skills and encourage collaborative practices between teachers and pupils.

Section 5 - Targets at school and national level

9. Do you agree with the statement that: "There is a strong case for establishing a measure of improvement in progression rates for pupils during the National Curriculum years"?

10. Do you agree with the proposal to formulate a new measure and target for pupil progress in the following terms: "The percentage of children achieving a basic level of progress expressed in terms of two National Curriculum levels (or equivalent)"?

11. Do you agree with the proposed framing of measures and targets for English and mathematics at KS2, KS3 and KS4 as set out on page 19?

The use of some measure of improvement rates is inevitable in a data rich environment. Two levels per key stage is not unreasonable, but it needs to be emphasized that these measures and no doubt targets are crude and at odds with the personalised agenda of the paper as a whole. If the driving force of progression targets becomes the high profile accountability measure, then much of the power of the progress proposals will be lost. In the last year of a key stage, schools will focus their attention on pupils who have not yet progressed by two levels and who appear close to being able to do so. There will be no incentive to further stretch a pupil who has already progressed two levels, or giving extra attention to a pupil who is clearly not going to progress by two levels. The proposals encourage undesirable targeting just as the current measures of absolute attainment do.

The measure should be formulated inclusively, so that any extra progress has an effect. An option would be to use the mean attainment per pupil (in levels), ie the total number of levels gained by the pupils over the key stage divided by the number of pupils. An annual mean attainment could then be calculated by division of the number of years in the key stage. This would allow comparability of progression in key stages of different lengths.

Section 6 - Piloting the new approaches

12. Do you agree in principle with the proposal to pilot these ideas with a limited number of Key Stages 2 and 3 schools in selected Local Authorities?

13. If you wish, please comment on anything arising from the first two subsections namely 'How would the pilot work?' and 'Support costs and the progression premium'

Piloting of any major initiative, such as those discussed in this paper, would be essential before a national roll-out. However, we would strongly recommend discussion and amendments to the models of assessment before a pilot is undertaken. A pilot implies an agreed initial model. It is doubtful that the single level assessments as outlined in this paper are at a stage where the model could be seen as one ready to pilot.

Once a model is agreed, the development and piloting of progressional assessments, working in partnership with groups of LAs would be very welcome.

14. If you wish, please comment on anything arising from the subsection 'Individual tutoring'.

Clearly, any initiatives to aid recovery for slow starters or underachievers is welcome. Funding for individual tutoring sessions would do doubt be welcomed by schools. It would offer the opportunity to help pupils directly and also act as a useful research tool to measure and evaluate the usefulness of such programmes. Often in schools, it is only statemented pupils who receive individual tutoring. Any such initiative as described in this paper should be made available to a much wider cohort of pupils. It would also be useful to look at alternative strategies to support these pupils, perhaps using on-screen technologies.

15. If you wish, please comment on anything arising from the last two subsections entitled 'Tests for progress' and 'Progress Targets and the Progression Premium'.

This response has outlined our reservations about the proposed model and recommendations for amendment. If the progress tests and progressional premium are seen as high profile and linked to funding, it is even more important to develop a system of the highest quality. As before, we would recommend more discussion and expert input into the structure of progressional assessment materials.

16. Please let us have your views on responding to this consultation (E.g. the number and type of questions, was it easy to find, understand and complete? etc.)

References

1. Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2006) "Assessment and Testing; Making space for teaching and learning".
2. Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2006) "Pupil Attainment; Time for a three R's guarantee".
3. Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2006) "Assessment and Testing; Making space for teaching and learning".
4. Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2006) "Assessment and Testing; Making space for teaching and learning".
5. QCA/INCA: Scotland: Assessment arrangements.