

## Measuring progress imaginatively could start a revolution

**T**he last act of the former Education Secretary – to remove the national curriculum levels from the assessment regime – was a bit like throwing the proverbial spanner in the works and then walking out of the factory door.

As with all Govian reforms, the thinking behind it was a little unclear. There was no consultation, no strategic context, no positive rationale. There was some mumbo jumbo about simplifying the assessment and accountability system for schools but in actual fact, it has just added confusion. Since both schools and Ofsted used these levels to track progress, it has left a vacuum, and some panic, as to what to put in its place.

How different to the US curriculum and assessment reform around the Common Core Standards! There, the national movement for reform began outside of government, with research about the growing incompetence of American children to think beyond superficial levels in their schoolwork and to cope with higher education or employment, or indeed anything where more than mechanical learning was required. This was followed by a national debate about what sort of children American society needed in a new technological age. The answer? Critical, creative children with the ability to think outside of the box, to work in groups and to undertake sustained project work that could engender in-depth learning and original solutions to problems. This initial research and the proposed solutions were both a devastating critique of the sort of test-based, knowledge-based curriculum Gove has recently introduced.

Unlike the DfE, the US Department of Education realised that the new strategic direction for education had to be supported by new forms of assessments and backed the development of these with hundreds of millions of dollars. Here in the UK, some ten grants have been handed out to schools to do the best they can on the very limited goal of thinking up something to replace levels. They will do their creative best – and we are featuring one such school, Hiltingdon Primary in Hampshire which has developed Learning Ladders, in our November Conference, ‘Assessment and the New Curriculum: New Ways to Measure Progress’ – but with a such limited brief, they will never begin to address some of the questions that the American review is addressing. Questions such as: how do you objectively assess the skills of critical and creative

thinking, how can you assess project work that gives all students a level playing field, what is the right mix of normative and formative assessment, how can you rid the system of teaching to tests?

What most schools are going to do here – in the absence of any government guidance or pedagogical context – is stick to the levels for at least one year. This is not a bad idea, but as Sue Hackman comments in her piece this issue, not a long term solution. The national curriculum is changing and the levels will no longer apply post 2015, at which point you might as well work backwards from the attainment requirements and fix your own stages. However, this must be the start of a more profound review of not just the means but the *kinds* of progress we want to track. We need to find ways that track understanding and misunderstanding, levels of thinking ability and forms of creativity.

Many of the tools to do this already exist but need to be dusted down and re-applied. Assessment for Learning is one core methodology that could be rigorously applied to learning objectives set by the school, but also to critical and creative thinking and collaborative project work.

The problem is that AfL has become almost a portmanteau concept which can mean anything to anyone. Maybe Precision Teaching, which despite its name is a more rigorous form of AfL, should be recovered from its doldrums. SOLO Taxonomy has a lot to offer in terms of assessing a student’s progress towards higher levels of abstract thinking. Some secondary and primary schools have been using it to assess children’s progress in this for some time, with remarkable results in the changes in orientation for teaching and learning. Even Bloom’s Taxonomy has a lot to offer if one of the measures of critical thinking you are going to apply is the degree of abstraction in the quality of student questioning.

None of this need be at the expense of students acquiring knowledge – it should be through knowledge, its ordering and analysis, that these other skills are taught and applied.

We need new tracking procedures to replace levels, but we now have the chance to invest in tools with a deeper concept of teaching and learning. In the absence of any credible philosophy of education from the government or the opposition, schools will have to do it on their own.