

## **@BeyondLevels - Assessment Research Projects 2014**

**Name of Project: Assessment without Levels**

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**Project Teaching School: Ashford Teaching Alliance**

### **What did your study set out to work on?**

1. To find out what forms of assessment are most useful in helping students to make progress.
2. To find out what forms of assessment are most motivating to students.
3. To consider ways in which assessment can be recorded to enable progress to be monitored regularly and interventions to be implemented when needed.

A research group was formed of 12 members of staff from the three secondary schools in the Ashford Teaching Alliance: Highworth School (11-18 girls' selective with mixed KS5), Brockhill Performing Arts College (11-18 mixed comprehensive) and Goldwyn Community Special School (11-16 boys). The group covered a wide range of subject areas (Maths, English, Science, MFL, History, Citizenship, Drama, ICT and PE). This group met once a term between January and July 2014 in order to:

1. Devise survey instruments to gauge the effectiveness of current forms of assessment.
2. Consider survey results and wider research on assessment to devise more effective forms of assessment and plan pilot schemes.
3. Implement and evaluate pilot schemes in a range of subject areas.
4. Consider how assessments of particular units of work could fit in a wider tracking system to enable effective monitoring across the secondary school.

### **Your findings (please include diagrams, photographs, video etc if you wish)**

- A. Initial surveys to gauge views on key purposes of assessment and effectiveness of current systems

The following conclusions were drawn from survey data from students, staff and parents at the three institutions.

- The majority of staff and students at all three institutions saw the key purposes of assessment as relating to student progress and identifying ways in which this can be enhanced. Thus assessment needs to address not just where students are but also to point to ways forward.
- At least half the staff responding to the survey at the two larger schools did not feel the current system of using National Curriculum levels was effective in meeting the most important purposes of assessment.
- Most parents and a large number of staff felt there was a problem in translating National Curriculum levels into GCSE grades so a system that was the same across the secondary school would seem preferable.

- Only a minority of parents said they understood how KS2 levels related to those in secondary schools and only about 25% of staff felt that KS2 levels provided useful baseline information for subject assessment at secondary school.
- There were some differences in students' preferred forms of feedback, with a higher proportion of selective students preferring marks / levels. Survey and interview responses together suggested that feedback in the form of words (written or spoken) may be more effective in encouraging progress.

#### B. Piloting of new forms of assessment in a range of subject areas

Survey data and wider research into assessment suggested that the most effective form of assessment would involve a recordable *Assessment for Learning* approach to particular units of work. This would provide students with a clear idea of exactly how they could make progress and foster self- and peer-assessment. Teacher assessment at the end of the unit would show what had been mastered and areas of weakness that would need to be addressed in subsequent units of work. However, it was also felt that there needed to be an overall framework to ensure that students were making progress that could be monitored across the whole of the Y7 to 11. Therefore, the group decided to:

- Pilot recordable *Assessment for Learning* approaches in all schools in particular subjects in Term 6.
- Consider ways in which results from these could be fed into an overall monitoring system.

Detailed discussion of the nature of progress in different subject areas suggested that the nature of the Assessment for Learning would vary. Subject representatives on the group therefore devised a form of assessment to be piloted in Term 6 in their own subject area with at least one class in KS3. The group also agreed on questions to be used in a survey of students involved in the pilot schemes to gauge their perceptions of their effectiveness.

The following conclusions were drawn from the pilot schemes:

- Staff involved in the pilot schemes felt that the assessments used had been effective in directing students more clearly to what they needed to do to make progress and, in some cases particularly, it was felt that the standard of work produced was higher as a result.
- Student responses to survey questions were generally positive with many stating that the more specific assessment objectives and given them a clearer focus on what they needed to do to improve.
- There were some Y8 students at Highworth who expressed a desire for a level. In English where the scheme had been piloted with two classes, there were fewer comments to this effect in the class that had been given a green, amber or red tick to indicate whether progress overall was in line with expectations based on prior attainment. Some students commented that assessment relating to particular objectives rather than an overall level focused their attention on improving their learning, rather than making comparisons with peers. For example, one Y8 Highworth student wrote:

*I think that it helped because it showed me what I needed to improve on in more detail than usual and also it made me feel better about myself because nobody was comparing levels.*

- Many of the pilot projects had involved self- and peer-assessment in addition to staff assessment. There were concerns about the reliability of these although in some cases it had

proved useful to a teacher to know which students were over-assessing themselves. The issue of reliability was a particular concern in PE as the practical nature of the subject made it impossible for the teacher to verify all achievements claimed by students.

### C. Consideration of overall framework for monitoring assessment

In addition to the piloting of schemes with students, a number of members of the group, representing different subject areas, endeavoured to produce a framework of expectations of high achieving students in each year group, starting with Y11/13 students and working back to suggest what would need to be achieved by the end of each of Years 7-10 as steps towards this. This could provide a more coherent progression route than we have currently with lack of consistency between KS3 and KS4 expectations. However, in PE the diversity of demands for different sports made it difficult to generalise in this way. In Maths, the particular demands of each unit of work are so different that again it was difficult to come up with generalisations for each year group.

Each of the assessment schemes piloted could lead to the award of an overall mark / percentage which would enable monitoring to take place in which the achievements of students could be compared with others and against prior attainment. However, further piloting is needed to consider how effectively such schemes would differentiate and how they would relate to an effective monitoring system across Y7-11 which would enable staff to see whether individuals were making expected progress.

Although we aimed to achieve coherence across the secondary school, there were felt to be dangers in using a GCSE-based grading system from Year 7 upwards. For low achieving students, this could be demoralising. As we also currently do not know the requirements for the new GCSEs to be introduced in 2015-16, we are unable to be precise about what students will need to be able to do to achieve the new grades. If high-achieving students were given '9' scores in KS3 but then when they began GCSE courses, these were reduced to '8's, again this would be demoralising.

A possible solution would be to use broader bands (distinction, merit, pass) at KS3 which would then translate into GCSE grades at KS4. Students could be given their numerical score termly *Assessment for Learning* units, together with an average, to give them more precise information about progress. There was considerable discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of this and other forms of reporting overall progress and attainment but it was agreed that further piloting and consultation on this is needed.

#### Further research

Such issues can only be addressed with further piloting and it was suggested that a broader pilot scheme involving all Y7 students at the three institutions would be desirable. In such piloting, it was agreed that:

- When students are being assessed against assessment criteria for a particular unit of work, a Starting / Developing / Mastered grading system should be used. For a student to be assessed as having mastered the learning objective, they would have to have demonstrated it in different contexts, e.g., in test as well as class / homework conditions.

The following issues would need to be investigated:

1. How points for objectives that had been 'Mastered' could be added to provide an overall mark for the unit. Subject leaders would need to look very carefully at the spread of marks achieved in this way to ensure that there was differentiation. For example, if large numbers of students were 'Mastering' all objectives, this would suggest they were not challenging enough.
2. How the criteria for each unit would relate to the standards students would need to achieve in each year in order to achieve target GCSE grades (although there are difficulties in achieving this at present because of lack of information about new requirements so the

process would need to be refined over the next couple of years as more information becomes available).

3. How students' achievements could be monitored against expectations based on KS2 data.
4. The ways in which expected targets in practical subjects would be established. Although national data suggest a correlation between KS2 data and achievements in all subjects at GCSE, for practical subjects, this data only relates to the minority of subjects who choose to take these subjects at GCSE. Students with high academic performance who do not have aptitude for practical subjects are highly unlikely to have taken them for GCSE and thus there are gaps in the data. Therefore, baseline standards would need to be assessed before progress could be measured against these.
5. What should be reported to students and parents – which obviously needs to be considered in relation to school reporting policies.

### **What, if any, literature have you drawn on and would recommend?**

*(Itemise any readings that your teams have found valuable in further shaping their understanding of the issues of Assessment, planning for assessment, quantitative-qualitative tensions etc.....)*

- Masterclass by Paul Black and related literature on Assessment for Learning
- NAHT Assessment Commission Report  
<http://www.naht.org.uk/EasysiteWeb/getresource.axd?AssetID=37799&type=full&servicetype=Attachment>
- Gardner, J (ed) (2012) *Assessment and Learning* (Sage Publications Ltd, London), especially chs. 11, 14, 15 and 16

### **Please identify any limitations/challenges you are, or have grappled with**

The severe time limits were a considerable challenge. Because the project only started at the beginning of the year and we felt that research was needed before piloting, pilot schemes were only trialled in Term 6 when conditions were less than ideal because of the range of other activities going on in schools at this time of year which impact on the curriculum. Schemes need to be modified in the light of experience and piloted further, as explained above. We wonder if there is the possibility of any funding for the continuation of the project in the coming year.

A further limitation is that we were endeavouring to plan a framework for assessment which would prepare students for the demands of GCSE courses. However, we do not currently have information about exactly what the nature of assessment in new GCSEs will be nor of what will be required to achieve a new Grade 9.

It has been difficult to find times for the whole team from three different schools to meet. This has meant that not all members of the team have attended each meeting.

### **How you intend to share your learning to benefit wider system**

We intend to place findings on the Ashford Teaching Alliance website and to report them to school leaders of all schools in the alliance. We would like to pursue further research with a wider pilot scheme involving Y7 students in the three institutions in the coming academic year if funding is available to do so.