

Beyond levels – making assessment work for learning

The journey which Wroxham Primary school has been on over the last few years makes them better placed than many to describe their reaction to the news regarding the abandonment of National Curriculum levels as “delighted.” In an article for Pearson Education Alison Peacock describes the alternative approach to assessment developed over the past decade and presents practical examples of the manner in which this approach has enabled our school to achieve outstanding results.

The philosophy of ‘Learning without Limits’ has its roots in a research study where the key findings were that teachers who sought an alternative to ability grouping were motivated by core principles of trust, co-agency and inclusion. (Hart et al, 2004). Alison Peacock has worked out these principles at Wroxham School which was in special measures when she became headteacher and changed the dialogue with and between teachers from one of judgement, to one of opportunity, developing a team where each teacher’s confidence could be rebuilt. Working together, they began to enliven the curriculum, to focus on high quality professional learning and to give children a real voice about their experience of school.

As teachers gained confidence, they began to offer choices to the children and encouraged a culture of self-assessment where attempting new challenges was encouraged in a climate of trust. By the Ofsted 2006 inspection, children were able to self- assess their learning without using the language of levels. Instead of talking to inspectors about how they were going to reach ‘3b’ for example, they could confidently explain what they were learning and how they were going to challenge themselves to take the next steps to progress further. The school was judged to be outstanding in 2009 and 2013, again without children using levels to describe their progress.

What is assessment for?

The school is clear about the many purposes of assessment. Alison notes that “In English schools, assessment is too often about proving the worth of the teacher or the school rather than focusing on the needs of the individual learner. Ironically, this form of top down pressure to achieve ever higher assessment results leads to unhelpful (in some cases paralysing) pressure on teachers themselves.

At The Wroxham School, we currently use an assessment management programme to track individual and cohort progress. This has enabled us to present data for inspectors and provides a quick review point alongside RAISEonline to evaluate whole school trends. However, for us, the most important dialogue centres upon individual children and ways of enhancing achievement.”

How to judge progress without levels?

In the school “pedagogy, curriculum and assessment each have equal emphasis and excellent teaching offering rich tasks enables the best opportunity to assess and understand children’s learning. Although teaching teams make judgements about progress throughout the year against the current milestones of National Curriculum levels, these are used as a simple checking mechanism against level descriptors rather than a rigid accountability tool. Progress in writing is easy to see through studying composition. Progress in reading is evidenced through the type of literature that each child is confidently accessing. Progress in mathematics is recorded against each area of study through noting the amount of challenge that they are able to achieve.”

The assessment system also includes a wide range of formative assessment through high quality teaching supported through research lesson study where colleagues plan activities collaboratively with specific children in mind and study their response. The wide range of methods to assess the children's learning includes tests but the approach taken, however, is that each child is encouraged to improve on their 'personal best' rather than feeling ranked against others. This allows for competition and positive pressure within a culture of ambition and collaboration.

Beyond September 2014

Alison explains "From September this year with the advent of a new curriculum we shall continue to place the main emphasis on quality of pedagogy through irresistible learning opportunities. Assessment will continue to be a rich daily process that informs teaching. We shall eventually replace our current tracking system with another similar process that relates more closely to the new national curriculum tests, but this will remain a background metric rather than a measurement tool for individual children. "