

Tough questions

The introduction of new, more difficult tests might well challenge children, but at the moment it's teachers who are stumped, says **Michael Tidd**...

Before you read the remainder of this article, can you explain whether the word 'before' at the start of this sentence is being used as a preposition or a subordinating conjunction? And while you are reading, can you change verbs in this sentence into the past progressive form?

When the sample questions for the new style of National Curriculum tests were published in July, there were doubtless some gasps of horror in staffrooms up and down the country. We have been warned for months that the bar is to be raised; what we hadn't realised is that some previous limbo-dancing might soon become pole-vaulting. No longer are questions in Year 6 teachers' meetings about what will replace the Level 6 tests. It's the lack of Level 3-equivalent questions that is causing concern.

At Key Stage 1, one sample maths question asks children to identify the number of vertices on the square-based pyramid shown. By Key Stage 2, a fractions question asks children to fill in the blank space in the calculation $\frac{1}{3} + \frac{1}{4} + \underline{\quad} = 1$ (certainly not something we'd currently expect in Year 6).

The release of the materials does at least bring some clarity for teachers about exactly how children's learning is to be assessed from 2016 – a not-too-distant date if you're teaching Year 5 during the coming academic year. The expectations are notably higher,

and the remaining five terms before the tests are taken leaves relatively little time for covering the new content.

However, perhaps more than anything, the release of this sample material highlights the continuing unknowns about primary assessment. As we begin the first term of the new National Curriculum, there are still many unanswered questions about how assessment will work in less than two years' time, not to mention how schools will be judged in response.

1 What will constitute a 'pass'?

In the past, the theory was that a student confident in the material at Level 4 should be able to score enough marks on a test to score Level 4, and thereby be deemed to be working at the expected level. The theory was flawed, but it was at least a starting point. We knew that some questions tested Level 5 content to identify higher attainers at KS2; equally, some tested simpler Level 3 content. However, in the absence of levels, we now have only the National Curriculum Programmes of Study as a guide. We have no way of knowing what proportion of the test needs to be answered correctly to achieve the golden scaled score of 100. And nor are we likely to know until after the first set of tests. Perhaps importantly, we don't even know who will get to decide what constitutes a high enough score to be converted to 100 points.

2 What happened to 4b equivalence?

We were told that the new higher bar would be broadly equivalent to Level 4b on the old curriculum. Yet much of the new content would never have been expected at Level 4 at all. Indeed, in some of the maths questions, the expectation is nearer Level 6 or higher. Was the '4b-equivalence' just a myth, or will that somehow be related to the magical threshold for scaled scores?

3 How will progress be measured?

Again, the absence of levels from 2016 presents a new challenge for primary schools. How are we to have any idea of how children have progressed when comparing a KS1 level to a KS2 scaled score – particularly given that the scaled scores won't be known until after the event? Two levels of progress may not have

been a perfect measure, but it was at least a measure.

4 What are Performance Descriptors going to look like?

We've been told that writing will still be assessed by teachers at the end of each Key Stage, with new Performance Descriptors to be published in the autumn. What we haven't been told, though, is what to expect of these descriptors. At first mention, they sound like National Curriculum levels. Can we expect to see the moderation materials for KS1 and KS2 written with the levels simply renamed and a few wording tweaks?

As so often with releases from the DfE, we're left with rather more questions than answers. The good news is that the sample questions themselves at least have the answers attached!

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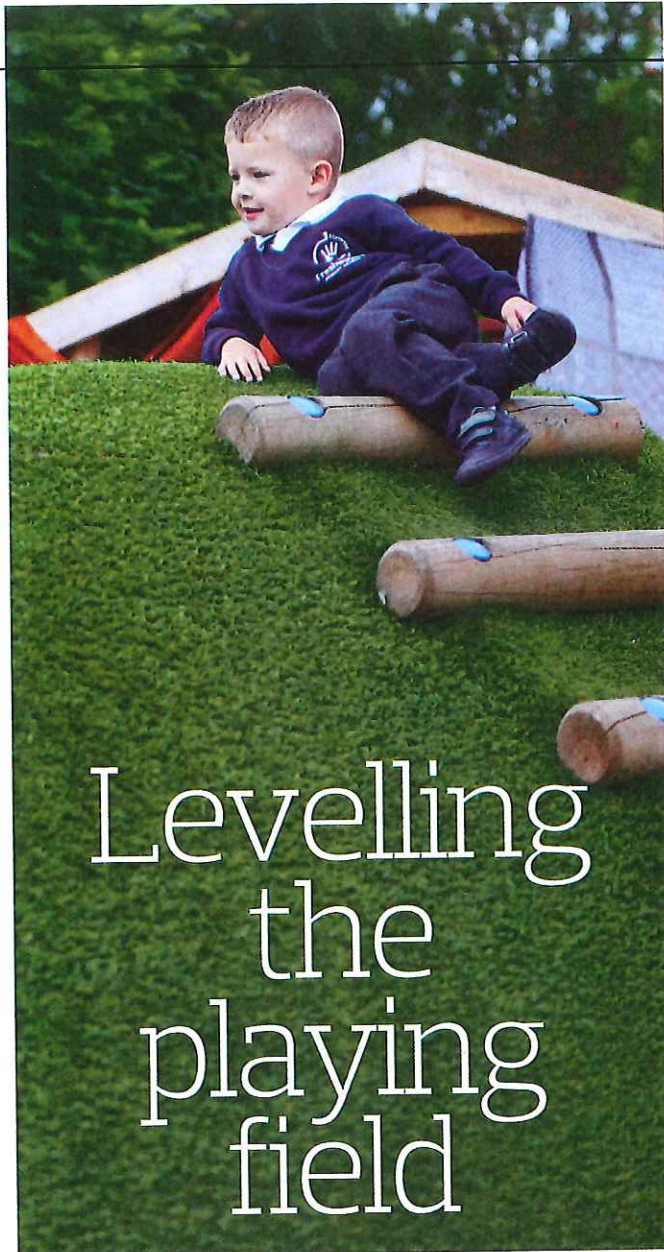
Tests for four year olds; is this not the epitome of 'too much too young'? Is it another example of the erosion of childhood and an obsession with measurement? Despite my natural suspicion of testing in primary schools, I actually don't buy this line.

My main argument is as follows. We should measure schools on the progress they make; this is the only way to properly value those people who choose to work in the most challenging schools. If you are going to measure progress, you need a start measure and an end measure. At the moment, in primary, we take our start measure at the age of seven. This is somewhat puzzling to me, as I am sure children usually start school earlier than this! Indeed, measuring progress from seven to eleven ignores three of the most important years of a child's education. It is in reception and KS1 that those schools serving challenging and deprived communities make their most important investments and begin reversing the gaps already emerging. By neglecting this phase, we place schools on an uneven playing field from the start: there are schools where some children arrive able to read and there are schools where some children arrive in nappies and barely able to speak. Should we not take this into account when assessing how well a school performs?

Now, you can argue that we should not use assessments at all at primary school, or that we should not hold schools to account. This is a coherent position, but I don't see it gaining traction any time soon. In the meantime, we can do the most practical good by arguing for the best and least distorting measures.

A reception baseline will more fairly measure the performance of schools and reward those who work where they are most needed. This is good for schools, but what about the impact on children? There are three common concerns:

Will we get hot-housing to pass these assessments? It



Levelling the playing field

Schools should welcome the baseline assessment, but it should not be used to predict the destinies of individual children, says **Russell Hobby**...

would be mad for a school to coach children or apply pressure for them to do better than they should in the baseline. I would have thought the opposite outcome was a greater risk.

Will it be an unpleasant experience for children? Diverting as it is to envisage a group of four year olds in an exam hall, turning over their papers at the start of the clock, nobody is seriously proposing this. Schools are being offered a choice of baseline assessments, and each of these needs to be teacher-led and teacher-administered. There is no reason this can't be made

fun and low key.

Does it erode childhood? The erosion of childhood through formal teaching methods and curriculums is worthy of debate, but is a separate issue from when assessment should take place. My view is that a baseline should be taken when children start school. The right age to start school is a different matter. Nor does the concept of a baseline imply a view on what the curriculum should be post-baseline; although, to be fair, the nature of the assessment will send messages about priorities. We should certainly work to ensure that we 'baseline'

emotional, social, physical and cognitive development.

A more worrying objection to baseline assessment in reception is as follows: somewhere in the DfE there are, no doubt, statisticians who are eagerly waiting to predict a child's GCSE results from his or her score at four. This is antithetical to everything education should stand for – which is about confounding and beating predictions rather than blindly following them. There is no way that the individual results of a single assessment of a four year old can be accurate enough to make such life-changing predictions, and yet the danger is they become self-fulfilling prophecies.

I believe, therefore, that the reception baseline should produce an official cohort level measure only. This is a measure of the challenge a school as a whole faces; it should not be used to guess at the destinies of individual children. If it weren't such a terrible waste of diagnostic and formative information for the school, I'd go so far as to suggest that, when the class average is generated, we throw away the individual results. But let's only record the collective results for official purposes.

There's plenty to doubt in terms of practicality. How will multiple baselines work – will we not just repeat the problems faced by exam boards, only in the opposite direction? How long will it be before this data becomes useful and the system settles down again? What about schools where the cohort is very small? These are all legitimate concerns but the basic idea seems to be of value from the school's perspective and benign from the child's.

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Mind the gap

The temptation is to cover the content of the new curriculum year by year, but we forget formative assessment at our peril, says **Ben Harding**...

The essence of teaching is to teach the child's next step. "My children know this, so I will teach this next. And when they know that, I will teach them that, and then that, and then that." In other words, formative assessment has been around a long time.

The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 was intended to standardise the content of what was being taught. However, it had an unexpected side effect. It introduced the dreaded concept of 'coverage'. Teachers (though not all) started to 'cover the curriculum' in the guise of good teaching – as opposed to teaching next steps. Year 2 teachers taught Year 2 objectives and followed Year 2 programmes of study, irrespective of learners' knowledge and understanding at the time. This is at odds with the nature of teaching, and progress slows as a result. Which is why the term 'formative assessment' arrived. The essence of teaching hadn't changed, but we had lost sight of it through the introduction of the National Curriculum.

Of course, National Curriculum levels did not help this issue. As schools became increasingly accountable, they began teaching 'to the levels' in order to be deemed 'successful'. Though introduced as attainment descriptors to aid in the

assessment of the National Curriculum, levels became everything.

With the advent of Assessing Pupil Progress (APP), it became apparent that levels had actually been a curriculum all along! But it was by no means a detailed curriculum, since each level was supposed to describe a new milestone worthy of two years' learning. What about all the gaps inbetween? Where was the detail to be found? Not in the levels, nor the National Curriculum. You have to feel sorry for governments; if they wrote all of the detail needed to ensure formative assessment was built in to the National Curriculum, they would be accused of prescription and interference.

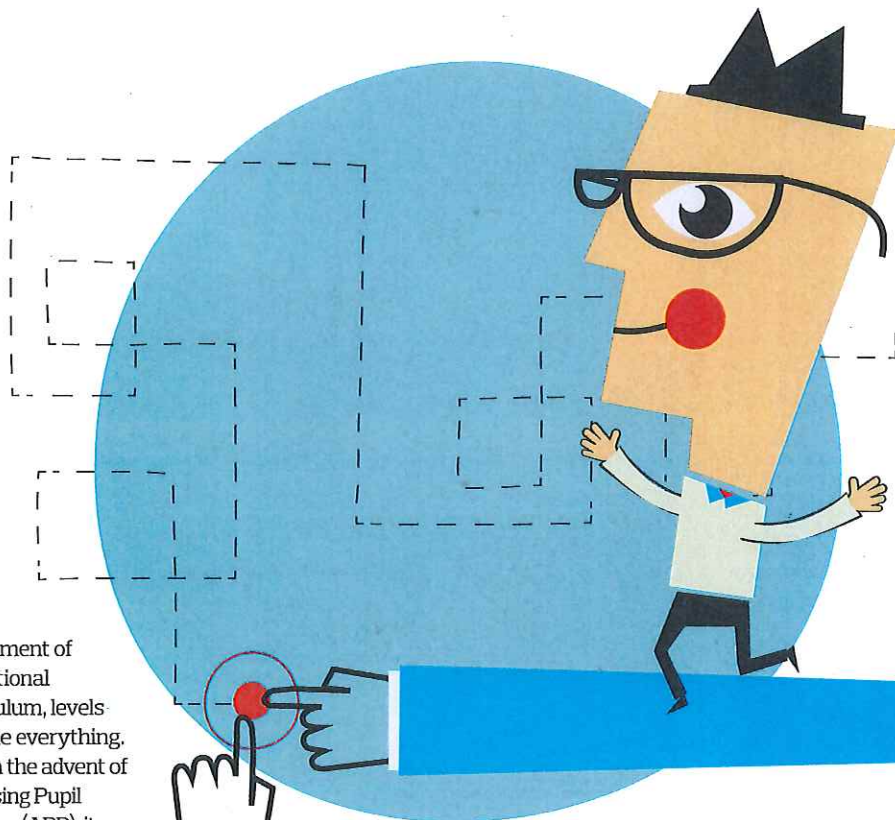
The new National Curriculum has rightly created the opportunity to return to the principles of formative assessment in the classroom – without the bizarre translation from sub levels to point scores, and then back to sub levels, before returning to the detail of the curriculum. Now we can

focus on a more natural progression through the curriculum content. It also makes sense that we check if a child is 'on track' for his age by building in milestones linked to year groups.

This shows us there was never any need for levels. If you were designing a curriculum and assessment system today (as the current government has done) then you would not have the curriculum content running alongside two further systems, year groups and levels. Year groups are enough. The new National Curriculum is what to teach and what to assess in one system; common sense always triumphs eventually. But this is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it clears up where children should be at the end of each school year without the need to translate progress into a levelled system. However, and crucially, it also invites us just to teach that content, which is dangerous. Notice how the new

curriculum even states, 'Pupils should be taught to...' as opposed to what children should learn. In other words, coverage! "I am a Year 3 teacher so I will teach the Year 3 curriculum".

This would be a huge mistake. We mustn't throw out all the work we have done to re-embed formative assessment into the culture of our classrooms. Furthermore, there is clearly a great deal of detail missing from the new National Curriculum. The document itself misleadingly calls the content a 'programme of study', thus implying this is all we should teach. However, the fact is that the nitty-gritty of the curriculum that supports formative assessment and leads to more rapid progress is just not there. Teachers still need subject knowledge and they still need a specific pedagogy for that content; the National Curriculum is not it. So, a caution to one and all. When reading those National Curriculum year group descriptors, mind the gap!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The bottom line

Formal assessments in Reception will not be welcomed by all, but the mum in **Rachel Dowling** can't help but feel pleased...

When I was pregnant with my son I remember being utterly astonished by the number of people who commiserated with me that I was having a summer-born baby – and a boy to boot (gasp!). Having never before thought about family planning in terms of school-

readiness, it was news to me that my unborn child was already at a disadvantage.

Four years and a month later, as my baby boy skipped into his Reception classroom on a bright, sunny morning (drowning in his new school uniform in-spite of my best hemming efforts) I suddenly got what they were on about. I thought he could cope with school socially, but had major concerns about his academic readiness. My attempts to teach him basic numeracy and literacy skills thus far had been met with an impressive display of passive resistance. Knowing that he was still unable to sing the

alphabet song, or count to 10, or even correctly name colours, I was concerned that from the very start of his school career he would already be behind his peers and that the situation would only get worse.

Another year on, and I realise that my worries overlooked two important factors. One: that my son was not the only summer born child, boy or otherwise, in the class, nor indeed the only one who hadn't yet mastered his ABCs. And second, that my son was fortunate to have a very experienced, caring, and wonderful teacher, who

had come across enough boisterous boys over the course of her career to know that he just needed time. Even so, at the mid-year parent-teacher consultation, the teacher explained to me that when progress ceases to be linked to age (as in the EYFS), and instead becomes linked to year-by-year criteria (as in the NC levels) – my son would appear, if only on paper, to be lagging behind.

I believe she meant simply to warn me not to put too much emphasis on the numbers. However, it left me fretting somewhat about whether next year my son will feel as though he is falling behind and lose heart; and whether his new teacher will be understanding (or so under pressure to deliver results that she will end up viewing my son as a nuisance – a blight on her progress reporting). It was hard not to feel slightly indignant at the system.

It seems arbitrary to expect all children to reach the exact same level within the exact same time frame each year. Hence, while I disagree with 'testing' 4 year olds in any format that would be intrusive or stressful, my son's situation has highlighted to me the potential benefit of a more child-centred approach to benchmarking progress that allows the system to absorb the peaks and troughs of each individual's learning, so that children are not penalised for failing to reach the finishing line en masse.

Reception benchmarking already takes place across the country in the form of teacher observations. It seems only a small stretch to make that a more formalised and consistent process nationwide. While I can

understand that there are legitimate concerns around what form this test might ultimately take – I don't feel we should take an absence of information (so far) as evidence that the key questions won't be thought about and resolved. I believe that digital technology (touch screens in particular) can play a huge part in answering many of those worries: software means that the test can be administered by anyone (not taking teachers away from the rest of the class), automatic data capture reduces the risk of 'cheating' and ensures consistency of reporting, and computer graphics can be used to make children feel like they are playing a game rather than taking a test.

I do hope that I am not being naive, and that the baseline check won't simply become another administrative and costly burden for schools, or a new stick to beat teachers with. However, if done in the spirit in which I hope it is intended, it seems to me that a baseline assessment is a positive for everyone, relieving some of the pressure on teachers to squeeze all their pupils into little progress boxes. And as the new curriculum talks often about helping all children to achieve higher standards, it is logical to have a system in place that allows teachers to be rewarded for their impact on each individual child – whatever their starting point.



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Rachel Dowling is a mother who works in the education industry, in close connection with primary schools.



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A new era of testing and assessment has begun, but the way forward is less than clear. NFER's Liz Twist is here to help...

TP: Can schools continue to use national curriculum levels this school year?

Liz Twist: While schools aren't prevented from continuing to use levels as a basis for teacher assessment, there's a danger they won't adequately reflect either the content of the new curriculum or its demand. The DfE has announced that performance descriptors will be published this autumn. Their purpose will be to inform statutory teacher assessment at the end of key stages 1 and 2. In Year 2, pupils will be assessed as meeting one of several performance descriptors for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and mathematics. In science there will be just one performance descriptor of the new expected standard. Similarly, there will be just one performance descriptor of the new expected standard for each of reading, mathematics and science in Year 6; teachers will assess pupils' writing as meeting one of several performance descriptors.

How else can pupils' progress be measured?

Assessment using the national curriculum levels is what is called 'criterion-referenced assessment', i.e. does the pupil meet the criterion? An alternative approach is known as 'norm-referenced assessment'. Here, a pupil's attainment is compared to that of other pupils. An age-standardised score compares a pupil's performance to that of other pupils of the same age. NFER tests are age standardised. A

pupil who makes average progress will record age-standardised scores that don't change markedly from one year to the next.

What has NFER produced to help schools manage the introduction of the new curriculum?

We've published three guides (English, mathematics, science) covering key stages 1 and 2. These show what's changed in the curriculum: essentially what's in and what's out, as well as what's moved between year groups.

The questions in NFER maths tests for Years 3, 4 and 5 have been mapped to the new curriculum and this information will be available to test purchasers. The reading tests don't require that type of mapping and will continue to show how the questions relate to the reading skills in the assessment focuses.

We've also produced a series of guides to help teachers assess pupils' writing. These guides are structured around particular text types and focus on grammar and punctuation although other aspects of writing are also considered.

We're developing a new suite of tests in reading and mathematics aligned to the new curriculum and these will be made available during 2015/16 following extensive trialling in schools.

What will the new key stage tests look like?

In 2015, the key stage tests (SATS) will be in

the style of those in 2014, but from 2016 the new curriculum will be assessed and there will be other changes. The DfE has published sample materials

(gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum-assessments-2016-sample-materials) and next summer will publish a full set of sample tests. NFER's new test series in reading and mathematics will be in the same style. In the interim, in order to accommodate a specific change in mathematics assessment at key stage 2, where calculators can no longer be used in the year 6 tests, we're restandardising the current year 5 maths test to reflect this change. This will be available in the autumn.

With all this change, how will Ofsted inspectors judge school effectiveness?

Ofsted has made it clear inspectors will use a range of evidence in arriving at their judgements: "including by looking at test results, pupils' work and pupils' own perceptions of their learning" (Ofsted, 2014*). They will also "talk to leaders about schools' use of formative and summative assessment and how this improves teaching and raises achievement".

Ofsted has also indicated that they are interested in pupils' progress at least as much as their final achievement. The introduction of baseline assessment schemes in September 2015 will, eventually, assist with this. From 2022, for those schools that choose to use an approved scheme in 2015, progress will be measured from school entry to the end of Year 6. The baseline assessment schemes will have to meet a set of rigorous criteria published by the DfE earlier this year (gov.uk/reception-baseline-approval-process-for-assessments). NFER hopes that its baseline scheme, currently under development, will be one of those that meet the criteria.

For more information, go to www.nfer.ac.uk/schools/

*Ofsted (2014). Note for inspectors: use of assessment information during inspections in 2014/15. Available: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/note-for-inspectors-use-of-assessment-information-during-inspections-201415

