

# Assessment Without Levels

## Avoiding the Pitfalls



## Potential pitfalls

1. Recreating Levels using other words to describe them
2. Trying to assess Attainment Targets before all the component parts have been taught
3. Seeking to boil down a large range of learning attributes into just one number
4. Using a 'Working At' approach where pupils effectively start from a 'fail' grade
5. Using a high level of granularity in grading that is unlikely to be supported by evidence
6. An assumption that progress advances neatly, like climbing the steps of a ladder
7. A view that a pupil is 'on target' if they attain their predicted grade – even if that grade is unacceptably low
8. A lack of detail in showing how the teaching will cover all of the Subject Content statements
9. A lack of clarity about what pupils should learn after being taught each unit of work
10. Not taking the opportunity to implement a 'Mastery' approach to learning

# 1. Recreating Levels using other words to describe them

1B+, 2W+, 4S+  
Step 18, 19, 20  
Index 92, 93, 94

Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3  
Progress Notation 0, 1, 2  
Diamond, Sapphire, Ruby

- Levels are a measure developed for the old National Curriculum, designed to wrap up a package of what a pupil has learnt into one number, i.e. a Level.
- They depend on a definition, e.g. a graded set of statements of competence in relation to an area of learning – an Attainment Target.
- In the new National Curriculum there is no definition of Levels, so they can't be used.
- Alternative numbers or symbols would also need a definition in order to be usable.

It is best to drop Levels completely and take a different approach

## 2. Trying to assess Attainment Targets before all the component parts have been taught

Example from Computing: *“Design, use and evaluate computational abstractions that model the state and behaviour of real-world problems and physical systems”*

- In order to judge a compound statement like this it will need to be broken down into its component parts, and each one taught and assessed.
- Only when all the components of this statement had been taught would we be able to make a holistic judgment about the Attainment Target.
- Some schemes expect teachers to go straight into making a judgment about the Attainment Target without providing evidence of learning of the component parts.

Evidence should be recorded across the key stage of both Component Learning and Holistic Learning

### **3. Seeking to boil down a large range of learning attributes into just one number**

- Previous practice with Levels may have led to us to believe that we can express evidence of learning as just one number.
- But diverse attributes, learnt to different extents, don't lend themselves to being put into one box.
- Using an atomised list of learning attributes makes it difficult to summarise what pupils are learning.
- Neither can we easily use a single number representation of an Attainment Target.

One or two Learning Objectives associated with each unit of work would be a good, manageable balance

## 4. Using a 'Working At' approach where pupils effectively start from a 'fail' grade

- A pupil starting their first lesson in year 7 in a subject they haven't studied before will be 'Working at' a fail GCSE grade.
- We can't disguise this problem by choosing different names or symbols for Levels.
- Year 7 is too far away from GCSE to be meaningful to decide what GCSE grade pupils are 'Working at'.

A 'Working Towards' approach will provide an early sighting on a likely grade attainable should pupils continue to study the subject at key stage 4.

## 5. Using a high level of granularity in grading that is unlikely to be supported by evidence

- It is tempting to use a very precise measure of progress so that we can show changes over time.
- But at the start of a course we aren't going to know with any precision how accurately a pupil is acquiring an Attainment Target
- Instead, we should focus on noting what pupils are learning and report that instead of a number.
- Across key stages 3 and 4 the accuracy with which we can estimate a future GCSE grade will increase.

Focus on recording how well pupils are mastering what they are taught.  
Estimates of future attainment will be more accurate towards the end of KS3

## **6. An assumption that progress advances neatly, like climbing the steps of a ladder**

- The old system of Levels and sub Levels gave the impression that ‘progress’ is something that advances in even, incremental, measurable steps.
- However, it is doubtful that what happens in the brain when learning takes place has this sort of order to it.
- We may not be able to measure learning, but what we can do is observe and record the outward signs of learning. This may best be represented by a dotted line towards an indicative result.

The range of evidence of what pupils are learning will indicate a journey towards an estimated outcome, even if that journey may meander.

## 7. A view that a pupil is ‘on target’ if they attain their predicted grade – even if that grade is unacceptably low

- A common view is that learners are destined to attain a grade in any particular subject indicated by their prior attainment in English and mathematics
- Evidence of the progress being made by pupils in KS3 with a Mastery approach is a better basis of estimation than prior attainment
- The consequence of this is that a school might be perfectly comfortable for pupils who they consider as weak to attain a low GCSE grade – because they have *met their target*
- A Mastery approach is not a one-chance-to-learn approach. With good teaching, many pupils could master what they are taught at KS3

With a Mastery approach, we should not cap pupil expectations at KS3 with targets based on prior attainment in English and mathematics.

n.b. ‘Mastery’ means a pupil is heading towards a higher grade. It doesn’t mean pupils are ‘On Target’ (variable)

## **8. A lack of detail in showing how the teaching will cover all of the Subject Content statements**

- Many approaches to AWL say very little about the curriculum content for which the new assessment system has been being developed.
- But the evidence of what is taught and learnt is the most important indicator of the work of schools.
- An effective assessment system will make it clear how the National Curriculum has been analysed into its component parts, that teaching schemes are developed to teach these components in a progressive manner, that there are clearly-identified learning outcomes to each unit of work, and that over key stage 3 all components of the Subject Content statements will have been covered.

The design challenge of AWL is not to create an alternative measure to Levels, but to ensure we record what pupils are learning

## **9. A lack of clarity about what pupils should learn after being taught each unit of work**

- Attainment Targets in the new National Curriculum no longer describe, for each Level, what pupils should understand, know and be able to do.
- A better approach will be to define a Learning Objective for each unit of work that is taught.
- We would be judging pupils on what we have taught them – not on some other criteria that will need to be inferred.
- Because we will have summaries of what pupils are learning, it will be easy to produce diagnostic reports

Using a Mastery approach makes it easy to place pupils' learning into one of four mastery categories for each unit of work taught

## 10. Not taking the opportunity to implement a 'Mastery' approach to learning

- A Mastery approach is no longer to be a hectic rush through a sea of content with pupils falling off at each stage.
- Mastery is not a one-chance-to-learn approach. Key areas will be visited more than once.
- Mastery ensures that pupils have understood the 'Key Concepts and Big Ideas' so that further learning can build upon them.

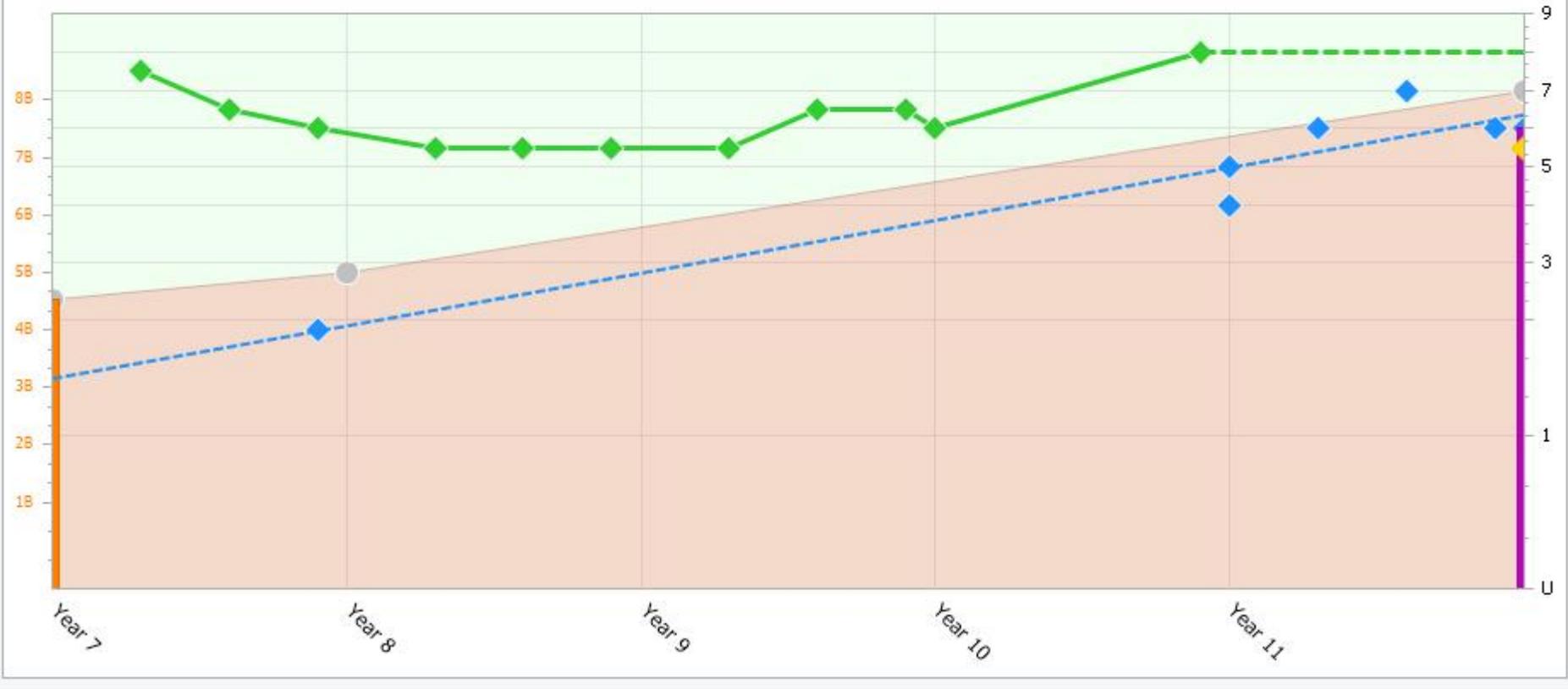
In a Mastery system we should be setting and expecting targets of the highest grades for all pupils with the potential to succeed.

## From Component Learning to Holistic Learning

- Key stage 3 is largely about building foundation knowledge to support studies at key stage 4
- Assessment in year 9 should provide increasing opportunities to demonstrate learning across the whole attainment target, i.e. from **component learning** to **holistic learning**.
- In key stage 4, GCSE Assessment Objectives will govern the approach to assessment. We will move from 'Working Towards' at KS3 to 'Working At' at KS4.
- A range of evidence at KS3 will indicate future attainment - including Prior Attainment, Attainment 8, and 'Working Towards' estimates

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Target KS2 Baseline Working Towards Working At Performance Attainment 8 Expected Progress



We will need to look at a range of evidence of pupils' progress in order to manage their learning from year 7 to the end of year 11

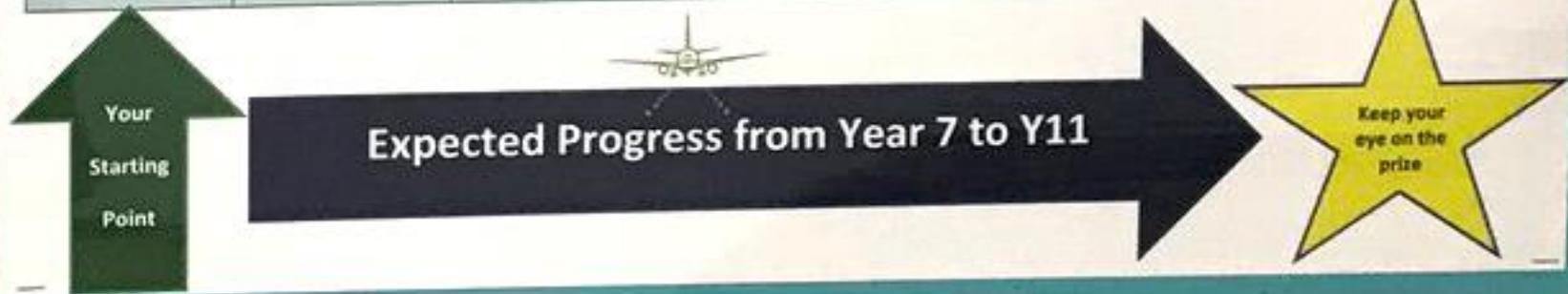
# The Characteristics of a good AWL solution

- The solution to AWL isn't really about finding an alternative to Levels
- At the heart of the solution to AWL is the need for sound planning of the delivery of the National Curriculum
- The criteria for assessment are the Learning Objectives for each unit of work in each subject
- Replace an emphasis on numbers with an emphasis on teaching and learning
- Using a Mastery approach, we should not cap pupil expectations at KS3 with targets based on prior attainment in English and mathematics.
- A 'Working Towards' approach signals future attainment and avoids 'Working At' fail grades
- We should base progress monitoring on evidence of the movement from 'Component Learning' to 'Holistic Learning'
- The IT system should use the data to forecast future attainment, plot Flight Paths, and produce diagnostic reports

## The New Mastery Curriculum – Your Progress and Targets



KS2 Starting Point In Levels	Mastery Starting Point	Y7 Target	Y8 Target	Year 9 Target	Y11 Minimum Grade	Y11 Target Grade
Level 2 and below	Working towards Foundation 1	Foundation 1	Foundation 2	Foundation 3	E	D
Equivalent to	G-	G	F	E	E	D
Level 3	Foundation 1	Foundation 2	Foundation 3	Intermediate 1/2	D	C
Equivalent to	G	F	E	D/D+	D	C
Level 4	Foundation 2	Foundation 3	Intermediate 1/2	Intermediate 3	C	B
Equivalent to	F	E	D/D+	C	C	B
Level 5	Foundation 3	Intermediate 1/2	Intermediate 3	Advanced 1	B	A
Equivalent to	E	D/D+	C	B	B	A/A*



Here is an example of an approach to Assessment Without Levels.  
How well does it meet requirements?