An approach to Assessment Without Levels at Key Stage 3

Discussion point:

Q. How does our school's approach to teaching and assessment at key stage 3 enable us to demonstrate the quality of our curriculum?

2. What are the 10 pitfalls that we can observe by looking at examples of school's approaches to AWL?
By looking at examples of approaches to AWL at KS3 we can identify a range of potential pitfalls.
There will be a natural reluctance to change something that has only just been embedded, but it will be important for an SLT to steer the development of KS3 to avoid such 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

If a school has simply swapped Levels for some other number or symbol, then the number or symbol will need to have a definition if it is to have any meaning. We no longer have Attainment Targets which had definitions of pupil competences at each Level. Instead we have Subject Content Statements - which are also the Attainment Targets.
The solution to AWL isn't about finding a number or symbol that can sum up what pupils have learnt. We should ditch Levels and instead think of a way to summarise what pupils are learning.

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

There are many individual components which make up an Attainment Target. Each of these need to be taught before we can assess the statement as a whole. We can't begin to use Attainment Targets until late in a teaching programme. Instead, we should aim to record what pupils are learning. It will only be when the component parts have been learnt that we will be able to assess the whole Attainment Target.

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

There are potentially thousands of individual competences that need to be learnt to be proficient in a subject.
It is because it is not practical to list all these competences that we look for a single number to sum them up.
But, diverse attributes, learnt to different extents, don't lend themselves to being put into one box.
If we express many learning attributes as one number we lose the more important thing - which is a description of what pupils have learnt.
Using Key Performance Indicators gives us the problem of how we can package thousands of dissimilar attributes.
Using one number to summarise them takes us back to the problems of Levels.
But if we define one or two **Learning Objectives** for each unit of work taught, we will have a smaller number of manageable statements against which we can decide the extent to which they have been learnt at any point in time.

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

We might want to call a GCSE number grade 1 a 'Silver' band, or some other phrase but pupils will soon realise that it means they are effectively working at a fail grade. A 'Working At' approach is not helpful or necessary at the start of key stage 3.
But, 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. Using 4 Mastery categories means that we are forecasting future attainment from a range of information - the most important being current progress. The system will refine the forecast as it builds up evidence.

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

When the desire to represent pupil attainment at a point in time using a single number is conflated with the desire to show progression, people start to think that a single number can be divided up into smaller parts, so that we can add a bit to it for each lesson to show progress.
So we see schools trying to condense what they think a pupil in year 7 has learnt into a GCSE fine grade like 4+.
Would we genuinely have the evidence to support such a precise assessment when we are not even using GCSE grade criteria? No. It is not a good idea to use one number and then try to make it even more precise by dividing it up.

Instead, we should concentrate on recording how well pupils are mastering what they are taught and broadly equate that to what CGSE grade that is likely to lead to. Estimates of future attainment will become more accurate towards the end of KS3 when we have accumulated more evidence of what pupils have learnt.

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

It is doubtful that what happens in the brain when learning takes place has this sort of order to it.
Progress is not going to be much like climbing the rungs of a ladder. It is far more messy than this.
It is better to draw dotted lines to show the path towards an indicative grade. Their journey may meander on the way there but evidence of previous pupils' learning journeys will help us to refine our estimates of their future attainment.

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

Some schemes are based on 'Flight Paths' towards pupils FFT estimated grade. If they are 'at' or 'above' this path they will be 'above target'. If they are below it they will be below target'.
These trajectories devised from KS2 scores, ('tramlines'), take a fixed view of pupil's future attainment, even though it is based on a different school's analysis in a different curriculum. This is not as good as an approach that acknowledges that pupils can grow, learn and improve. Where progression occurs, the best judge of future progress will be current progress rather than historical progress. Target setting is a tricky issue, and we should be careful not to impose a future grade on a pupil, and then set targets which are less than a full expectation of success.

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

If a school just reports numbers they wont have any information about what pupils are learning.
How will we know if a teacher has prepared the teaching to cover all the component areas of learning?
School inspections focus on the quality of the curriculum and how well it is taught. An assessment approach that doesn't provide evidence of this will not put the school in a strong position.
We need to focus more on the planning and what pupils are learning - i.e. through good use of Formative Assessment.

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. Rather than report numbers, we should aim to report what pupils have learnt.
If we define one or two **Learning Objectives** for each unit of work taught, we will have a smaller number of manageable statements against which we can decide the extent to which they have been learnt at any point in time.
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

Mastery is not a hectic rush through a sea of content with pupils falling off at each stage.
In a Mastery approach, key areas of learning will be visited more than once.
A Mastery approach, recommended by the Commission for AWL. is not a one-chance-to-learn approach. Instead it will ensure that the majority of pupils are tracking toward the higher grades.

Q. So what targets should we set at KS3 when using a Mastery approach?
A. We should be setting and expecting targets of the highest grades for all pupils who have the potential to succeed.

It is only at KS4 that the process of target setting becomes appropriate, as it will be based on GCSE grade criteria.

3. Breakthrough Idea 1

Assessment is a Curriculum issue.
The Curriculum is the Progression Model.
Plan Progression into the Scheme of Work.
Don't try to find evidence of progress later.
If pupils are mastering what they are taught, they will be making progress.

If we plan a Scheme of Work so that it builds on what has been learnt, then it will provide a progressive learning experience where simple concepts and ideas later underpin more holistic understanding.
With this approach, we don't need to look for progression later, because if pupils are mastering what they are being taught, then evidence of the extent of pupils mastery of each Learning Objective is itself evidence of progression in learning.

Breakthrough Idea 2
At key stage 3, place the emphasis on recording what pupils are learning, not on trying to report a number.
As this record accumulates, it will indicate their likely attainment at KS4 with increasing accuracy.

It is highly relevant to report what a pupil has learnt, but if there is only a space on a report for a single symbol, then we will naturally look for a single number to report. An IT system can allow us to report in more detail the extent to which a pupil has mastered what they have been taught. The record of what pupils are achieving will provide a good basis for estimating the sort of grade that could be expected at GCSE. The estimate will become more accurate the closer we get to year 11. Note that a **Progress Graph** is different from a **Flight Path** in this respect. The former offers a prediction from the current record of progress, the latter assumes a result from a single estimate in a different school in a different subject, taught in a different context.

4. A Mastery approach provides the basis for estimating future grades

If a pupil was **mastering** every unit of work taught them, this would imply that they are 'Working Towards' the higher GCSE number grades in the subject, were they to continue to study the subject at KS4. If they were **Secure** in every unit of work, this would imply that they were working towards a GCSE number grade 5 or above. Similarly, if they showed an **Emerging** mastery of the units of work, it would imply they were currently working towards the lower pair of GCSE number grades.

A mixture of mastery grades will provide the basis for the application to estimate the likely future GCSE number grade and express this as a current 'Working Towards' grade. However, a statement of what pupils have learnt and how well they have learnt it that will be the more important component of reporting assessment at KS3.

This understanding of how mastery grading can indicate future attainment, provides the basis for quantifying pupils learning at KS3. By recording these 'Working Towards' grades, we have the basis for plotting Progress Graphs through key stage 3.

5. From Component Learning to Holistic Learning

Assessment in year 9 should provide increasing opportunities to demonstrate learning across the whole attainment target, i.e. we will move from **component learning** to **holistic learning**. This is an important principle of assessment at KS3.
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

6. The Characteristic of a good solution to Assessment Without Levels

A good AWL solution will focus less on numbers and more on reporting what pupils are learning. The key factors will be the effectiveness of planning and determining a clear Learning Outcome for each unit of work.
In summary, we should not try to find an alternative to levels. We should consider how we can easily capture what pupils are learning. We should then look for a system that does the number crunching for us.

7. The Concept

Place the focus of assessment on Formative Assessment, i.e. the informal gathering of information about how pupils are responding to the teaching. Teachers have always done it this way. i.e. from time to time make a note in a register about how well each pupil is responding to the teaching. Supplement this information with homework grades and test scores.

The stages in developing a solution to AWL at KS3 will be to plan the teaching, deliver the teaching, summarise how pupils are responding to the teaching , record the outcomes to their learning, let the system use this data to predict future grades and produce evidence of pupil attainment :

Plan > Teach > Learn > Outcomes > Predictions > Attainment

8. Curriculum-Driven Assessment at key stage 3

The focus for developments at KS3 should be in designing a curriculum that meets the requirements of the National Curriculum. This will usually be preceded by analysing the subject content statements into the components that will need to be taught, and developing a scheme of work which will progressively teach these components.

We will then use a mastery approach to record how pupils are mastering what they are taught. Towards the end of key stage 3 we will examine the holistic learning, i.e. how the components of learning have built into an understanding of the broader subject skills and knowledge described by the Attainment Targets.

The system should then use this evidence to predict future grades, were the subject to be continued into KS4, and produce reports.

9. An IT solution

We can systematise these stages by recognising the 6 stages, in this case as 6 layers of information.

Called, a multi-layer curriculum design and assessment matrix, it provides the means to record information about the analysis, design, planning, teaching, learning and outcomes to KS3.

A note about workload issues

IT systems should be used in such a way as to streamline the activities that would need to take place (whether IT was used or not). For example, the planning by subject leaders of progressive schemes of work, and reporting by teachers at the required intervals. The use of IT should always be used to make this process easier, for example by aggregating information from across a school and providing reporting tools. With more emphasis now on the Quality of the Curriculum, 'tracking data' will no longer be used for accountability. Schools can now focus on how information can be used effectively to manage pupils' learning.

10-14. Slides showing the information held in each layer

15. The Progress Graph

This will be produced by the system itself from the information entered about component and holistic learning.

A Progress Graph is not a 'Flight Path', i.e. an expected route of progress. It is more like a Flight Recorder, a record of a pupil's progress over time.

We would mostly use 'Working Towards' estimates at KS3 based on evidence of mastery of what pupils are being taught. We would supplement these with occasional standardised tests which would provide a 'Working At' estimate. At KS4 we would use grade criteria to provide 'Working At' grades.

We can look at a range of evidence of pupils' progress in order to manage pupils' learning from year 7 to the end of year 11. We can record 'Mastery' as 'Working Towards' grades as well as standardised test scores as 'Working At' grades. These will usually form two convergent lines.

This graph will show the range of evidence available which will point towards a likely number grade at GCSE. The green line is the 'Tracking Towards' approach which will tend to be a horizontal line pointing towards an expected GCSE number grade corresponding to the mastery category or band along which the pupil has travelled.

The orange and purple lines show the baseline and the Attainment 8 estimates. The yellow dot shows four levels of progress (legacy) and the blue dotted line is a best fit through the 'Working At' blue dots which are based on the use of GCSE Grade Criteria.

The Progress Graph provides a visual representation showing a range of measures and trends indicating a future GCSE grade and providing a picture of a pupil's progress.

The important point is that this graph is generated by the computer as a result of teachers recording how well pupils are learning what they are being taught. It requires no additional effort by teachers to create it.

16. The mastery report

Pupils acquisition of Learning Objectives can be reported as a diagnostic mastery report.

17. The summary report on pupils' progress
The system can create a report of pupil's mastery across their subjects.

18. The End-of-key-stage 3 Certificate

If a pupil does not continue to study a subject after year 9, there ought to be some kind of celebration of what they have achieved at KS3. This a one way to mark the end to this important stage of education.

19. Criteria for a suitable approach to assessment at KS3

The approach that a school adopts to assessment at KS3 might be guided by these criteria.
These are the criteria which we used to develop our Curriculum-Led Assessment at key stage 3.

Discussion point:

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