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A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

IF ASSESSMENT DOESN'T IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING, THEN THE NUMBERS AND LETTERS IT PRODUCES AREN'T WORTH THE SPREADSHEETS ON WHICH THEY'RE PRINTED, SUGGESTS ALEX QUIGLEY...

National Curriculum levels are dead. They've kicked the bucket, shuffled off their mortal coil and joined the bleedin' choir invisible. It is a time for rejoicing and for developing a new, better approach to assessment.

Such rejoicing is immediately tempered, however, by the reality that very few schools so far have shaken off the shackles of levels. In our system of high-stakes accountability, few SLTs dare to forge ahead and build their own assessment system. At the very least, familiarity with NC levels breeds something like contentment in the face of little evidence of better models. What we must do is work together to share the best models of assessment that supersedes the straitjacket of the levels system.

We must articulate why levels are dysfunctional and how we can do better.

A tale of two very different Parents' Evenings summed up the unredeemable corruption of NC levels for me. My colleague and I recently swapped stories about the Parents' Evening of our own offspring. I had the luck of speaking with a teacher who spoke knowingly about my daughter and her nascent literacy and numeracy and, crucially, her emerging confidence and growing friendships. We were given purposeful ways we could support our child. Not a mention of levels. We went home happy and relieved.

My colleague told a different tale. A well-meaning teacher spoke with unerring accuracy about the relevant NC levels of his young son... and not much else. He was at a level 2c in literacy. Spoken with confidence. Yet, this label said nothing of real merit about how my colleague could support his child with reading and writing. It didn't make clear what his son actually could and could not do. It was a useless label borne of a culture obsessed with data judgements and weighed down by the albatross of accountability.

Data can be brilliantly useful. Indeed, forensic data analysis can sometimes be transformative for our schools; however, it can be overwrought. NC levels were only ever meant to be an end of key stage marker of progress. To give the guise of greater accuracy we developed sub-levels. Soon enough, nigh on every piece of our students' work was daubed with summative sub-levels. To hell with the learning – we could label it a 5 and worry no more!

Children would go home to parents bemoaning their cataclysmic drop in maths, from a 6b to a 5a, understanding very little about the why and the how of their learning. Ultimately, these levels then presented the illusion of accuracy, without being very reliable.

Somewhere along the way, in the pursuit of evaluative judgements of schools and teachers, we forgot what



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assessment was actually *for*.

Assessment was for learning.

Most teachers have known about the work of Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam and their 'Black Box' for years. Put a level onto student work and their ego obscures their learning. It becomes a corrosive competition. Students develop a fixed mindset about their worth and their ability to get better. No-one wins.

Black and Wiliam herald the potent impact of purposeful feedback in formative assessment. From comment only marking, to discussion and dialogue, with selective and peer and self-assessment, the options are endless. We should seize upon these freedoms we have been given to define our own school specific principles of assessment, building upon what we know about great learning from Black and friends and our own expertise.

At my school we are creating our own assessment model (do a quick Google of 'HuntingEnglish' and 'Moving Beyond National Curriculum Levels') that defines our own principles and standards for great assessment. We plan to remove numerical levels from all formative work throughout the school year (except a summative test at the end of the year in some subjects) – moving to comment-only feedback. We will use the knowledge of our students to give us a guiding point for the year ahead, before then charting their relative progress.

We may not be giving out a 4b, but we can work together to create models of excellence for each and every outcome. An 'exceptional' persuasive speech can be made real with a model of such a speech, with detailed indicative content. Every student can aim to reach that model of excellence, not some vague notion of two sub-levels of progress.

We can look at the actual work of students. By turning the pages of their book progress will be visible. Teachers can moderate that work and diagnose exactly how we can adapt our teaching so that student may do better in future. It will take time, effort and commitment, but the rewards for our students will be worth it.

Seize the opportunity in your school... and believe in better than levels.

