Assessment and APP: Thoughts on a Journey

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“The journey is both repetitious and progressive: we go both round and upward” (WB Yeats)

 Barely a week goes by without some kind of pronouncement in the media about exam results, standards rising, standards falling and exams getting easier. For pupils it is probably also true to say that barely a week goes by without some kind of assessment, examination, test or resit. So how have we got to this point and where are we going with it all?

Back in the late 1990’s we were inspired by the work of the Assessment Reform Group and the publication of *Inside the Black Box* by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam. Their research was hugely influential in shaping our thinking and the principles of Assessment for Learning underpinned our work in the National Strategies. We remember coming across the quotation from Mary Alice White about the pupils’ perspective of school:

The analogy that might make the student’s view more comprehensible to adults is to imagine oneself on a ship sailing across an unknown sea, to an unknown destination. An adult would be desperate to know where he [sic] is going. But a child only knows he is going to school. ...The chart is neither available nor understandable to him. ...Very quickly, the daily life on board ship becomes all important. ...The daily chores, the demands, the inspections, become the reality, not the voyage, nor the destination.

This seemed to sum up so much of what was wrong at the time in education. So often, pupils simply went through the motions of school without ever really thinking about what they were learning, why they were learning and what they had to do to improve. AfL seemed to offer a solution to the problem.
The AfL strategy was promoted through the National Strategies ‘whole school initiatives’ strand, as well as through subject support for English, mathematics, science and ICT. Every school was provided with a set of training materials that they could use as a starting point for development work. Whole-school training followed by classroom based ‘action research’ approaches was recommended. LA consultants ran training events and offered in-school support for some schools. All schools were allocated funding to support developments.

It was a privilege to be part of the team that developed the AfL materials in order to help schools put the ideas into practice, and during the early part of that decade we saw interesting developments in schools and, at the very least, a raised awareness of the importance of AfL.

Practice varied, of course. There were real successes and lots of examples of schools that embraced the principles, used action research approaches to personalise and develop their practice and, ultimately, the pupils in those schools benefitted. The evidence for the impact of AfL on pupil learning, engagement and motivation, when implemented well, was significant and well documented.

However, there were also problems. It wasn’t all plain sailing and some very ‘interesting’ issues started to emerge as schools adopted some of the suggested practice, often without fully understanding the principles that underpinned AfL. There were schools that took elements of the strategy without really understanding the rationale, implemented a sort of ‘tick box’ approach and distorted the principles to such an extent that in some cases the effects could have been positively detrimental to pupils. For example, there were schools where every child had to copy a learning objective from the board at the beginning of every lesson, thus sometimes wasting at least five minutes of valuable learning time every lesson and very often the ‘objective’ was simply a task. We remember being told things like ‘we did AfL last year’, although it was very clear that teachers had not really got to grips with the pedagogical changes needed to embed AfL in practice. If AfL was the process of

seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there

what happened when the teachers could not articulate what progression in their subject looked like? How can you help learners engage with notions of quality and the ‘next steps’ they are striving for if their teacher is unclear about those steps?
And so it was that APP came into being. It was developed to help teachers to make judgements about their pupils’ attainment, and refine teachers’ understanding of progression in their subject. It was hoped that teachers using APP would gain diagnostic information about the strengths and weaknesses of individual pupils and groups of pupils and use that information to adapt their teaching and revise their curriculum planning to match pupils’ needs. It was also intended to facilitate the setting of meaningful curricular targets that could be shared with pupils and parents.

**APP was developed for teachers, not pupils,** to help them to understand the small steps of progress and assess students’ work more accurately. One of the key aims was to ensure that ‘every teacher is equipped to make well-founded judgements about pupils’ attainment, understands the concepts and principles of progression, and knows how to use their assessment judgements to forward plan, particularly for pupils who are not fulfilling their potential’.

That was the intention. So how has it come to pass that APP is like Marmite - you either love it or hate it? What should have been a tool to help teachers has been turned, in the worst cases, into something that some teachers feel is a tool to beat them with.

The way in which English departments managed the introduction of APP varied, as did the way it influenced their practice and the impact on staff and pupils. In some ways, it became an implementation of ‘two paths’.

In April 2011, Ofsted published *Impact of Assessing Pupil Progress Initiative*, based on visits to 14 secondary schools and 25 primary schools from 11 different local authorities. The aim of the report was to evaluate the impact of APP on improving outcomes for pupils and the extent to which assessment was used to support learning and to ensure that the curriculum met the needs of pupils. Its findings chime with many of the observations we made during visits made to schools and local authorities.

In schools where implementation seemed to be effective, staff came to a shared understanding of what progression looked like in reading and writing. As part of this, they also came to a more rigorous interpretation
of ‘levelness’ which had a side effect of appearing to depress standards initially as teacher assessments became more accurate and consistent.

Some staff became more aware of gaps in their subject knowledge and had to work to overcome these. However, staff we interviewed felt that they had gained a clearer picture of where students were and what their next steps should be. Written and oral feedback to pupils became more focused, as did information for parents. One (possibly apocryphal) anecdote recounted how one parent had taken the APP guidelines and stuck them to the fridge at home!

Effective departments quickly made the link back to teaching, learning and provision. Internal standardising meetings quickly highlighted gaps in possible evidence of attainment in particular assessment focuses (or skills), which then led to questions around ‘Why?’ Was it because pupils were unable to demonstrate the skill or was it that they had not been given the opportunity? Interestingly, the gaps were often around higher order reading skills, which then led departments to review schemes of work to evaluate whether the skills were explicitly taught. In many cases they weren’t and departments reviewed schemes of work to ensure that skills highlighted in the National Curriculum Programmes of Study were explicitly taught and that progression in these skills was secured – not just at KS3 but also at KS4. One interesting side effect of the way in which assessment focused the mind on skills was the impact this started to have on KS4 in some departments, where teams began to move away from a content-based approach (‘We’re doing Of Mice and Men’) to a more skills-based approach for both staff and pupils.

Another interesting effect was the way in which departmental medium term planning became less fixed and ‘one size fits all’, as teachers responded to the assessment information they had. Lesson-by-lesson medium term plans were changed to allow flexibility for different groups, depending on the strengths and weaknesses identified in day-to-day and periodic assessment. This more detailed knowledge about pupils’ strengths and weaknesses also supported more effective intervention for individuals.

The key to thinking about evidence of the impact of APP was the impact on pupils, particularly in the light of the National Curriculum revision of 2007 that aimed to ensure that pupils were given the opportunity to become ‘successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve…’ In order to make this happen, schools were aware that pupils needed to become more independent and take more responsibility for their learning. How could APP play a part in this? The importance of pupil involvement in formative assessment had already been highlighted:
Formative assessment cannot be done to the pupils but must be done with them. The aim is to enable pupils to become independent learners.\(^6\)

Just as teachers became clearer about pupil’s strengths and next steps, we were able to see evidence that this was also true for some pupils. When asked in the early stages of implementation of APP about their next steps in reading and writing, they tended to talk in general terms about being more skilled at reading aloud or make a vague statement about needing to read more. Comments about writing tended to centre on neat handwriting and spelling. However, at the end of the year, the same pupils were asked about their next steps and were able to make much more specific comments, such as, ‘I need to use different types of sentences in my writing’ or ‘I need to make sure I use inference.’ Interestingly, this particular pupil was not just parroting the language of the APP criteria but was able to describe specifically what inference meant and how they needed to go about demonstrating this skill: ‘I need to look beneath the surface at the extra meanings of words and then think about the impact on the reader.’

Pupils seemed to be more actively involved in the assessment process, more involved in the ‘voyage’ and the ‘destination’ of learning, rather than just the ‘daily chores’. They were able to talk explicitly about skills, and become used to using the shared language to describe progression. For example, in one classroom, a teacher asked pupils to identify the skill that was going to be developed in the lesson after the starter which was focused on that particular AF. Pupils were then involved in reflecting on how they would be able to develop that skill and show evidence of having achieved this.

We also observed how some pupils were able to respond effectively to specific, written feedback from their teacher. Having received the feedback, pupils were expected to demonstrate an attempt at taking the advice given and annotate it to show how they felt they had managed the next step. This feedback from the pupil to the teacher in response to the teacher’s initial feedback helped to ‘make the learning visible’ and create a situation where ‘teachers receive more feedback about their teaching…’ \(^7\) Teachers were able to see not just the impact of their teaching but also the impact of their feedback and highlight any further stumbling blocks that needed to be removed.

Having a shared language also supported pupils in becoming more effective at giving specific feedback during peer assessment, and again supported greater pupil independence through being able to ‘engage with
what work at that particular grade or level looks like… and also enables them to see how a piece of work might be approached, and so understand issues of quality. 8

However, the same difficulties that dogged the effective implementation of AflL became evident with the implementation of APP, with some schools adopting some of the principles and practices without fully understanding them and therefore unwittingly distorting them.

For example, in some departments, APP assessments were devised which became a separate entity from all other assessment and teaching and learning activity (these were often referred to as ‘doing our APPs’). It was almost as if English Departments felt the need to devise end of unit assessments which tested particular AFs. These were then marked and placed in folders without being referred to for long periods of time except perhaps at school reporting points, so it was difficult to see how this process might have an impact on pupil achievement or provision. It was also difficult to see how these could show evidence of pupils being able to demonstrate skills independently, consistently and across a range of contexts.

The curriculum became fragmented and atomised down to the AFs. These were being used to plan the curriculum, rather than the National Curriculum Programmes of Study and there was a danger that the skills were becoming fragmented and decontextualized (for example, looking at sentence structure without examining their impact in the pieces of writing as a whole.) These problems were often exacerbated by commercial products which exemplified this approach.

There was evidence, too, that in some schools teachers did not fully understand the criteria and what they looked like in practice. As a result, teachers were unable to communicate evidence of achievement and next steps to pupils. A lack of time to engage with standardising folders also led to inconsistent application of the criteria and insecurity around ‘levelness’.

Towards the end of the National Strategies there were times when we wondered whether we had helped to create a monster. Had the preoccupation with APP added another, somewhat unwieldy, addition to the already overburdened teachers? Perhaps more importantly, what was the effect on the pupils? Were we developing a nation of little assessors rather than independent learners who could genuinely engage with notions of quality and progress? The answers to these questions are not simple and straightforward.
There are teachers whose practice has been greatly enhanced by using APP and, as a result, pupils’ progress, engagement and motivation are greatly improved. We talked recently to a teacher who has just changed school and has moved to a school that does not use APP. She told us that she couldn’t conceive of abandoning the approach; it is so much part of her practice and she is certain that it has had a really positive impact on her pupils. Her hope is that the rest of the school will see how effective it is and follow her example.

So, where next? With the end of the National Strategies and the change in political administration, many of the mechanisms that were in place for support with implementation and development no longer exist. Also, schools were at a very early stage in developing their use of speaking and listening APP and progress with this may have stalled.

The factors that contributed to successful implementation of APP still remain important for schools to consider:

- the contextualisation of APP in a strong, whole-school vision of teaching, learning and assessment
- time to ensure training in the approach for new staff and teaching assistants
- frequent departmental standardisation and moderation
- a link back from assessment into planning, teaching and learning
- a holistic view of the evidence used to make judgements against the criteria, including oral and more ongoing, informal work as well as more formal end-of-unit assessments.

One of key findings highlighted by Ofsted in 2011 was cross-phase and cross-school standardisation and moderation, which was described as ‘highly beneficial’.

Teachers trusted the accuracy of their assessments, developed a thorough understanding of progression and shared effective assessment practice.9

Without support for these types of meetings, there may be a danger that they do not continue and therefore valuable opportunities for cross-school and cross-phase discussions may be lost. Given that transferring good practice between schools is being emphasised, opportunities for schools to meet together are still vital and it’s important that schools continue to find ways to enable this to happen.
What are the current concerns for schools and does APP fit into the current agenda?

It seems to us that the passing of the National Strategies, the white paper ‘The Importance of Teaching’, proposed changes to the National Curriculum and to examinations and the revised Ofsted framework have all had a significant impact on the current landscape in education. The future policy on assessment is unclear and is likely to remain so, given that decisions about National Curriculum revision have been delayed. However, effective and accurate teacher assessment, which impacts on pupils’ learning and achievement, is still likely to be important, particularly given some of the recommendations in the Bew report.\textsuperscript{11}

Some things seem to have disappeared without a trace…some language has changed. We are not ‘narrowing gaps’ any more, but ‘closing them’. We have not heard the term ‘functional skills’ too often lately and yet schools are preoccupied with literacy and numeracy across the curriculum; surely ‘functional skills’ by any other name? There is still a relentless focus on developing independent learning, closing gaps and improving progression. So how can we see the end of APP when there is so much evidence that, when implemented well, the approach is central to all of these issues? APP is key to developing progression in reading, writing, speaking and listening. All of those skills are vital to improving literacy skills and, therefore, developing independence. APP empowers learners because it lets them into the secret …the voyage and the destination.

\textbf{References:}