

Assessment and Progression without levels: where do we go from here?

Jerome Freeman

The new Primary History National Curriculum is finally upon us. The first thing you might notice is that the level descriptions have gone. These were first introduced in 1995 and became the mainstay for assessing pupil progression and attainment in Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 across schools in England. So *what on earth do we do now?* In fact the new curriculum does set out the outcomes we should expect from pupils in each key stage; we will come back to this a little later. To begin with, however, it is worth exploring what progression actually looks like in history. The absence of level descriptions, does not mean that there are any significant changes to the way pupils make progress in history .

How do pupils make progress in history?

Given that our understanding of pupil progress is well established you should have something to build on as you plan for the implementation of the new national curriculum. Figure 1, setting out the key features of progression in history within Key Stages 1 and 2, is a useful starting point for your curriculum planning. The question you should ask yourself is *Does the history curriculum in my school enable pupils to make sufficient progress across all of the features outlined below?*

What does it say in the new curriculum about progression? How is this helpful?

Despite the fact that the level descriptions have been removed, the new national curriculum has plenty to say about progression in history both within its overall aims and at the beginning of each key stage.

Take a careful look at the new national curriculum aims for history in Figure 2. Much of what you will see links

closely to the key features of progression outlined in Figure 1. The first two aims relate to pupils' expanding knowledge and understanding though with a more explicit reference to developing a secure chronological narrative than in previous versions of the national curriculum. Aims 4 and 5 refer to the second order concepts such as change, causation and interpretations as well as to historical enquiry and evidence, all of which are key to pupils making progress in history – as they always have been. Some minor changes are evident here; for example, the second order of significance is now featured in Key Stages 1 and 2 for the first time.

The final aim about historical perspectives is an entirely new feature. It is designed to combat the fragmentary approach to teaching history that is prevalent in many schools. In your long-term planning you will need to provide opportunities for your pupils to make links and connections across different periods, societies, events and developments. By the end of Key Stage 2 pupils will need to have developed a reliably secure framework of the past.

The paragraphs at the beginning of each key stage in the new national curriculum (see Figure 3 for Key Stages 1 and 2) are extremely useful as they set out what we should expect the majority of our pupils to achieve. When planning your history curriculum you should ask yourself whether it will enable your pupils to meet the expectations set out in these paragraphs. One thing you might notice if you compare these statements with the old level descriptions for levels 2 and 4 is that there has been a slight increase in the expectations at the end of each key stage. This will have some implications for your planning.

How do I plan for progression?

As suggested in the previous section, unless you plan for progression your pupils are unlikely to make

Figure 1: The key features of progression in primary history

Across Key Stages 1 and 2 progression in history is characterised by:

- an increasing knowledge and understanding of local, British and world history within an increasingly secure chronological framework
- asking and answering more complex questions about the past
- making links and connections within and between different areas of the content specified in the history curriculum
- an increasing understanding of second-order historical concepts such as continuity and change, cause and consequence, similarity, difference and significance
- an understanding of specific historical abstract terms building towards terms such as 'empire', 'civilisation', 'monarchy', and 'democracy'
- an increasing proficiency in the effective use of historical enquiry and selection of sources as evidence
- an increasing awareness of the different ways in which the past is represented and interpreted
- using a greater depth and range of historical knowledge to provide more reasoned explanations
- becoming more independent in learning.

systematic progress towards the expectations that are set out so clearly in the new national curriculum. Some of your pupils will be capable of exceeding these expectations and you will want to give them every opportunity of doing so. The suggested benchmark statements in Figure 4 provide a useful starting point for any long-term or key stage planning. As well as providing a way to map out progression, they can promote a shared understanding and common language about progress and attainment in history. Ofsted has stated recently that where teachers use a common language to discuss and agree pupils' progress, this has a marked effect on the consistency of assessment practice within a school. These statements can be personalised to fit into the curriculum followed by your school e.g. by adding references to specific topics you have chosen to teach. Having said that, the crucial thing to remember is that these should not be used for day-to-day assessment, only to inform planning and help develop a common understanding of pupil progress over a key stage or part of a key stage.

How do I assess pupils' progress without resorting to levels?

While the removal of the level descriptions presents schools with a huge challenge it also offers an opportunity to review and improve current assessment

procedures. It is interesting to note what Sir Michael Wilshaw has set out in terms of what Ofsted expects in relation to assessment and the 2014 national curriculum:

Good schools have always tracked their pupils' progress and Ofsted will expect to see this continue. We will not endorse any particular approach. But we do expect every school to be able to show what their pupils know, understand and can do through continuous assessment ...

This additional freedom is endorsed further by the DfE which argues that schools will now have much more scope to be able to develop their own approaches to formative assessment to support pupil attainment and progression.

The aim therefore should be to develop a system for assessment which engages pupils with their learning, promotes progression and leads to high achievement.

Given the DfE's new stance on formative assessment, why not take the opportunity to make this central to your day-to-day assessment of your pupils? Develop classroom activities that are designed to enable pupils to improve and express the knowledge, understanding and skills set out in Figures 3 and 4. Make sure

Figure 2: The aims in the new history national curriculum

The national curriculum for history aims to ensure that all pupils by the end of Key Stage 3:

- know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative, from the earliest times to the present day: how people's lives have shaped this nation and how Britain has influenced and been influenced by the wider world
- know and understand significant aspects of the history of the wider world: the nature of ancient civilisations; the expansion and dissolution of empires; characteristic features of past non-European societies; achievements and follies of mankind
- gain and deploy a historically-grounded understanding of abstract terms such as 'empire', 'civilisation', 'parliament' and 'peasantry'
- understand historical concepts such as continuity and change, cause and consequence, similarity, difference and significance, and use them to make connections, draw contrasts, analyse trends, frame historically-valid questions and create their own structured accounts, including written narratives and analyses
- understand the methods of historical enquiry, including how evidence is used rigorously to make historical claims, and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed
- gain historical perspective by placing their growing knowledge into different contexts: understanding the connections between local, regional, national and international history; between cultural, economic, military, political, religious and social history; and between short- and long-term time-scales.

that feedback to and from your pupils focuses on the qualities of their work and what they can do to improve. Avoid comparisons with other pupils. Establish a dialogue with your pupils that is thoughtful and involves critical reflection about what is successful and how to improve. If you have not done so already, make use of peer- and self-assessment so that your pupils start to take control of their learning.

In addition to day-to-day assessment you may want to take stock of your pupils' progress at key points during the school year. This is sometimes known as periodic assessment and is a form of summative assessment made against national expectations in history. Rather than relying on tests or formal tasks to do this, the idea is that you use a wide range of evidence from all stages of a pupil's learning and only do it when you have sufficient evidence to make a worthwhile judgement. You could either use the benchmarks in

Figure 4 or the expectations statements set out in Figure 3 for your assessment criteria as these are the closest thing we now have to national 'standards' in history.

The real advantage of periodic assessment is that it can be used both formatively and summatively. Involving pupils by making the assessment criteria clear and accessible, encouraging them to gather some of the evidence of their progress and using the judgements made to identify strengths and areas for improvement are all features of effective formative assessment. Additionally, the information you gain from making periodic assessments can be used to inform future curriculum planning. Periodic assessment tends to lead to more reliable judgements of pupil progress being made over time (e.g. over a term) which fulfils the school's need systematically to track and record pupil progress.

Figure 3: Expectations for pupils at Key Stages 1 and 2

Key Stage 1

Pupils should develop awareness of the past, using common words and phrases relating to the passing of time. They should know where the people and events they study fit within a chronological framework and identify similarities and differences between ways of life in different periods. They should use a wide vocabulary of everyday historical terms. They should ask and answer questions, choosing and using parts of stories and other sources to show that they know and understand key features of events. They should understand some of the ways in which we find out about the past and identify different ways in which it is represented.

In planning to ensure the progression described above through teaching about the people, events and changes outlined below, teachers are often introducing pupils to historical periods that they will study more fully at Key Stages 2 and 3.

Key Stage 2

Pupils should continue to develop a chronologically-secure knowledge and understanding of British, local and world history, establishing clear narratives within and across the periods they study. They should note connections, contrasts and trends over time and develop the appropriate use of historical terms. They should regularly address and sometimes devise historically valid questions about change, cause, similarity and difference, and significance. They should construct informed responses that involve thoughtful selection and organisation of relevant historical information. They should understand how our knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of sources.

In planning to ensure the progression described above through teaching the British, local and world history outlined below, teachers should combine overview and depth studies to help pupils understand both the long arc of development and the complexity of specific aspects of the content.

How do I make assessment work best for me?

Each school is different. While there is no a single model for assessment, here are some broad guidelines based on best practice to help you find your way in this new world without levels.

Make sure that your assessment procedures are manageable. Make sure too that you conform to your school's requirements so that history fits into the whole-school assessment strategy. Offer to help to develop this as it will give you more influence in the final outcome and make it more likely that the principles you want to introduce into the history curriculum are reflected in the whole-school policy.

The history co-ordinator should, where possible, involve all staff teaching history in the development of your assessment procedures. Everyone should be familiar with the assessment requirements of the new curriculum as set out in this article. Work together to plan some historical enquiries/topics that have opportunities for pupils to make progress in specific aspects of history. (*See online version of this article for an example of a long-term plan.*) Don't overload individual enquiries/topics by trying

to assess everything in one go, but rather focus each enquiry/topic around a few key aspects of progression in history e.g. causation, change or interpretations. Make sure that over a key stage that there are plenty of opportunities to revisit the various elements of progression in history. Pupils need several opportunities in different contexts to make progress in these elements. This should start in your long-term planning where you should map out where you are going to teach and assess these elements. Think carefully about how you are going to ensure that pupils develop a holistic understanding of the subject within a key stage and across key stages as well as an in-depth knowledge and understanding of specific topics.

Use a variety of approaches to assessment.

- As well as day-to-day assessment which might involve observing pupils at work, questioning pupils and marking their work, develop some more substantive assessment tasks for use at the end of each enquiry. Use them to evaluate your pupils' progress across a whole enquiry.
- Work with other teachers to develop success or assessment criteria that can be shared with pupils based broadly on the expectations in Figures 3 or 4.

Figure 4: Suggested history benchmarks as an aid to long-term planning

By the age of 7 pupils should:

- have knowledge and understanding of people and events from the recent and more distant past, including from their own lives and communities, as well as from Britain and the wider world. They should be familiar with different stories about significant people and events from the past and where these fit within a chronological framework .
- be able to demonstrate their understanding of the past by identifying similarities and differences between ways of life in different periods, by using common words and phrases about the passing of time. They should be able to give some reasons why people in the past acted as they did, and identify some of the ways in which the past is represented.
- be able to choose and use parts of stories and other sources to ask and answer questions about the past. They should understand some of the ways in which we find out about the past.
- be able to communicate in different ways about aspects of life in past times and use a wide vocabulary of everyday historical terms.

By the age of 9 pupils should:

- have knowledge and understanding of some of the main people, events and periods from the history of their locality, Britain and the wider world and be able to place these into different periods of time. They should have knowledge and understanding about some of the different technological, scientific, cultural and aesthetic achievements along with some of the social, political, religious and economic developments from the past.
- be able to demonstrate their understanding of the past by describing some of the differences and similarities between the periods they have studied and by beginning to suggest causes and consequences of the main events and changes. They should be able to make some links and comparisons between periods of history. They should be able to identify some of the different ways in which the past is represented.
- be able to use a range of sources of information to find answers to questions about the past and begin to select relevant information to support their findings. They should understand how we find about the past by using different sources of information.

By the age of 11 pupils should:

- have knowledge and understanding of some of the significant people, events, and periods from the history of their locality, Britain and the wider world and be able to fit these into a secure chronological framework. They should have knowledge and understanding of different technological, scientific, cultural and aesthetic achievements along with social, political religious and economic developments from the past.
- be able to demonstrate their understanding of the past by describing some of the differences and similarities between the periods they have studied and by beginning to suggest causes and consequences of the main events and changes. They should be able to make some links and comparisons between periods of history. They should be able to identify some of the different ways in which the past is represented.
- be able to demonstrate their understanding of the past by describing characteristic features of periods and societies from the ancient to the more recent past, and by identifying contrasts, connections and trends within and across periods of history. They should be able to identify and describe some short- and long-term causes and consequences of the main historical events and changes studied. They should be able to identify and describe some different ways in which the past has been interpreted.
- be able to use different sources of information to help them investigate the past and use relevant information to support their findings. They should understand how our knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of sources.
- be able to describe past events, people and developments using dates and terms appropriately and select and organise information to communicate their understanding of the past in different ways.

Whatever you do, avoid creating a new set of levels and instead go for a best-fit approach to assessment.

- Agree on a clear and manageable recording system that is then used consistently across the school. Get your colleagues into the habit of using the information gathered to inform their planning and teaching of history.
- Build in opportunities for pupils to take part in the assessment process – develop an open culture where pupils feel confident about discussing their achievements and reflecting critically on their areas for development. Involve them in gathering evidence of their progress.
- Involve parents and guardians too – share your assessment criteria with them and explain to them what it means to get better at history in the new curriculum.
- Produce a school portfolio of work with specific examples of pupils' work in a range of contexts – formal and informal with some annotation which can be replaced over time with better examples if appropriate. Use this at in-school moderation meetings to build up a shared understanding of the school's developing standards in history.

What further support for assessment without levels is available from the Historical Association?

The Historical Association can offer support to schools with their primary history assessment in various ways.

1. Exemplar pupil work showing progression and commentary to be published on the HA website in due course
2. Schemes of work showing assessment criteria on the HA website
3. Guidance on the HA website including blogs and frequently-asked questions such as how to put together a portfolio
4. Regular articles in the HA's journal *Primary History*
5. Workshops and sessions at HA conferences and history forums
6. Support through the HA Quality Mark process to be launched in 2015.

Jerome Freeman is the chair of the Historical Association's National Primary Committee and the Institute of Education's Programme Director for the First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme. Before joining the IoE he spent several years as the national adviser for history at the QCA and taught history in several English state schools.



Further Reading

School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) (1997) 'Expectations in History at Key stages 1 and 2'.

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (1999) 'History – the National Curriculum for England, Key Stages 1-3'.

Freeman, J. (2003) 'Developing Assessment, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2' in *Innovating with History*, QCA.

Burham, S. and Brown, G. (2004) 'Assessment without level descriptions' in *Teaching History*, 115, *Assessment without Levels? Edition*, pp. 5 -13.

Freeman, J. (2011) 'Progression and coherence in history: how to plan across the key stages' in *Primary History XX*, pp. 33-34.

Brill, F. and Twist, L. (September 2013) *Where have all the levels gone? The importance of a shared understanding of assessment at a time of major policy change*, National Foundation for Educational Research.

Byrom, J. (December 2013) 'Alive ... and kicking? Some personal reflections on the revised National Curriculum (2014) and what we might do with it' in *Teaching History, Curriculum Supplement*, pp. 6-14.

Wilshaw, Sir Michael (15 January 2015) Speech to the North of England Education Conference 2014, Ofsted website.

Burn, K. and Freeman, J. (5 August 2014) 'Progression & Assessment without Levels – Guide', Historical Association website.

Lomas, T. (5 August 2014) 'Assessment in Primary History – Guidance', Historical Association website.

Lilly, J., Peacock, A., Shoveller, S. and Struthers, d'R (1 September 2014) *Beyond levels: alternative assessment approaches developed by teaching schools: research report*, National College for Teaching and Leadership.

Geographical Association (September 2014) 'Assessment and the national curriculum', Geographical Association website.