

# MODERATION UNDER THE NEW CURRICULUM

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*The end of 'best fit' assessment will fundamentally change the nature of moderation. This article asks what form of internal and cross-school moderation is called for under the new curriculum.*

## **Assessment under the new curriculum**

Everyone agrees on the value of calibrating judgements with other people, both in school and between schools. Ofsted comments positively on schools that do it. And, in spite of financial constraints, many schools value the process and continue to meet.

The 'best fit' model of the past allowed trading between success in one aspect of a subject and underperformance in another. Writing was the paradigm case. In the past, a poor speller with imaginative expression and adequate sentencing might have got a Level 4 even though s/he performed differently on each strand. The new approach is additive rather than synthetic; 'best fit' has given way to a simpler and less contentious measure against discrete objectives. In this model, nothing can compensate for the underperformance in spelling. The 'pass' line is everything.

The great thing about the new approach is that it will not be easy to neglect unachieved objectives. Its shortcoming is that it leaves the unsuccessful pupil in a terrible place, held back from further credit for their successes until the weakness is resolved. Crude classifications such as 'at, above, below' are easy to grasp but not sufficiently detailed to help teachers to tailor the curriculum. Moreover, such classifications are norm-based rather than criteria-based and not always reliable guides to how much has been achieved and the pattern of that achievement.

It remains to be seen how schools deal with children who do not achieve objectives. It is not a new phenomenon. Despite our best efforts, and even among great teachers, children do sometimes falter. Should we be holding them back a year, as America once did? I doubt we'd want to embrace that failed policy. Falling further behind is a double deficit. We will be more likely to embrace a highly focused catch-up intervention as soon as a shortfall is noticed, and take the child on to the next phase of learning with that catch-up in hand. Our best hope is that we develop sharper, shorter and more effective catch-up than a fuzzy supply of 'extra help'.

## **So what is moderation now for?**

In the past, moderation allowed teachers to compare judgements to agree the relative weighting of different strands. It was a form of fair play. Over time, custom and practice helped to fix the meaning of levels and the weighting of each element. Government exemplars also helped to illustrate assessment principles at work.

Now, in the 'mastery' curriculum, negotiation is a less relevant concept in moderation. The tests that arrived with the new curriculum tell you a lot about the government's vision for clean, absolute assessments. The phonics check and the Grammar Punctuation Spelling tests are designed to elicit

'right' or 'wrong' answers. They are good for checking discrete knowledge but less useful for assessing application and skill.

Nonetheless, schools will want to get a grip on the new standards, not least because they have been hoisted by half a level and because the content of the curriculum has changed and is harder. Here are some reasons and approaches to moderation to help you get a good fix on the new expectations:

### **1. To check standards in test years 2 and 6**

To help, we have a simplified set of revised *Performance Descriptors* for reading, writing, maths and science. We should also receive *exemplifications with commentary* to show us what is considered strong evidence that a child has secured particular objectives. Once you have these, it would be worth an early review of pupils' work against the descriptors. Check off the criteria diligently, and don't fall into compensatory judgements that were right for 'best fit' but wrong in this more absolute system of counting only age-related successes. This will give you early warning of who is not yet succeeding and in which objectives, and afford you the chance to fill gaps in the evidence before an external moderation.

Top tips:

- Keep close to the objectives/criteria
- No trading of strengths and weaknesses: stick to what has been secured
- Use the forthcoming exemplification materials for a dummy run of a moderating meeting

### **2. To check priority topics (e.g. grammar) vertically across the years**

Vertical checking means moderating across all years rather than just one year. Focus on one priority strand to see how it develops across the years. This helps teachers to get a fix on the standards that apply above and below their own year, to see where they should pitch their own work. For this reason, vertical moderation is especially useful in the first year or two of a new curriculum.

Choose an important strand. This will probably be one of the much-changed strands such as grammar, computing or the four operations in maths. Put one person in charge of organising the moderation. This person – not the class teacher – should select three pupils in each class who are at, above and below the expected standard. Do not choose extreme examples, but *typical* examples separated by an 'old level' or less. Collect in all their books for the year, including rough books and unaided work. Lay out a long line of these samples starting with the youngest year and going up to the exit year.

Equip each teacher with an assessment ladder for the strand. This may be readily to hand in a scheme you have purchased, or it may be a full list of objectives from the NC. The job now is to check each pupil against the objectives for their year. Allocate each teacher or pair of teachers with a year to

check against. As far as possible, make this an absolute check: has the child mastered the objective or not? Grade pupils according to whether they have definitely achieved:

- All the objectives and more
- Nearly all
- More than half
- Less than half
- Only a few
- None at all

Next, ask participants to circulate around the samples in order to look across the years – some moving upwards in age and some moving downwards – to see if the line of continuity and challenge is steady. Look for years in which the level of expectation stalls or accelerates. If there are problems among the older pupils, trace back to earlier years to see where the problem started and why it persisted.

Finally, check whether your teachers have been able to provide the right sort of evidence. Usually, moderation throws up doubt because the evidence is not there. Topics like grammar and punctuation will be easy enough, but reading will be harder if there is no evidence of what the child has actually read. You may emerge from moderation thinking more about what evidence you need to have available.

Finish with a chaired discussion:

1. How are we doing against each year's objectives?
2. Are there clear successes and shortcomings?
3. Does the gradient of challenge feel right?
4. Do we have the right sort of evidence to make a judgement?
5. What do we need to do to improve progress and provide evidence of it?

Top tips:

- Prepare a handy list of key objectives for each year in the chosen strand
- Explain that colleagues need to be honest and open about identifying weak spots
- Be a bold organiser: direct people and set time limits

### **3. To check standards with other schools at the half-way mark**

Key Stage 2 is a long haul and it is wise to check that pupils are on track while there is still time to catch up. This means checking standards towards the end of Year 4. Ideally you should do this with two or three other schools and allow half a day so you can cover both English and maths. Alternatively, cover them over two twilight meetings.

Collect English and maths work from five pupils in each Year 4 class. Include rough work and unaided work. Select:

- 2 pupils at expectations
- 1 pupil above expectations
- 1 pupil below expectations
- 1 pupil whose achievements are harder to weigh: the sort of child whose work stimulates discussion.

At the meeting, lay out the room in two halves – one for English and one for maths. Place into five groups the work of pupils at each level and the discussion pieces, drawing from each school. For example, all the pupils who are above expectations in maths will be together.

Spend the first half of the meeting on one subject and the second half on the other. Take this running order:

1. The 'at expectations' group
2. The 'below expectations' group
3. The 'above expectations' group
4. The discussion pieces

Check that the 'at expectations' group has achieved all or virtually all of the objectives for the year. Use the priority objectives listed in your assessment scheme or a full list of objectives from the NC.

Unlike the old system of 'best fit', shortfalls are not offset by other strengths and there is no reasonable 'pass line'. If any significant objectives are unachieved, the pupil has fallen short. You might allow some wriggle room for minor objectives that can be easily caught up and will not obstruct next year's learning, but use this loophole with sparingly.

Consider also whether you have enough evidence to make firm judgements, and what more might be needed to check standards thoroughly.

With the 'above' and 'below' groups, you can expect a variety of attainment, so you might try:

- Rank ordering. This will give you a sense of relative priorities in the new curriculum. In English, for example, basic skills count for more. In maths, written method counts for more.
- Flagging two or three unfulfilled objectives and how more successful schools have taught them.

Allow time to browse the discussion pieces. It helps if the teacher has put a covering note explaining why a second opinion is being sought. Try to agree:

- Where they sit among the groups you have already considered.
- What next for this child?

Top tips:

- Keep a focus on the quality of evidence
- Gently remind colleagues not to pursue 'best fit' trading
- End the meeting on a positive note by collecting up good ideas from other schools, and constructive suggestions for taking forward the children represented.

A number of publishers are offering spot tests for each year based on the new curriculum. Money will be tight this year, but if you have the cash and the need, an end-of-Year 4 test is the best buy.

However, it's not beyond enterprising staff in a year group to agree a set of activities that will provide evidence of attainment in each strand of English and maths. The convenience of the government's 'can/can't' approach is that tests are easy to devise and mark.