



Assessing progress in foundation subjects

It is hard to focus on the assessment of foundation subjects when so much attention is absorbed by the make-or-break assessments of reading, writing and mathematics. But is it unwise to neglect the other subjects, and how can they be assessed if there are no performance descriptors? **Sue Hackman** looks for answers.

No one can blame primary schools for the imbalance between the 3Rs and the rest of the curriculum. It's been that way for years. What has made matters worse this year is that changes to assessment have come thick, fast and rather late, and the stakes are so high.

Grammar, spelling, handwriting and number have dominated the assessment of English and mathematics, to the detriment of range, process and less-favoured strands such as spoken English, geometry and statistics. But even this looks generous compared with the lack of attention paid by the government to the foundation subjects, and the token attention given to science, which does at least have the modest benefit of its own performance descriptors for the end of Key Stage 1 (KS1) and 2.

The science performance descriptors, however, have not been embraced by many schools this first year. The unfortunate word 'interim' has made many wary of over-committing to the descriptors. Schools are also very aware that the subject does not count in the primary accountability measures. In any case, the descriptors refer only to the end of the key stages and do not help to track pupils' trajectory over the other years.



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The deterioration of foundation subjects

The foundation subjects, meanwhile, are in the worst possible position, vying with the titan subjects for attention at a time of unsettling change. Schools have to focus on the 3Rs because one slip there will send them spinning into the 'coasting' category, even if they stay above the floor and get through Ofsted with a good grade. And it doesn't help that the foundation subjects are squeezed for teaching time, which limits the scope for sensitive assessments.

In an attempt to maintain a coherent and interesting curriculum, many schools have re-embraced topic work which unites the disciplines but blurs the assessment opportunities for individual subjects. Besides, there are no ready-made assessment objectives to use in the foundation subjects, unless you count those objectives in English and mathematics that can be delivered through other subjects. On their own, these piggy-backed assessments do not add up to a coherent account of success in disciplines such as geography or biology which have distinctive features of their own.

As a minimum, schools will wish to report progress in the foundation subjects to parents at the end of the year, while parents may reasonably ask how that performance in those subjects compares with reading, writing and mathematics.

Attainment in the foundation subjects is important in its own right: to recognise talents, to give status to favourite subjects and to contribute to children's tentative ideas about a career. Take a child who is brilliant at art and music, good in practical subjects but weak in the core subjects. Of course you will wish to get their literacy and numeracy up to scratch, but in this case, is it not also important to recognise their achievements in the other subjects?

What is to be done?

In the absence of performance descriptors, assessment in the foundation subjects depends on enterprising school and subject leaders. There is a basis for assessment and it lies in the National Curriculum (NC). The learning objectives are couched in terms that allow them to be used as assessment objectives. The difficulty lies in the fact that most objectives are provided for the entire key stage, and not by year.

The task, then, is to construct a set of annual assessment objectives based on the teaching objectives provided in the NC. That means allocating objectives to the most appropriate year or sub-dividing them across the years so that you can teach (and assess) them incrementally as pupils improve their skills. Most schools are already doing this in their teaching plans, since none of us expects to teach everything every year. Take heart, therefore: you may already have done the hardest part.

In many cases, you can cut and paste the existing objectives straight from the NC to become the objectives for the final year of the key stage. In other cases, you can allocate them to a chosen year knowing that, by the end of the key stage, you will have covered everything.

However, for the many objectives you revisit each year, the art lies in adjusting them to define the content and standard of the previous years.

Even so, you may end up with a lot of objectives. Science, in particular, is already lengthy. This is where you have to be brave and select out key objectives that will give you a good sense of how the child is doing. Other subjects such as art and design are so slender that filling out an assessment scheme will help to give them more definition and purpose.

How, then, can this be done?

Science

Objectives are provided for each year, and in the main, these are arranged under the three disciplines of biology, chemistry and physics. A fourth strand, 'Working scientifically', is offered in two-year chunks for Years 1 and 2, 3 and 4, and 5 and 6. As a minimum, an assessment scheme capable of fine tracking would need to distinguish between the paired years.

Nonetheless, science is a lengthy curriculum, and you should aim to reduce your list to at least 50 per cent of its current length. Consider where you have focused your energies in the teaching plans, and focus on those in your assessments. Choose a handful of objectives that will give you a good sense of whether the child is on track. These objectives often subsume earlier ones anyway.

History

History is offered in chronological order for the whole key stage, but its arrangement over the years is left to the school. Most schools are following the chronology. But this is not the biggest challenge. The difficulty lies in the fact that the objectives tell us what to cover but not to what standard. The task facing the subject leader is to adjust the objectives for each year—first, to reflect knowledge of content, and second, to peg the standard.

Verbs are useful allies. In Year 3, for example, we might expect pupil to 'know', whereas later on, they will 'understand', 'grasp', 'explain' or 'argue'. The key to writing objectives is to choose verbs that are specific enough to detect in pupils' work.

Geography

Geography works in the same way as history; however, the programme of study is much better written. The objectives are sharp and define the nature of the learning and its assessment. It is full of helpful verb stems such as 'Pupils can identify...', 'Pupils can use...' and 'Pupils can name and locate...'

The main task for the teacher is to place these objectives in the years in which they are taught, and to define the standard that is expected in each year if objectives are revisited.

Foreign Language (KS2 only)

There are 12 language objectives for the whole key stage, but each of them is a multi-headed hydra. Take this one, for example: 'Engage in conversations; ask and answer questions; express opinions and respond to those of others; seek clarification and help.' I count eight objectives in there, though they are related. You may wish to break them down and adjust the wording for each year, saving the hardest parts for Year 6. In Year 3, for example, you might feel comfortable with asking and answering simple questions, and knowing how to ask politely for help to find a place, elicit a name or make a purchase. In Year 4, you might extend this to include statements of belief and preference such as 'I like...'; 'I dislike...'; 'I prefer...'; and 'I believe...'; and how to reply positively, negatively and less certainly.

Physical Education

In a handful of bullets, the physical education curriculum gestures at the sports to be experienced, but not the standard to which they must be achieved. For example, one KS2 objective requires pupils to 'perform dances using a range of movement patterns'. The task of the subject leader will be to decide for each year what constitutes the expected standard, and to state this in a way that can be observed.

For example, in Year 3, you could decide that an appropriate standard would be: 'Can perform a dance with smooth transitions between three or four different movements'. Ramping up in Year 4 might then be: 'Can devise a dance containing four

or five movements that are elegantly linked'.

Swimming to 25 metres by the end of the key stage might be accomplished in specific years depending on access to a pool, or divided into years by style and distance.



Design and technology

The design and technology curriculum is helpfully presented in four strands running through all key stages, but, like other foundation subjects, each objective applies to a whole key stage.

Note, also, that there is a lot of content inside each objective. You will, for example, probably wish to spread this KS1 objective over two years: 'Select from and use a wide range of materials and components, including construction materials, textiles and ingredients, according to their characteristics'. Some of the materials will appear in Year 1 and others in Year 2, and we might reasonably expect a higher level of competence in Year 2 as pupils become more confident in using them. The task of the subject leader is to make these decisions and write crisp versions of the objective for each year.

Computing

There are six or seven bullets in each key stage in the computing curriculum. You may decide to share them out between the years as the basis for teaching. In this case, your assessment objectives would be identical to the teaching objectives. If, however, you decide to build up each objective over two years, take the existing bullets as your final year assessments and adjust them in the previous years to express the content and standard you expect there.

Art and design

The Cinderella of all subjects, art and design has only four bullets in each key stage. No one can blame the writers for the generality of the wording—they were trying to slot in as much of art as they could. However, this poses a problem for subject leaders when it comes to developing assessment bullets. Verbs like 'use', 'develop' and 'improve' do not give clues about the standard to which they must be achieved, even at the end of the key stage.

Divide the arts, materials and media over the years to reflect where you teach them, then for each year, try to fix the standard for the objectives you revisit.

Take this KS2 objective for example: 'Create sketch books to record their

observations and use them to review and revisit ideas'. Separated out over the four years, it might look something like this:

Year 3	Has made effective use of a sketch book to record observations and gather ideas.
Year 4	Has made effective use of a sketch book to gather and develop early ideas.
Year 5	Has made effective use of a sketch book to gather, develop and experiment with ideas.
Year 6	Has made effective use of a sketch book to initiate and incubate ideas for the future.

Measuring progress within the year

If you only wish to make an annual report to parents, you can use the objectives you have devised for a single end-of-year judgement. Following government practice for the end of key stages, you can issue a clear judgement about whether the pupil has met all the expectations for the year.

You might then agree a measure that mirrors the 'Working beyond' category in Year 2 and Year 6. For example, a child who can prove that they use all objectives consistently and competently in a range of different situations and has moved on to the next level of study for future years may be awarded 'Working beyond'. Some schools use the alternative title of 'mastery' (although the government has dropped this word from its publications).

Without too much effort, you can also devise a 'Working below' threshold for the child who has met most of the objectives but not all, or achieved all the objectives but not yet consistently.

If you wish to track pupil progress in-year, then you need to decide on a simple measure to tell you how far along pupils are in securing the objectives for their year. In the **Climbing Frames pupil progress tracker**, a simple judgement is required for each cluster of objectives:

	Has made a good start/partially met	<i>Working below expectations</i>
	Has secured many or most objectives, some consistently	<i>Working towards expectations</i>
	Has secured all objectives	<i>Working at expectations</i>
	Has mastered and exceeded all objectives to a very high standard	<i>Working beyond expectations/mastery</i>

In this model, expected progress is three steps in each year, passing through early acquisition, to substantial success, to complete success, then an additional 'exceeding' step for those working beyond. The child who makes two or even just one step of progress is moving slower than the expected pace.

Despite the government's optimism that all children will progress through the year evenly, there will no doubt be pupils who travel slower or faster than expected, and some who will still be striving to complete objectives from previous years. Given the unexpectedly high standard of this year's exemplification, we can expect the number of pupils in this category to expand.



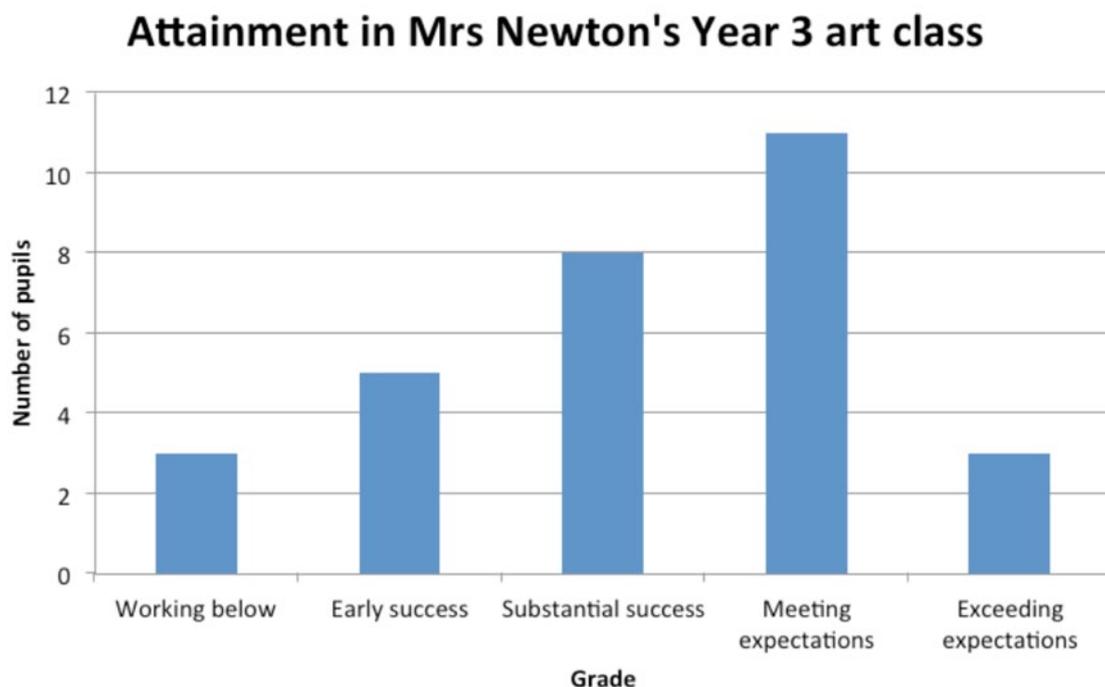
Gathering data

It may be enough to report in words how the child's year has been if you are well tuned in to the criteria, but you can go further. Here, for example, is a traffic light version of one child's successes in which the parent can see, at a glance, how their child is doing across the curriculum:

Subject	Attainment	Progress
Reading		
Writing		
Maths		
Science		
History		
Geography		
Music	Exceeded	Exceeded
Foreign languages		
PE		
D&T		Exceeded
Computing		Exceeded
Art and design		Exceeded
RE		Exceeded

The colours have been allocated to reflect the four gradings given above. At a glance, we can see that weak writing skills are holding back success in the language-based subjects, but also that the child's progress in the right-hand column has been very good in the foundation subjects, and especially good in the practical subjects. Traffic-lighting is well-received by parents.

Results can also be aggregated to create management information about subjects, cohorts and classes like this profile of a Year 3 art class:



Each bar shows the number of pupils in the class working at each level. Taken at Easter, we can see that the pupils in the three right-hand columns are doing very well for that stage of the year, with five pupils lagging behind and three pupils significantly behind, perhaps because they are still catching up on unlearnt objectives from the previous year.

Making a start

It is understandable that schools start off attending to English and mathematics, because that is where the need is greatest and the accountability regime demands it. It would be a shame, however, if those two subjects eclipsed all other judgements about children. In due course, these are the children who will sit GCSEs in a range of subjects and eventually seek work in a range of jobs. It would be remiss of us if we were to neglect their rounded development.

Once you have settled on a system for the internal assessment of English and mathematics, turn your attention to the other subjects, and start with those where you have expertise and strength—an enthusiastic music leader, perhaps, or a keen scientist. Get them to develop assessment objectives for each year so that they gain insight into the challenges of doing this, trialling it with their own class and then spreading it to other teachers. In due course, this expert teacher can support other subject leaders to follow suit.

This will ensure parity of approach, as you don't want competing assessment models among the subjects. If you work in a cluster of schools, you could create time for subject leaders to meet together to do this job. Sharing objectives enables future local moderation using the same scale.

There are fringe benefits in devising your own foundation subject assessments. Firstly, it will give you a close understanding of assessment principles and expertise in applying them; secondly, it will enhance your in-depth understanding of the subject; and thirdly, in making you consider how objectives are built up incrementally over several years, it will confront the business of planning for learning. It is, after all, the point of education to progress by small steps and the enterprise of teaching to scaffold that learning.

This is not assessment as an end-point—it is the beginning of knowing where we wish to go and planning how to get there.

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