

Physical Education assessment from 2014: assessing without limits

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Abstract

This article covers background to the Physical Education National Curriculum and assessment changes in England from September 2014. It outlines the reasons for change and why a focus on assessment for learning is potentially a good move for the English education system. A discussion follows on how assessment within the new curriculum framework may look in Secondary Physical Education at Key Stage 3 (11–14 years old). Ideas for reporting assessment are proposed to help physical education teachers start to develop their own robust and manageable assessment system

Keywords: Physical Education; assessment; National Curriculum; high expectations; learning without limits; core thresholds.

National Curriculum reform

In *The importance of teaching: the Schools White Paper 2010* (DfE 2010) the UK Government outlined its proposed steps for whole-system reform, which included the curriculum, accompanied by assessment reporting. It expressed a desire to give schools autonomy and teachers freedom to formulate innovative curricula that still had clearly set expectations for children at each key stage. The purpose was to rid schools of the 'prescriptive straitjacket' (DfE 2010: 10) but ensure that 'proper assessment of pupils at each vital transitional stage of their education' occurred (DfE 2010: 11).

Reviews, expert panel findings, proposals and public consultations followed, with the new National Curriculum first published in September 2013. William (2001) reported that since the introduction of National Curriculum attainment target levels in 1988, 'policy has driven teachers and schools in ways that are

antithetical to high-quality teaching and learning' (p. 1). In the National Curriculum, attainment targets were set to 'establish what children should normally be expected to know, understand and be able to do at around the ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16, and enabled the progress of each child to be measured against established national standards' (DES & Welsh Office 1987: 9–10). In addition 'targets must be sufficiently specific for pupils, teachers, parents and others to have a clear idea of what is expected, and to provide a sound basis for assessment (DES & Welsh Office 1987: 10). For physical education there were guidelines rather than specific attainment targets. The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE 1999) introduced attainment targets for physical education, consisting of 'eight level descriptions of increasing difficulty, plus a description for exceptional performance above level 8. Each level description describe the types and range of performance that pupils working at that level should characteristically demonstrate. In Physical Education, the level descriptions indicate progression in the aspects of the knowledge, skills and understanding set out in the programme of study' (DfEE 1999: 7).

Reflecting on current practice observed by the author, schools can view attainment in physical education as being made up of a series of levels averaged from various 'sports'. The coercive tension between monitoring and recording standards and ensuring progress on a regular occurrence means there is pressure to 'race' pupils through levels. The focus is on constantly measuring VO_2 in a 'bleep test' (the bleep or multi-stage fitness test is used by schools to monitor pupil's maximum oxygen uptake (VO_2 max), as opposed to concentrating on the activities to improve the scores. The regularity of 'assessment' lessons witnessed in schools by the author insinuates the content will cover all expectations in a level descriptor. This is extremely difficult to achieve. Judgements that take into account the performance shown within and across units of work will likely show a better picture of what a pupil can attain and what areas need improvement. In its greatest light, attainment targets offer a best-fit model.

The system of attaching a number to a child's performance simplifies a complex process, which has left parents and carers baffled about their child's educational progress as evidenced in the new Department for Education (DfE 2014) assessment principles. One only needs to browse internet search engine results regarding what an attainment level is, to realise the confusion they could cause. An attainment level (regularly sub-levelled) in a report does not provide enough information to allow parental understanding of the activities which they may be able to support and help their child develop.

The Expert Panel of James, Oates, Pollard and Wiliam (DfE 2011) recommended that attainment targets in their presently established level descriptor form should not be retained. The Education (National Curriculum) (Attainment Targets and Programmes of Study) Order 2013 subsequently removed all levels from the National Curriculum, starting in September 2014. All UK state-maintained schools, which includes community schools (local council controlled), foundation schools (more freedom than community schools to choose the way they operate) and grammar schools (pupils selected after entrance exams; run by the local council, foundation body or trust), have to follow the National Curriculum. Academy (run by a governing body, independent of the local council) and independent (fee-paying) schools do not. School leaders, who have to follow the National Curriculum, will be going against the legal position (The Education (National Curriculum) (Attainment Targets and Programmes of Study) Order 2013) if they request teachers to continue to use attainment target levels. While attainment targets still exist in the new National Curriculum (DfE 2013), there is no need for progress or attainment to be 'levelled', or reported numerically.

The DfE (2014) published a set of core principles that should underpin any approach to assessment in the National Curriculum (2013). It suggests effective assessment systems:

Give reliable information to parents about how their child and their child's school is performing

- a. Allow meaningful tracking of pupils towards end of key stage expectations in the new curriculum, including regular feedback to parents.
- b. Provide information which is transferable and easily understood and covers both qualitative and quantitative assessment.

- c. Differentiate attainment between pupils of different abilities, giving early recognition of pupils who are falling behind and those who are excelling.

- d. Are reliable and free from bias.

Help drive improvement for pupils and teachers

- a. Are closely linked to improving the quality of teaching.

- b. Ensure feedback to pupils contributes to improved learning and is focused on specific and tangible objectives.

- c. Produce recordable measures, which can demonstrate comparison against expected standards and reflect progress over time.

Make sure the school is keeping up with external best practice and innovation

- a. Are created in consultation with those delivering best practice locally.

- b. Are created in consideration of, and are benchmarked against, international best practice.

(DfE 2014: 1)

It is clear that formative assessment is key, with an ability to provide feedback to both pupils and parents that is easily understood, which enables pupils' performance to improve along with the quality of teaching.

The Expert Panel suggested an approach to pupil progression that emphasises 'high expectations for all' (DfE 2011: 47). Teacher commitment to aspiration and inclusion is fundamental, along with expected outcomes for each key stage. They identified the following ten salient dimensions that contribute to 'high expectations for all':

1. Presumption of capability for improvement;
2. Maintenance of high expectations;
3. A focused curriculum with appropriate depth;
4. Tangible learning objectives;
5. Constructive feedback for all pupils;
6. Valuing of effort;
7. Resolute commitment to essential knowledge for all;

8. Monitoring to record the attainment of pupils who are 'ready to progress';
9. Provision of pupil support to maintain progress;
10. Engagement of parents and carers in authentic learning.

(DfE 2011: 48)

These dimensions mirror effective pedagogy and closely tie in with the 'learning without limits' approach where ideas of fixed ability, and practices based on them, can limit learning (University of Cambridge 2014). Learning without limits encourages pupils to compete against their own abilities in order to achieve. Pupils are not defined by their levels, or so-called ability. Grouping pupils by ability suggests intelligence is fixed and therefore in education we push those most able, while supporting those most challenged. It is a restricting practice to predict pupils' attainment. In environments where all strive to work together to create a climate of unlimited ability and future, pupils have a chance to achieve beyond their aspirations and surprise themselves. A creative and broad curriculum inspires teachers to believe in all pupils' learning capacity and focus on providing high-quality learning experiences. Within 'learning without limits' classrooms, pupils will have a choice of task and make decisions regarding how much challenge they take. Feedback, or assessment for learning, rather than levels, takes centre stage. Pupils having a feeling of control of their learning develops intrinsic motivation to tackle new tasks and challenges in a very positive way.

New era for assessment

'It is vital for all assessment, up to the point of public examinations, to be focused on which specific elements of the curriculum an individual has deeply understood and which they have not' (DfE 2011: 50). The National Curriculum (DfE 2013a) programmes of study for physical education provide a lean framework, granting schools more flexibility in their delivery. Schools need to decide 'What are the essential core thresholds of skill, knowledge and understanding in each subject?' Once these core thresholds have been decided, further decisions need to be made such as, 'How as a physical education department are we best placed to deliver them?' Schools will need to creatively design their own curriculum models that best suit their learners' needs and the school community resources available. It is a chance to develop a more personalised path for learners. There needs to be clear progression across and within key stages,

paying attention to the essential knowledge, skills and understanding stated for each programme of study (PoS). With less subject content within the PoS, there is now an opportunity to study in greater depth the 'core thresholds', ensuring key skills and concepts are entrenched before pupils move to the next key stage. This inclusive process of scaffolding should lead to higher standards of attainment. To support this, new progressive frameworks will be essential to support formative assessment of pupils' capability in relation to the new programmes of study (Physical Education Expert Group 2014a).

Table 1 details the requirements of the Physical Education National Curriculum throughout Key Stage 3, using headings identified within the new National Curriculum (DfE 2013). Schools will need to consider whether all headings in Table 1 suit their school model and how 'gaps' will be addressed to achieve consistency and continuity in pupils' learning across the breadth of the subject (Physical Education Expert Group 2014b). This is a challenge for schools, considering the timeframe, to not only completely overhaul assessment practices but get to grips with 'assessing without levels' too. Many professional teachers do not know life without 'levels', having utilised them so much that they may feel they have lost their 'guardian'. There is now a chance to grasp outstanding teaching and learning, through effective use of 'assessment for learning'.

Measuring progress

Evidence from several professional learning workshops attended by the author suggests many teachers will be comfortable with designing a school-centred curriculum for their subject, though they may become confused when thinking about measuring pupil progress without levels. Quite simply reporting on the proportion of pupils 'ready to progress' to the next key stage, or 'on target' to meet the end-of-key-stage targets will suffice in the new National Curriculum. The new attainment targets are written integral to the programmes of study. 'If planning and teaching is aligned to the progressive achievements of these targets, then our planning record, and an indication as to whether outcomes have been met becomes a record of progress towards the attainment target' (Frapwell 2014: 8). There is no need to formulate data spreadsheets to track each pupil's progress and attainment because the planning record plus notes fulfil that obligation. The planning record is thus an 'improving record rather than a proving record' (Frapwell 2014: 8).

Table 1. Analysis of progression across Key Stage 3 (Physical Education Expert Group 2014b) adapted by Hamblin.

What pupils should be taught (italic)	Purpose of Study Aims (italics)	What pupils should achieve at Key Stage 3	What pupils should be taught at Key Stage 3
Movement	Develop competence to excel in a broad range of physical activities	Build on and embed the physical development and skills learned in Key Stages 1 and 2	
Using skills, techniques		Become more competent, confident and expert in their techniques and apply them across different sports and physical activities	Develop their technique and improve their performance in other competitive sports (eg athletics and gymnastics)
Range of activities, application			
Dance			Perform dances using advanced dance techniques in a range of dance styles and forms
Cooperation (social)	Opportunities to compete in sport and other activities build character and help to embed values such as fairness and respect		... be encouraged to work in a team, building on trust and developing skills... (either individually) or as a group
Competition	A high-quality physical education curriculum inspires all pupils to succeed and excel in competitive sport... Engage in competitive sports and activities		Overcome opponents in direct competition through team and individual games Take part in competitive sports and activities outside school through community links or sports clubs

What pupils should be taught (italic)	Purpose of Study Aims (italics)	What pupils should achieve at Key Stage 3	What pupils should be taught at Key Stage 3
Games			... through team and individual games
Tactics Attack/defend			Use a range of tactics and strategies to overcome opponents in direct competition (through team and individual games)
Challenge	... succeed and excel (in competitive sport) and other physically demanding activities		Take part in outdoor and adventurous activities which present intellectual and physical challenges and be encouraged to work in a team, building on trust and developing skills to solve problems, either individually or as a group
Analysis and evaluation			Analyse their performances compared with previous ones and demonstrate improvement to achieve their personal best
Preparation for life and participation	It should provide opportunities for pupils to become physically confident in a way which supports their health and fitness	Develop the confidence and interest to get involved in exercise, sports and activities out of school and in later life	Take part in competitive sports and activities outside school through community links or sports clubs
Health and fitness	Are physically active for sustained periods of time Lead healthy, active lives	Understand and apply the long-term health benefits of physical activity	
Swimming			

Incremental numbers on a spreadsheet do not evidence progress or moderation of it, they evidence a record of monitoring. Documentary evidence in physical education could include videos, photos or scanned worksheets. There is certainly no need to collate evidence for every pupil, as a sample will likely suffice. As a method of documenting this evidence, e-portfolios offer a simple solution for each pupil to upload work produced in lessons. Many schools have access to this technology but perhaps are not taking the step change to exploit it. Pupils can reflect, self-assess and evidence their own progress, which teachers could annotate on a manageable frequency. Subject and teacher inspections could review these e-portfolios and relate them to lesson observations and dialogue with pupils, teachers and parents to make their judgements. E-portfolios could have a powerful effect in engaging and cultivating an environment where parents and carers can support and feel involved in their child's progress too, as it makes the process easily available to them.

Assessment reporting

'Pupil progress and achievement should be communicated in terms of descriptive profiles rather than condensed to numerical summaries' (NAHT 2014: 6). There has always been a requirement to report on progress and detail the level attained, at the end of each key stage. English physical education teachers have become accustomed to presenting a level, or even sub-level, each half-term to comply with school policy. Schools will now have to report on whether pupils are 'on track' to meet end-of-key-stage targets. This could include statements with the terms 'working towards...', 'on target...' or 'working beyond...'. Alternative terms could be 'excellence, secure, developing or foundation' thresholds (Durrington High School 2014).

Physical education departments will need to formulate in detail what those 'thresholds' of essential knowledge, skills and understanding will entail. Referring to Table 1 and breaking down 'pupils should be taught skills and techniques', Table 2 suggests some essential 'thresholds' based on the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA 2008) core task cards. It is unlikely pupils would master all of these core thresholds in Key Stage 3, therefore the responsibility is placed on physical education leaders to decide which activities can be covered in great depth, to enable pupils to be ready to progress onto their next stage of learning.

Reports, in addition to stating whether pupils are 'on track' to meet end-of-key-stage targets, should articulate particular attainment relative to the learner and national expectations, plus achievement towards the aim of engagement in healthy active lifestyles (Frapwell 2014). Targets set should be process targets (eg practise passing various size balls to advance accuracy, to help improve performance in all team ball activities, particularly hockey). If e-portfolios are being used then the pupils' own reflective comments and targets can be included. The focus should be on the success towards mastering core thresholds.

Schools looking for a ready-made adaptable physical education assessment tool for recording and reporting could investigate Create Development's (2014) wheel. Each segment in the wheel can be allocated a bespoke core threshold (and given a number if required). Figure 1 shows a wheel based around the mastery of multi abilities: cognitive, physical, health, personal, social and creative. A green segment indicates a threshold completed, while orange represents a partially complete one and red indicates a target. With the mouse hovering over a segment the details will appear, as shown with a personal core threshold. A report can be generated of an individual's learning journey as partially shown in Figure 2. You will notice scores against each 'ability' which indicate how well pupils are progressing against eight levels. This appears to be levelling reinventing itself, but rest assured these grades can be removed.

Ofsted inspectors will use a range of evidence to make judgements, including looking at test results, pupils' work and pupils' own perceptions of their learning. They recognise schools are working towards a preferred fully functioning assessment system. However, Ofsted (2014) will expect schools to show pupils are making progress, making effective use of formative and summative assessment and how it impacts on teaching and consequently raising attainment. They will use the expected outcomes, as stated in the National Curriculum, to judge how well pupils are performing against national standards and want to know what measures are in place if pupils fall behind these core outcomes. Additionally Ofsted will consider if reports help parents to understand how well their children are doing in relation to any standards expected (Ofsted 2014).

Table 2. Using skills and techniques.

What pupils should be taught (italic)	What pupils should achieve at Key Stage 3	Core thresholds of essential knowledge, skills and understanding (QCA 2008)
Using skills, techniques	Become more competent, confident and expert in their techniques and apply them across different sports and physical activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passing and shooting with control, fluency and accurately • Tracking, intercepting, catching and throwing the ball effectively • Use skills to direct their shots to target areas • Use appropriate range of strokes and shots accurately and consistently
Purpose of Study Aims	What pupils should be taught at Key Stage 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bowling with variety, accuracy and awareness of fielders' positions • Respond to the way a ball is bowled • Using batting techniques effectively and showing good timing
Develop mastery of skill and techniques in non-competitive and competitive situations	Develop their technique and improve their performance in other competitive sports (eg athletics and gymnastics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use good technique for running events • Use good technique for jumping events • Use good technique for throwing events • Show different ways to take weight on the hands and feet
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show tension, extension and control • Demonstrate a variety of flight actions • Perform single and linked actions accurately and smoothly • Perform with control, accuracy and power • Practising and repeating actions in order to improve • Perform fluently and with confidence • Perform at various speeds and levels • Use appropriate attacking and defending positions • Planning and pacing throughout a game • Adjust their skills and techniques to suit the game • Perform safely • Discuss how to improve performance • Evaluate and analyse their performance in order to improve

Figure 1. Create Development (2014) wheel.

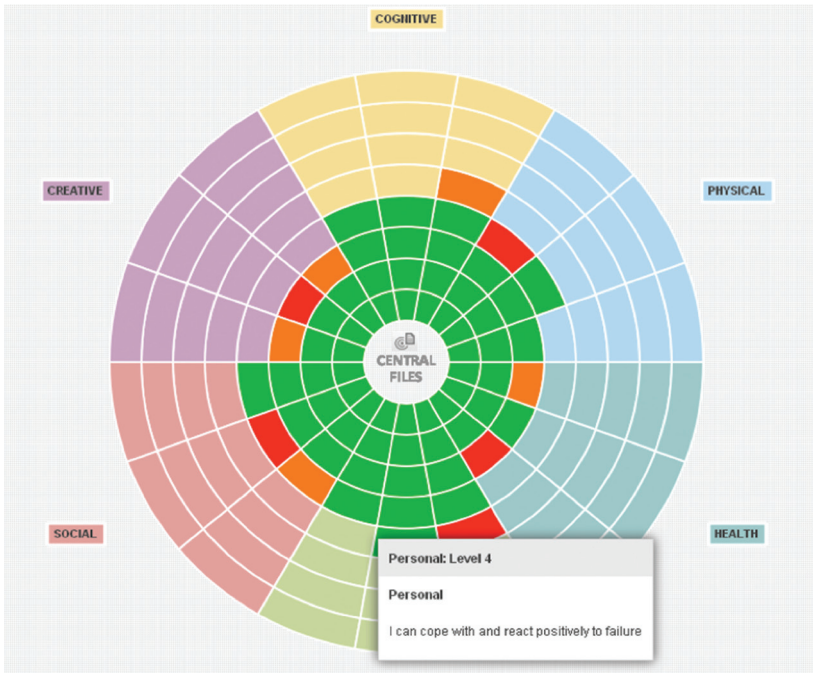


Figure 2. Create Development (2014) wheel report.



Conclusion

Assessment for learning should infuse all teaching and learning activities. In fact 'assessment really is the bridge between teaching and learning' (William 2013: 15). English school physical education departments have a clean slate to develop a new system based on the mastery of core thresholds of skill, knowledge and understanding, (Dweck 2000). They should have confidence in their ability to develop a 'learning without limits' approach to their teaching, while remembering 'teachers' own assessments of their pupils are highly reliable, because they are based on hundreds of hours of assessment' (William 2001: 19). Frapwell (2014) points out 'the purpose and aims of Physical Education have changed in the new National Curriculum', therefore 'what and how we measure must therefore also change, or be refocused. Assessment, recording and reporting must be fit for purpose. If not we miss the point and misguidedly attempt to transpose an old system onto new content and targets' (Frapwell 2014: 8).

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