Revival of KS3:
How the Dominance of 'Big Data' has Impacted on Pupil Experience.

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"And if we agree that purposeful progression exists, then you will see… that it's easy, and it's seductive, to assume that data is really knowledge. Or that information is, indeed, wisdom. Or that knowledge can exist without data. And how easy, and how effortlessly, one can parade and disguise itself as another. And how quickly we can forget that wisdom without knowledge, wisdom without any data, is just a hunch."

--Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 2019

Michel Rosen's poem, ['The Data Have Landed'](#), traces education's worrying progression from, at first, wanting data in order to track children's learning to, ultimately, seeing to it that 'the children became data'. This poem captures an aspect of my experience over the past ten years as an English teacher, literacy coordinator and head of department. I have been fortunate to have worked in a variety of excellent schools throughout my career – all of which wanted the best for their pupils. However, for the most part, my memory of inputting reams of data on SIMS, spreadsheets, and various reports involved an inordinate amount of time, was an administrative burden at the busiest of times and was often a form of triplication.

Data and algorithms were recently thrown into the spotlight during the 'Centre Assessment Grades' (CAGs) debacle and stirred some interesting debate. One of the positive stories of the lockdown has been the chance, now, to look at the bigger picture around data.

One size does not fit all – Framing the discussion from a pupil's perspective:

Let's take KS3 tracking data, for example. Tracking is predicated on the ETI notion that we can apply a one-size-fits-all solution to something as diverse and nuanced as education and subject curriculum. In reality, each department can independently determine what an assessment should look like, building in a huge range of variation despite the best efforts at quality assurance by senior management and middle leaders. The implicit acknowledgement that such a system is untenable has resulted in a further narrowing in which we have seen 'the core subjects' of English and Mathematics hollowed out by notions of 'data tracking' and 'drilling down' into the statistics, inevitably leading to the prioritisation of only that which can be easily measured. The detrimental impact this approach has on pupil learning is seen

across the full breadth of the curriculum as the pupils' experience of the joy of learning is dampened at best.

Add to this negative experience, the requirement for the very same pupils to set targets across a range of subjects. The arbitrary nature of the target-setting culture has created a nonsense of the idea of pupil agency in their own learning: how can we seriously expect children to focus on multiple unrelated targets across every subject, all of them demanding different things?

Even within subjects, the progression of targets is rendered meaningless when, from task to task, the required skill set may change: 'In your last assessment you scored 48%, so in your next assessment your target is to get 52%.' The next assessment may be in English, but it may be in a completely different aspect of the discipline requiring different skills.

Pupils comply and note targets in their diary, but they are frequently none the wiser as to what achieving that goal may look like. Of course, you will adjust your teaching and include strategies to support them and do your level best, as we all try to do, but in some ways this exposes the fallacy and disconnect between the collation of seemingly random data and classroom practice.

School leaders do their best to try to adapt and provide pupils with one-to-one time or to have additional support provided externally, but how effective and sustainable is this? The will is there but the system and timetabling can be difficult without an additional member of staff. We need a total rethink and an alternative curriculum pathway that is resourced.

We offer pathways at GCSE for the 'less able', yet we do nothing of the sort for KS3. Perhaps, if we began in KS3, then we would not have to narrow the pathways later and maybe we would not have the decline in MFL GCSE pupils?

This is where we need to start talking about progression and the 'Learning Journey', not the destination. KS3 should be about growth and building confidence and capacity. But, like homework, many parents judge the quality of the school in terms of assessment and reporting and we need to bring them along with us. Afterall, they too have come through the very same system, so it is familiar and secure – a warm bath for many. Our first task is to shift the narrative and include parents, pupils, and teachers.

The pass-fail culture and its trickle-down effect on KS3:

The pass-fail culture that dominates KS4 has made its way into psyche of teachers and, by osmosis, KS3 pupils. We are all guilty of digesting and distilling KS4 content and marking into the KS3 curriculum – and as teachers it would be a dereliction of duty not to do so as we know what is at stake for the majority of the children we teach. We have all referred to the importance of GCSE in our junior classes, but has this dominated the discourse for too long? What long-term damage are we doing to pupil experience, pupil voice and cultural capital? The lockdown experience provided me with an opportunity to look at KS3 and review our content as a department.

One area I was keen to review was assessment. After reading about the CAGs, GCSEs, and debates around the fast examination culture, I started reviewing our KS3 curriculum – and eventually this review became part of our Self-Evaluation. It became apparent that one of the biggest issues was how we mark our pupils' work in the department and how we reconciled it

with the wider school data systems, or 'aerial view.' It was a case of déjà vu over the course of a decade. I do not question the validity of using hard numbers and percentages, but I do question when and how we use it in relation to the child.

I therefore began the process with a complete refresh by reading the Levels of Progression documents on the CCEA website. I was pleasantly surprised and motivated by the fact that I discovered a whole raft of new documents that were much more refined and focused than the initial implementation. I would highly recommend the [interactive section](#).

Levels of Progression: The Beginning:

Whilst the intention for the use of levels was good, the delivery and implementation were frustrating and time consuming. Tasks had to be approved and were sometimes sent back for review – this was also framed in a turbulent climate where the profession was feeling undervalued and undermined; the website was not entirely user-friendly; and most importantly, dedicated time and training was not afforded. We did not know what this was supposed to look like and when you are in an English or Maths department, time is precious. Anything new needs to be 'oven ready', as one man would put it. The ingredients were certainly there but we needed time.

Adapting to Change: How Did We Use Levels of Progression?

Earlier in my career, I had the opportunity to work alongside a highly experienced colleague who was able to reconcile the Levels of Progression with SIMS and bring our department along at the same time. We each took a task and a year group and created our own rubrics that allowed for some agreement and standardising. This was further aided by the fact that our classes were streamed. This seemed to release us somewhat from the SIMS assessment straight jacket and at the same time allowed us to have meaningful conversations based on pupil exemplars, level descriptors and to show what progress looked like, and how pupils might achieve it. It was a reasonable compromise that created professional debate and discussion and so it was deemed a success, but I think we need to go further than reconciling.

Progression Levels should be used to allow for informed transition from primary to secondary; this would create informed parents, give greater confidence to pupils [and teachers] who are anxious about transition, and will remove the fear of pupils being lost in the system and reduce outliers.

It would also put literacy and numeracy at the forefront of school planning and give coordinators the clout they need to make real changes. Pupils should be treated with the same care and afforded the same rigour of handover that we provide for hospital patients. Finessed versions of the Levels could be used in the SIMS system across all schools.

KS3 should be a place of discovery, diversity, and fun as the Big Picture intended – not a snapshot of what could be. It is therefore vital that KS3 is given back its identity rather than making GCSE a five-year course. Again, Levels of Progression will not remove this, but they may address the concern that GCSE outcomes have dictated KS3 content and consequently, our approach to assessment. I know in my own context, a school with an outstanding pass rate, we still have a lot of what I call 'heavy lifting' with many pupils in GCSE. What if this began earlier? Perhaps the weight would be lighter for all involved and perhaps we could refine our resources and support the low achievers as well as the underachievers. The end

goal, of course, is equity with positive experiences with the right amount of struggle and motivation.

KS3 should be about progression, not performance:

It could be argued that grades and percentages are perpetuating a 'pass or fail culture' whilst simultaneously being used to demonstrate progression. We have tracking, cramming, and testing, often in a two-week period, to mimic GCSE. But how helpful is it that KS3 is associated with stress and anxiety to perform rather than to progress? The culture we should be perpetuating should be a reading culture, vocabulary expansion and a love for literature and language. Imagine if we had consistent use of Levels of Progression and PTE from KS2 to KS3 to support the awarding of CAGs? We could seamlessly chart the educational journey and develop, over time, this granulated data which would inform and guide practice. Then we could make system-wide changes on consistent evidence with pupils at the centre. We have embedded the child-centred approach to teaching and learning; the next step is to do it with assessment and data.

Could these suggestions help?

- Create a common portal or access to a KS2-KS3 data exchange for primary and secondary schools
- Compulsory parent awareness seminar or presentation on 'KS3: Progress above Performance'
- Compulsory whole-school departmental KS3 Standardisation day – with a focus on Literacy and Numeracy
- Levels of Progression on School Development Plan - full training provided by CCEA/EA or Coordinators – teacher and context-led
- Finessed Levels of Progression fully implemented for Maths and English as 'Tracking' – not a percentage or grade
- 'Elevate' curriculum for low and underachievers created by Literacy and Numeracy Coordinators
- A six-to-eight-week bespoke programme in small groups using PTE/PTM to select alongside recommendations from class teacher, SENCO and Coordinators
- All NQTs or RQTs trained using Levels of Progression – brought into schools for one or two years to support 'Elevate Programme' and strengthen expertise in Literacy and Numeracy
- Understanding Levels of Progression in Literacy and Numeracy as PRSD – How does it impact my subject?
- Pupil Progress Profile rather than a series of exam results on report – descriptors like SIMs Learning Ladders with modifications or focus on KS3 core skills.

And finally, now would be the time to take seriously the suggestions made recently in a [BBC interview](#) by that world-leading expert in education performance indicators, Professor John Hattie

1. Stop collecting numbers, start collecting teachers' judgements. Good schools have good growth, not necessarily good attainment.

2. We need a moratorium on what doesn't matter. Let's stop talking about new forms of schools, inspection and tests – let's instead start talking about teacher expertise.