AwL in a day’s work

For years we have been deluged in AfL and BfL so now let’s prepare for AwL – Assessing without Levels. The DfES states that the levels “system is complicated and difficult to understand” and “encourages teachers to focus on a pupil’s current level, rather than consider more broadly what the pupil can actually do”. This suggests that we have all been working to a flawed system for some time, although obviously levels were supposed to reflect what the pupil could actually do, so I’m not quite sure what this statement means; “more broadly” in what way? The level descriptors became so broad that it took half an hour for an inexperienced teacher to read about a level, let alone award one. They were rubbish – who marks anything out of 7? Few teachers even realise that in those early stages GCSEs were supposed to be marked using levels, 7 – 10 covering KS4. However, this still meant that, with 11 years of education you couldn’t fail but be stuck on one level for at least two years even if you were a Level 10 A* student in Year 11. The report continues,

“Schools will continue to benchmark their performance through statutory end of key stage assessments, including national curriculum tests.”

What statutory end of key stage assessments? They got rid of the KS3 English ones in 2009. For several years there has been no standardisation of KS3 levels – in fact, if your performance management, sorry, appraisal depended on the levels in your KS3 classes, you could make them up. No-one admits to this but, with the best will in the world, if your department doesn’t have time to moderate KS3, then the levels are, by default, invented because they are an individual’s interpretation of the criteria. Even if departments were diligent and committed enough to moderate some KS3 work, clusters of schools didn’t, meaning that a Level 6 in one school might be judged a Level 5 in others.

So, what are we all going to do? I have asked a couple of top people I know and their reaction is that no-one has time to think about it. As everything in teaching seems to revert to “how it was it was a few years ago”, why don’t we hop back 23 years to a time before levels existed? During my first year in teaching, I didn’t have to use levels. We gave the students an effort mark (excellent to not good enough - although outstanding to inadequate might be more apt these days) and a mark out of 10. They loved this because they understood it. We also gave them feedback which was real and used language that meant something to them, e.g. “You need to make this a bit longer, Tom.” I like the Ignite assessment criteria (indicating which expected year and stage they are at), which I would probably adopt for key assessments. We also wrote full end of year reports providing detailed and worthwhile personalised information which parents understood.

This still leaves a bit of an issue about how we “benchmark their performance through statutory end of key stage assessments”. Doubtless the government can come up with a quick test we all have to work towards at KS3. This would mean that the “curriculum freedoms” they claim to be “giving schools” would be taken away with the other hand. However, it could also provide a clear benchmark and clarify what we are working towards, something which has been lacking in schools too stretched to
think about tracking progress meticulously at KS3. Alternatively, schools could be given the time and the trust to create quality-assured assessment systems that suit their students, enabling them to build their confidence in and enjoyment of English prior to starting GCSE courses. What we do need urgently is useful, user-friendly feedback, which motivates pupils and enables parents to follow the plot.