INTRODUCTION

Teachers have many concerns about the use of assessment in music teaching and learning, and these have given rise to feelings of uncertainty. This Bulletin deals with some of the more common questions asked by teachers and, in the space available, tries to provide simple and straightforward answers.

Q1: What do I have to do?
The statutory requirement is that at KS1, KS2, and KS3 brief particulars of achievements in all subjects must be reported to parents during each year. In addition teacher assessment levels must be reported to parents at some point during the final year of Key Stage 3.

Q2: What are the best ways of assessing pupils’ work?
To answer that we need to be clear about the purposes of assessment. The two main purposes are to help with learning, and to provide information on what has been learned. These are normally labelled as formative and summative assessment respectively and are explored further below.

Q3: What is summative assessment?
In many ways summative purposes of assessment are the most widely understood in music education. Examples of summative purposes include:
- GCSE grades
- AS and A2 grades
- Associated Board Grade Exams
All of these are well-established means of summarising achievement – hence summative. We are used to the ‘shorthand’ saying “She’s a grade 6 Flute player”, or “He’s an A-star GCSE candidate” and we know, more-or-less, what this means. Because it takes place at the end of a learning episode or programme of study, summative assessment is also referred to as assessment of learning. It is often separated from teaching and learning, and tends to occur as a separate assessment activity. It often focuses on the product, the outcome of learning.

Q4: What is formative assessment?
Formative assessment, also known as assessment for learning (AfL), is well-known to teachers from its appearance in national strategies, and from its description in the ‘Black Box’ publications by the Assessment Reform Group. Its main purpose is to help pupils themselves understand what they need to do next in order to improve. It entails a dialogue with pupils, giving feedback which is personalised, so that pupils know what steps they need to take next and what a quality outcome will look like in the topic they are working on. It focuses on the process of learning. It is built into teaching and learning, and is an integral part of classroom work.

Q5: Is it possible to teach music without formative assessment?
Good AfL practice has always been part of professional practice in music, and interestingly it was a music lesson which was chosen to exemplify formative assessment in the original DfES guidance (DfES, 2002, 2004).

Q6: Are summative and formative assessments totally different then?
Not necessarily! “…using the terms ‘formative assessment’ and ‘summative assessment’ can give the impression that these are different kinds of assessment or are linked to different methods of gathering evidence. This is not the case; what matters is how the evidence is used” (Harlen, 2006, p104). One of the implications of this is that a type of assessment known as the formative use of summative assessment is also commonly found in the music lesson. This is where a summative grade, mark, or level is given, but since this is not the final stage in the learning process the teacher then discusses with the pupil what they need to do in order to improve on their mark in future.

The different purposes of formative and summative assessment can be represented diagrammatically:

This diagram shows the differences between formative and summative assessment in terms of their outlook too. Summative assessment looks back on achievement, and summarises it, whereas formative assessment looks forward to achievement in the future, and helps pupils know what steps they need to take next in their learning. The formative use of summative assessment builds on marks and grades given, and entails entering into a dialogue with pupils about why they got the result they did, and what they need to do in forthcoming work in order to improve their results.
Q7: Are there any problems associated with using summative assessment?
Some teachers have found that summative grades can act as a disincentive to progress for both low and high achieving pupils, and in order to counter this they have introduced a system known as comment only marking. In this way of assessing summative grades are still given to pieces of work, but these are only noted by the teacher. Feedback to the pupils takes the form of comments upon their work, and suggestions as to what to do. The rationale behind this is that research has shown that when grades and comments are both given to a piece of work, the comments are often ignored, and only the grades looked at. Pupils scoring a string of low grades become disenfranchised from the process, and those who score highly assume they will continue to do so, often without a clear grasp of why.

Q8: I always have an assessment lesson at the end of a unit of work; what am I actually assessing?
AFL is built into teaching and learning, so to have a separate assessment lesson normally involves a summative assessment of some kind. With the prioritising of high-stakes assessment, talking with pupils and making suggestions about what to do to improve does not ‘feel like’ assessment, as one teacher put it. It is simply seen as part of the normal professional role. So to some extent understanding of AFL has become confused, and what has happened as a result is that music teachers have changed the way they think about assessment. They have moved away from AFL as being integral to teaching and learning and changed “…their own on-going assessment into a series of ‘mini’ assessments each of which is essentially summative in character” (Harlen and James, 1997, p365).

So what tends to happen in an assessment lesson is that the product is assessed, and the process which has been undertaken to arrive at the product is largely ignored. This can have ramifications, for instance if composing is assessed in this way, it might be that it is the performance of the composition which is being assessed rather than the process of composing, in other words a totally different aspect of musical learning!

Q9: What is assessment data, and what should I do with it?
The word ‘data’ tends to conjure up images of white-coated scientists dealing with calculations. In assessment terms this is not the case. True, assessment data can be statistical, as in GCSE grades, for example, but can also take the form of textual descriptions, of comments made by the teacher in feedback to pupils, and of audio and video recordings of pupils’ work. What you should do with it depends on the purpose. One of the main reasons for assessing is to improve learning, and as the old saying goes, you don’t fatten the pig by weighing it daily! To use the jargon, music teachers should not be afraid of saying that assessment data in music are essentially qualitative in nature, rather than quantitative.

However, it is possible for qualitative assessment information to lead to quantitative numerical data. This can be done by ascribing a numerical grade, for example about the quality of imagination in a piece of composing work, where the grade acts as a shorthand for the text of the qualitative statement. Doing this can prove useful in tracking trends in pupil performance over time.

Q10: What is assessment evidence?
As we have seen in Q6, assessment evidence can take many forms. Whilst music teachers may not have ‘big’ mark books, they will have many hours of audio recordings of pupils’ work. This is evidence, and so are commentaries pupils have written on their own compositions, and as part of peer and self-assessment. Evidence in music is just as (if not more) likely to be musical, rather than statistical.

Q11: What is the meaning of the National Curriculum levels?
The National Curriculum levels are designed to provide information at the end of each key stage. What is not clear from the level statements themselves is that it is the first sentence of each which is key to achievement at that level. The remainder of the level statement is an exemplification and expansion of what characterises this achievement. The level statements themselves are designed to show a ‘best-fit’ approach. Pupils will often demonstrate achievement across a range of levels; the teacher needs to take this into account and then decide how the jigsaw of pupil achievement can best be accorded a level (see ‘National Curriculum in Action’ website for exemplification of this).

Q12: Should I try to ‘level’ individual pieces of work?
Not according to the National Curriculum! “… level descriptions are not designed to be used to ‘level’ individual pieces of work” (NC in Action). So although teachers and pupils are keen to know what progress is being made, giving every piece a level runs counter to how levels were intended to be used. ‘Levelling’ every piece of work is, in fact, summative assessment, and does not provide the pupils with clues as to what to do to improve. Another problem in music is that using levels in this way inevitably results in some distortions. For example, a performing project might only allow limited opportunities for composing which means that pupils can’t produce compositions that meet the requirements for a high level. In effect, the choice of project has limited the grade available to the student.

Q13: What are sub-levels?
Sub-levels do not exist in the National Curriculum. However, according to OFSTED, “In some cases, departments find it helpful to sub-divide levels, or to provide sub-level descriptors for assessing work in Years 7 and 8” (OFSTED, 2003, p5). This can be done to show progress between years. But what do sub-levels show? As they do not officially exist, this varies. Some schools use them to show ‘working towards-working at-safe’, others, similarly, ‘low-middle-high’. These are all systems devised by individual teachers or schools and therefore have nothing official (or transferable) about them.

Q14: I have re-written the levels (and sub-levels) into pupil-speak. Is this a good idea?
Anything which helps pupils know what they need to do to improve is helpful. The language of the levels in their original form can be a barrier to some pupils, and so many teachers have found (or it has been required of them) that re-writing the levels into pupil-friendly language has been of benefit. However, this can be a problem when the teacher then puts aside the original copy of the level statements, and only works from
the re-written ones. This can cause the finer nuances of the statements to be lost, especially as it is the first sentence of the levels which is designed to codify holistically the understanding shown by pupils over the full range of inter-related activities of the Music National Curriculum.

For an example, let us consider the case of a group of pupils working on a ‘spooky’ composing project at KS3. The pupils have worked together in groups, have composed their piece of music, and have had some sort of group sharing and assessment ‘event’ at the end of the project. The teacher has re-written the National Curriculum levels specifically for this project like this:

- Level 3: Has some feeling of scariness about the music. Pupils are not always together in their performance.
- Level 4: Has a number of aspects of scariness about the music. Pupils are mostly together in their performance.
- Level 5: Has many aspects of being spooky. Pupils are together in their performance.
- Level 6: Music is very scary. Pupils are always together in their performance.

What this does is to move a long way away from the original level statements, and insert some totally different requirements which do not take into account the holistic nature of the National Curriculum for music, based on the inter-related activities of performing, composing, and listening. Using criteria-based assessment is fine, and is usually a good thing to do in the classroom. Linking assessment to learning outcomes is also a logical step to take. The danger comes with assuming that over-simplified assessment equates directly with National Curriculum levels. Whilst these re-written levels may be useful for a rough-and-ready teacher assessment for ongoing purposes, they are not the same as best-fit judgements based on a range of evidence over time.

Q15: My school insists that I should provide all sorts of data, such as half-termed levels. Why is this?
Schools are under pressure to show progress. To do this they need statistical data. To make comparisons they need data from individual subjects and this poses a problem in music. In maths, for example, a KS3 class might have five lessons a week, whereas they will have only one of music. In a five-week half term the maths class will have had twenty-five lessons, the music class five. Showing statistically valid progression after five lessons is problematic; being expected to do so by assessment managers for data analysis purposes misunderstands the nature of development. Music teachers worried by this requirement should talk to the school’s assessment manager and explain the problems.

It is also important to note that the QCA says that “A range of experiences is essential for attainment at all levels. Understanding of a variety of genres, styles and traditions is also essential for attainment especially above level 4” (NC in Action). Since many units of work focus on a single genre, style, or tradition, it is problematic to award a level for a single piece of work.

Q16: How then can levels, sub-levels, and grades, be used to show progress?
Showing progression over time is helpful to the school, but what matters to the pupils is formative assessment, personalising for them what they need to do to improve. Being a statistic does not do this. What is needed is a mixed system where the purposes of assessment are tailored to suit the uses to which they are put. Thus a teacher will want to build in AfL to their teaching to ensure that progression takes place, and then show progression by devising suitable summative assessments at key points in the learning year. Levels and sub-levels by themselves might not show progress in a meaningful way over short time-scales whereas a mixture of summative assessments, teacher assessments of work in progress and AfL judgements are more likely to. Over time these can build up into an indicator of progress. It may well be that an individual’s path is non-linear; sometimes, as we know, a pupil may ‘coast’ for a while, at other times they will ‘put on a spurt’. Pupils make progress at different rates and we cannot expect a straight-line improvement graph from all pupils all the time.

Q17: How else can I show progress?
Many music teachers have provided individual grade criteria, based on learning outcomes (not necessarily NC levels), for specific units of work. In these cases it is the criteria statements which are important, the grade resulting from them being a shorthand pointer to achievement.

A related matter is that of auditing achievement. In Q14 we discussed rewritten NC levels for a ‘spooky’ composing project. Let us consider this in terms of assessment purposes and uses in order to think about helping pupils to progress. During the assessed ‘spooky’ performances the teacher, and possibly the pupils too, allocate a level grade to each performance. So at the end of this lesson some pupils’ work will be level 3, some level 4, and so on. These are summative assessments. What this assessment information does not do is detail how the pupils whose work is level 3 can improve to get a level 4. The only way they can do this is to try to infer it from the assessment criteria, in other words to be more scary, and more together. For the pupils concerned the question will be ‘how do we do this?’ and summative assessment of this sort does not give them this information. If the teacher then tells the pupils with a level 3 that their target is to get a level 4 next time, the question will be ‘how?’ This is not the fault of re-written levels, but of the use to which the assessment is being put. In other words the teacher will want to help the pupils progress by explaining what they need to do to get better; this will be formative assessment.

The auditing of the performances (the summative assessment alone) is unlikely to do this.

What is more likely to be helpful in showing progress is the use of clear learning criteria applied within lessons, summative assessment data from end of unit assessments which are marked against criteria specific to that unit (ie not NC levels), and knowledge of a wide range of pupil achievement both in and beyond the classroom.

Q18: Why am I finding assessment more difficult than my English teacher colleagues?
As we saw with the maths example above, some subjects have a lot more curriculum time than music, and so progression is easier to detect. Alongside many of our colleagues we have the problem of the process/product dichotomy, and we need to be clear about which we are assessing. Work in music takes place in sound, and over time. This is difficult to capture except by using
Questions and Answers

Assessment in Music Education

Q19: What are target grades, and how useful are they?
Target grades are often produced by statistical computer software packages, and have no basis in the work of an individual pupil. The statistics work in general terms, whereas teachers know their pupils. And although there is a robust mechanism in place for the core subjects it is statistically somewhat less robust for subjects such as music since the data often comes from attainment in the core subjects.

Target grades can also be produced by extrapolating from a pupil’s past progress in a specific subject. In terms of achievement in music this is probably more helpful, as it is based on that named pupil’s past work. It is, however, only a statistical forecast, and cannot take account of an individual’s future work. Target grades are useful if they have meaning for the teacher and the pupil, but, especially in the case of music, may have less validity if they are based on statistical extrapolation from the general population’s performance in maths and English. Target grades written by the teacher in consultation with the pupil are the most useful of all, as then they have been specifically personalised. However, music teachers may find it helpful to look at assessment data from core subjects to see how pupils are doing elsewhere.

Q20: What is baseline assessment?
Baseline assessment is that which is done at the beginning of a programme of study, often at the start of a key stage. At present there is no reliable mechanism for the baseline testing of pupils in music at the beginning of a key stage, and so teachers often produce their own data based on achievement in a range of areas over the first term.

Q21: How can I assess an individual pupil in a class of 30?
Referring to Qs 3 and 4, the teacher can be expected to be formatively assessing pupils all the time as an integral part of teaching and learning. This will build up over time into a picture of that pupil’s progress. Summative assessments of pupils’ work can be made at key points during the year, and documentation kept of evidence as to how each individual pupil is doing.

Q22: Will OfSTED expect me to use any particular system for assessment?
No! “An inspection team will not therefore expect or require a particular way of recording and tracking progression within a school. However, it will want to be able to come to a judgement about the effectiveness of the assessment, recording and tracking systems that a school has in place and about the pupils’ progress” (AAIA, 2007, p.2). OISTED will expect pupils to be clear about what they need to do to improve their work, and this will result from sharing assessment information with the pupils.

Q23: Will there be official recognition for the approaches adopted here?
QCA is currently developing the exemplification of standards in all subjects at KS3 (including music) for the new secondary National Curriculum. It is hoped this will also provide an alternative to the over-emphasis on levels and sub-levels, and is expected to be promoted nationally during 2009/2010.

REFERENCES
Assessment Reform Group (1999) Assessment for learning - Beyond the black box, Cambridge, University of Cambridge School of Education.
NC in Action website URL www.ncaction.org.uk/subjects/music/targets.htm (Accessed 03/08)

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