Secondary
National Strategy
for school improvement

Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

Monitoring Pupils' Progress in English at key stage 3

Project report:
Summary and teaching implications

December 2005

1. Introduction

In September 2003 the Monitoring Pupils' Progress (MPP) project was set up to pilot structured approaches to support and develop teacher assessment of English within key stage 3. The project was funded by the DfES and managed jointly between autumn 2003 and summer 2005 by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Secondary National Strategy for school improvement. In 2006, the Strategy will be making the resources developed by the project available to schools, consultants and local authorities. The materials have been renamed and packaged together as a toolkit for *Assessing Pupils' Progress in English at key stage 3*.

This booklet provides a summary for teachers of the findings from the MPP project. A full report is available on DfES 1789-2005CDO-EN, that outlines the approach to assessment developed by the project between September 2003 and August 2005 and presents the findings of both qualitative and quantitative evaluations (to obtain a copy please e-mail: english@qca.org.uk).

The MPP project had a set of specific aims:

- to improve the quality, regularity and reliability of teacher assessment throughout key stage 3 through the use of a structured approach to assessment

- to provide formative and diagnostic information about pupils' progress to support Assessment for Learning (AfL)

- to establish whether indicators of national progress could be derived during the key stage from teacher assessment

- to find manageable and effective ways to assess ongoing work.

The structure of the project was based upon close collaboration with a group of schools which trialled the developing materials and processes with support from their local authorities (LAs). Schools provided feedback at all stages of the project.

Included in the scope of the project were the development of guidance and materials to support a model of assessment as well as extensive trialling of the model in 91 schools spread across 15 local authorities. Participating schools were asked to trial the approach with 2 teachers and up to 3 classes of pupils in years 7, 8 and 9. An independent evaluation and collection of assessment outcomes data allowed the effectiveness and manageability of the MPP assessments to be investigated.

1.1 Ongoing assessment

Within MPP, the method of assessment of ongoing work in reading and writing helps teachers to identify strengths and weaknesses for individual pupils and across groups of pupils, in accordance with key principles of assessment for learning. The system is based on the assessment focuses which now underpin all English national curriculum test mark schemes at all key stages.

1.2 Reading and writing tasks

A 'bank' of optional reading and writing tasks has been developed which offer teachers a choice of additional assessment opportunities designed to provide further insight into specific skills or curriculum areas. This collection is intended to act as a supportive resource for teacher assessment, allowing teachers to select suitable tasks to use at times which fit in with their schemes of work. Their purpose is to add to their understanding of what their pupils have achieved.

1.3 Diagnostic outcomes

MPP assessments are unique in offering outcomes which are diagnostic, giving precise and detailed information about strengths and weaknesses in relation to specific assessment focuses, and, at the same time, providing a summative level judgement. Participating teachers recognised the power of the approach and valued the insights it offered into their pupils' skills in reading and writing.

Analysis of the level judgements made by teachers during the project showed that these were broadly in line with level outcomes for national curriculum tests for the pupils. Where there was a difference in the two outcomes for individual pupils, the teachers' level judgements tended to be higher than test outcomes.

1.4 Insights in to the teaching of reading and writing

Using this structured approach to assessment offered very important insights into the teaching of reading and writing within key stage 3 across a substantial group of schools. There was recognition that in many cases, project schools were not overtly teaching reading skills in the early part of key stage 3. Participation in the project resulted in schools reviewing and often changing their planning for both teaching and assessment.

Schools and LAs in the project recognised that MPP could help to:

- inform teaching, planning and work set
- facilitate conversations with pupils about progress and learning targets
- inform transition programmes
- identify pupils needing special support
- improve marking and reporting.

1.5 Lessons learnt from the pilot

The following were the key lessons learnt from the pilot:

- in order to be effective assessments needs to be coordinated across whole departments. Schemes of work, teaching and work set all need to ensure full coverage of the objectives in the Framework for teaching English and to reflect the full range of assessment focuses
- teachers need to be clear about the rationale for MPP assessments; to be familiar with the assessment focuses (AFs) and to appreciate what information the use of MPP can deliver
- schools and local authorities will need to consider how to support the introduction of Assessing Pupils' Progress (the revised name for the MPP project) so that it becomes an integral part of the work of English departments
- nationally, consideration needs to be given to appropriate means of establishing, embedding and maintaining consistent standards.

2. Key features of the MPP approach

In MPP, a new and unique model of structured teacher assessment was developed. It offers the potential for precise understanding of the development of reading and writing skills within the key stage, rather than providing an 'end of stage' outcome. The specific and detailed nature of the assessment outcomes allows teachers to identify priorities for teaching and learning and has the capacity to help them ensure that pupils' make progress within the key stage. The assessment model is based on ordinary classroom activities; teachers can gather evidence to support ongoing assessment from a range of different types of pupil work and the optional assessment tasks also take the form of 'ordinary lessons'. The quality of the assessment judgements is supported by the use of a handbook and standards are exemplified by a collection of exemplar work.

All materials use the assessment focuses (AFs) for reading and writing which are based upon national curriculum level descriptors and which underpin all English national curriculum tests and mark schemes from key stage 1 to key stage 3. The assessment focuses for both reading and writing describe identifiable elements of the complex skills of reading and writing. Considering each element separately enables more precise assessment and leads to improved understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each pupil. The full set of assessment focuses for reading and writing are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Assessment focuses

Reading	
AF1	Use a range of strategies, including accurate decoding of text, to read for meaning
AF2	Understand, describe, select or retrieve information, events or ideas from texts and use quotation and reference to text
AF3	Deduce, infer or interpret information, events or ideas from texts
AF4	Identify and comment on the structure and organisation of texts, including grammatical and presentational features at text level
AF5	Explain and comment on writers' use of language, including grammatical and literary features at word and sentence level
AF6	Identify and comment on writers' purposes and viewpoints, and the overall effect of the text on the reader
AF7	Relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts and literary traditions

Writing	
AF1	Write imaginative, interesting and thoughtful texts
AF2	Produce texts which are appropriate to task, reader and purpose
AF3	Organise and present whole texts effectively, sequencing and structuring information, ideas and events
AF4	Construct paragraphs and use cohesion within and between paragraphs
AF5	Vary sentences for clarity, purpose and effect
AF6	Write with technical accuracy of syntax and punctuation in phrases, clauses and sentences
AF7	Select appropriate and effective vocabulary
AF8	Use correct spelling

Two types of assessment materials have been developed:

- a set of assessment guidelines for use by teachers at any time during key stage 3 to make assessments of a collection of pupils' ongoing work

- a suite of assessment tasks, for use as required, to focus either on particular aspects of work in reading and writing or with individual pupils. These tasks are designed for use within a normal classroom context (not under 'test' conditions) and include lesson plans as well as marking guidelines similar in structure and design to the assessment guidelines for ongoing work.

The materials are designed to provide two outcomes for teachers:

- detailed diagnostic information on strengths and areas for improvement to inform teaching and learning

- a national curriculum level judgement for either ongoing work or for the task.

A handbook to describe the MPP approach to teacher assessment and a substantial collection of exemplar work to illustrate standards of reading and writing within key stage 3 were also developed.

3. Findings from the pilot

The project has been ambitious in scale and has involved several strands of work. The approach has been modified over the two years, both to incorporate an extension to the number of year groups and levels covered and in response to feedback from schools and local authorities. Throughout, the basic approach has been to combine development of assessment materials by a team drawn from QCA and the Secondary National Strategy with piloting of these materials by a group of project schools.

The materials were developed in stages by a core project team. They were trialled and revised before being piloted by project schools in each term of the two years. Schools submitted the outcomes from their assessments for quantitative analysis, which also included results from national curriculum tests for project pupils.

A team of markers worked throughout the lifetime of the project to carry out independent assessments of the work produced by participating pupils. This independent marking was intended to provide insight into the consistency and reliability of assessment outcomes which had been arrived at by different people using the same assessment tools, applied to the same work.

Each stage of the project was the subject of independent evaluation through which extensive feedback from users was passed to the project team to inform preparation for subsequent cycles. In this way the materials and approach to assessment could undergo continuous improvement within the life of the project.

The work of the project was overseen by a steering group made up of key stakeholders which met on a monthly basis. Towards the end of the project, additional work was undertaken to gather views on the potential for future use of the MPP assessment model.

3.1 Evidence to support level judgements

A key feature of the MPP approach is that the sources of evidence on which level judgements are based are made very clear and transparent to pupils, to other teachers at points of transition, and where relevant to parents. A weakness in existing systems of teacher assessment is that it is often hard to know what exactly has led to a particular judgement, which in turn makes it harder to be precise about areas for improvement. MPP has the potential to show the basis upon which judgements have been made.

Teachers in the project were able to draw on the outcomes from the two different assessment types (ongoing and task) in MPP in order to derive a level judgement which they had confidence in. There was evidence of an increasing willingness to take account of the outcomes from the assessment tasks over the course of the project as their quality improved.

3.2 Comparability of assessment outcomes

Across the different year groups and tests used, there was a reasonable measure of agreement between the outcome from tests and assessment of ongoing work. The best agreement was between teacher assessment in Year 9 at the end of the first year of the project and the end of key stage 3 test results for those pupils. Overall, there was a marked tendency for teacher judgements to be higher than the levels achieved on the tests. There may be a number of reasons for this, including the possibility that teachers are drawing on evidence of attainment which cannot be demonstrated through testing. However, this analysis highlights the importance of ensuring that teacher judgements are made with a clear understanding of the characteristics of performance at any given level and the need to embed standardisation and moderation as part of the model of teacher assessment.

3.3 The importance of moderation

Well-conducted moderation will be crucial in supporting the use of MPP in schools. It takes time to organise and schools found this difficult when the activity did not have any particular priority within the school. Where LAs were involved in organising sessions this led to a majority of schools taking part but some headteachers would not allow staff to attend these sessions. In any further implementation, systems of internal and external moderation will need to be laid down. These need not be exactly the same for each school or LA but all must meet some specified 'bottom line' requirements.

4. Tracking progress through key stage 3

There is evidence from the project that MPP supports tracking of progress through key stage 3 both formatively, allowing teachers to see how their pupils' skills in specific aspects of reading and writing as identified by the assessment focuses are developing, and summatively, providing teachers with a means of deriving national curriculum levels based on a range of evidence within key stage 3.

4.1 The potential of the approach

At the end of the two years of the project there was general agreement from participants that the MPP approach has the potential to track pupils' progress with a degree of precision that was not possible via their current systems. It was widely acknowledged that MPP offers a framework for common understanding of exactly what is required of pupils to enable them to improve their reading and writing, and that this information can be shared by teachers in a department, with the pupils themselves and with their parents.

4. 2 Profiles of pupil attainment

Teachers particularly welcomed MPP's ability to show profiles of attainment across the different AFs, and to reveal where a pupil had made progress, even though this did not amount to a change of overall level. MPP confirmed their observations that individual pupils' progress is generally uneven across the range of skills, but also allowed them to recognise the implications of this in relation to teaching and planning as well as to assessment. There was a clear view that the strength of MPP lay in its ability to be used for diagnostic assessment and for monitoring progress and that it could make target setting more precise for individuals and for groups.

However there was little direct qualitative evidence that schools in the project had been able to use it in this way systematically within the project. There was report of its use with a group of struggling Year 9 pupils, which showed they had made progress in certain aspects, but no claim was made that this was faster or more focused as a result of using MPP. Pupils who had been explicitly taught to extend their range of text connectives and to be aware of internal cohesion in their writing after one assessment point were judged to have improved in these areas next time round, though this was not reported in terms of increased scores in AFs3 or 4. A head of department judged that MPP pupils were *"better prepared for the SATs"* than other pupils, though it is not known if this was borne out by results. Some teachers reported that MPP had revealed that some Year 7 pupils showed improvement in writing independently from December 2003 to March 2004, whilst others had tended to regress, especially in certain aspects of technical accuracy (AFs 6 and 8).

4.3 Supporting progress

Teachers referred to learning useful lessons they could feed into planning and teaching that should support more pupils to progress in certain areas, and perhaps more quickly. These tended to relate to omissions in coverage that MPP revealed, but also sometimes to limitations in teaching approaches and expectations. Examples included:

- recognition that sentence structure was not as explicitly taught as it might be
- Year 7 writing that teachers had regarded as being 'independent' did not fulfil the MPP criteria for independence;
- coverage of reading was dominated by evidence of AFs 2 and 3 but often not much else, especially in years 7 and 8;
- that whilst pupils in abler groups had been taught to consider aspects of reading related to AFs 4 and 6, those in lower sets had not, as teachers assumed this would be too hard for them.

4.4 Tracking progress

Schools in the project were not asked explicitly to track progress of pupils from one assessment to the next. The results of the central data analysis were not shared with schools. If schools wished to review the progress of their project pupils from one point to the next they had to make the comparisons themselves. The impression gained from feedback was that many schools did not attempt this in the first year. In the second year, some schools reported filing pupils' assessment sheets from successive rounds in their work folders and using them to set individual targets related to the AFs. Some schools have developed 'pupil friendly' versions of the assessment focuses and have reported that these have helped them discuss areas for improvement with pupils in a more directed way than before.

4.5 Knowing what pupils can do

Overall, at the end of the first year it appeared that using MPP had considerably increased teachers' knowledge and understanding of what their pupils could do well and less well. The sample group in the first year was pupils at the 3-4 and 4-5 level boundaries in years 7 and 9, and teachers observed that these were the pupils who often struggled and who tended to avoid reading and writing whenever they could. However, there was also some evidence that in the case of some pupils, MPP had showed they were capable of more than teachers had realised or had expected of them.

4.6 Evolving patterns of progress

All the evidence from the qualitative evaluation suggests that the introduction of MPP should not be expected to lead to speedy improvements in pupil achievement, as teachers will first of all need to internalise new concepts and new ways of doing things. However, using MPP will show much more about those patterns of progress and what pupils in this age group tend to find easier and harder to improve. If teachers incorporate this knowledge into planning and teaching, this is what should lead to improvements in pupils' achievements over time.

5. Insights from MPP into teaching and learning

This was a project whose starting point was the development of an approach to teacher assessment including assessment for learning, but its most striking and unanticipated initial effect has been to highlight issues relating to the teaching of reading and writing within key stage 3. These issues have become obvious to teachers because gaps and weaknesses revealed by using the MPP approach have identified mismatches between their assessment approaches, and their planning and teaching. These have been the issues that many teachers have commented on as needing attention to enable the full power of MPP to be realised in terms of improved achievement. Their comments and concerns have been borne out by the analysis of assessment outcomes.

5.1 The quality and extent of ongoing work

One of the first issues to arise concerned the nature of ongoing work that pupils undertake in key stage 3. The assessment focus approach is predicated on the existence of a range of work that can be assessed using the guidelines. Initial guidance in the handbook defined such work as 'independent' and producing some 'memorable outcome'. In the evaluation at the end of the project teachers judged that the most important factor that determined the workability of this assessment process was the type of work that had been set.

From the first round of assessment it was evident that the quality and extent of ongoing work was very variable, particularly work that provided evidence of the AFs for reading. This applied across a range of schools and was not simply related to a school's intake. The situation with reading was particularly marked. Many schools reported in the first evaluation that doing the assessments of ongoing work had revealed that they paid insufficient attention to assessing reading and often to teaching it as well.

The project also revealed that much of the reading that pupils do at key stage 3 tends to lead to work that produces evidence of AFs 2 and 3, (understand, select and retrieve information and deduce, infer or interpret information), but not necessarily to AFs 4, 5 and 6 which deal with the structure and organisation of texts, with language and writers' purposes and viewpoints and overall effect on the reader. The most commonly reported type of work for reading was comprehension questions that are unlikely to go beyond evidencing AFs 2 and 3. Visiting markers reported that the key to robust evidence of reading AFs lay in both the quality of texts chosen and the type and range of work set on them.

5.2 Analysis of project data

Analysis of achievement across the assessment focuses for reading in Year 7 and also comparison of the extent to which there was lack of evidence for each AF, reinforces the comments of teachers from the evaluation. This type of data are shown in Chart 1 and Table 2.

Chart 1: Year 7 levels across AFs December 2004

Year 7 Assessment focuses

	Level 5
	Level 4
	Level 3
	Below 3

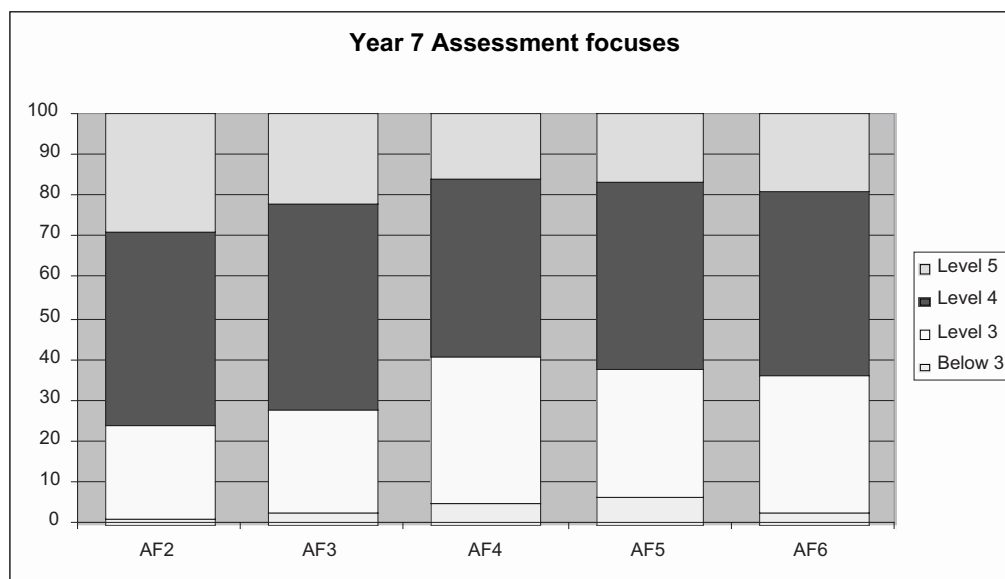(Chart showing stacked bars for AF2, AF3, AF4, AF5, AF6 with y-axis from 0 to 100)

Chart 1 shows that performance in AFs 2 and 3 was much better than in AFs 4 and 5 in year 7 reading. This pattern was replicated in other years.

Table 2: Insufficient evidence year 7 December 2003 & March 2004

			No. and % of pupils with 'Insufficient Evidence' on each assessment focus							
			AF1	AF2	AF3	AF4	AF5	AF6	AF7	AF8
Reading	Dec	No.	-	92	84	217	192	184	-	-
		%	-	*15*	*14*	*35*	*31*	*30*	-	-
	Mar	No.	-	43	56	122	118	105	-	-
		%	-	*5*	*7*	*15*	*14*	*13*	-	-
Writing	Dec	No.	20	17	18	25	8	7	8	19
		%	*3*	*3*	*3*	*4*	*1*	*1*	*1*	*3*
	Mar	No.	17	17	19	29	13	14	14	12
		%	*2*	*2*	*2*	*4*	*2*	*2*	*2*	*1*

Table 2 shows that in both the assessment rounds, pupils were twice as likely to lack evidence of achievement in AFs 4, 5 and 6 for reading than they were for AFs 2 and 3. There was no evidence of a similar shortage of evidence in any of the writing AFs.

With hindsight this situation might have been anticipated. Traditionally in secondary school English, reading has not been approached as the integration of different but identifiable skills. Until 2003 national curriculum assessment of reading and writing was intertwined and pupils did not receive separate levels for them. In the new tests, the reading papers now have questions linked to AFs but this change has generally not been well understood by teachers and it was too soon for it to have had much impact on the teaching of reading at the start of the project. Whatever else is an outcome of this project, it has alerted schools to the need to pay more attention to reading and to a wider range of reading skills. Schools have recognised that to get the most out of the assessment of ongoing work, they first need to ensure that they plan for and teach the full range of objectives related to reading AFs across the ability range.

"We've found we had huge gaps in our planning for reading and we need now to amend our schemes of work so that we teach all the areas of the reading AFs from year 7 onwards".

Whilst there was no attempt at the start of the project to identify a group of schools that was in any way a 'nationally representative sample', there was reasonable evidence from the project data analysis that they were by no means 'untypical' of schools generally. It is therefore reasonable to assume that these findings from the project schools are likely to be a reflection of the situation in many schools within key stage 3.

5.3 Oral evidence

Much evidence of response to reading takes place via discussion and other forms of oral work and is not necessarily recorded. Teachers pointed out that pupils who are not be able to express their understanding very well in writing may make insightful spoken comments on a text. The project team provided further guidance in the second year indicating that teachers would need to make a brief record of such ephemeral outcomes so as to remember to take them into account when assessing progress. The final exemplification materials also include work related to use of oral evidence in reading. Project teachers generally have not focused on trying to set up systems to capture oral evidence yet, but it is important that oral responses can be taken account of, and also recorded in some way.

5.4 Writing

Ongoing work that evidenced AFs for writing was generally more plentiful though again variable in amount, range and challenge. Teachers reported less difficulty in finding evidence across the range of AFs than for reading. There were basic requirements for the evidence for writing to be suitable for scrutiny by the assessment guidelines. The most important was its degree of independence. It appeared that the writing of weaker pupils in particular was sometimes so heavily scaffolded that it could not yield much evidence of what they could do, especially for text level structure. If pupils had copied from the board or from notes or produced near identical work, this was not much use for assessment purposes.

Writing also needs to be of sufficient substance to support some development and expansion, to enable judgements to be made at text, sentence and word level. Skimpy work often did not provide enough evidence of AFs 1, 2 or 3. Teachers identified that they needed to ensure that the work they set for pupils enabled them to demonstrate what they can do. For example, a teacher reported their frustrations with pupils who did not paragraph when this was needed and so limited what could be evidenced for AF4 before establishing whether they had provided appropriate opportunities to do so. Unlike for reading there was no consistent pattern to the AFs that proved hard to evidence. Different AFs were cited at different points in the year and for different year groups, sometimes explained by the focus of activities for that term. Some teachers reported that assessment became easier over time, especially as pupils learnt to sustain their writing and be more independent. After applying the guidelines some schools concluded that they had been 'spoon feeding' their year 7 pupils and needed to give them more scope to develop their writing.

5.5 Focus of ongoing work

Shortcomings in ongoing work often related to the nature of schools' curriculum planning and schemes of work and assignments. These often did not differentiate between reading and writing in terms of focus or outcomes. Many project schools have consistently reported the need to revise schemes of work and link them more closely to the AFs. Some have already done this but others have yet to do so. The project has shown that it cannot be assumed that a school's planning will coincide with the MPP assessment system from the outset.

6. Areas for future development

The MPP pilot identified a number of areas where schools and local authorities requested further guidance and support. QCA and the Secondary National Strategy are undertaking small research projects to develop materials in the following areas:

- use of the MPP approach for whole cohorts
- oral evidence for reading
- level 7 guidelines
- further investigation of models to support standardisation and internal and external moderation.