



Finding a fairer way of testing our least confident readers

School name:	Witney Community Primary School	School type:	Community Primary
Region:	Oxfordshire	Ofsted rating:	Good (2013)
Area type:	Town	Pupil premium %:	36%
Number of pupils:	203	EAL %:	4%

Why Progress & Assess English? Frustrated with 'one-size fits all' reading tests, **year 2 teacher Mark Conway**, was looking for a better way of testing his class's reading. He noticed the Progress & Assess tests were bookbanded, and decided to give them a go to see whether he would get better feedback on his least confident readers.

Key points to take away

- Progress & Assess Reading tests **allowed even the least confident children** working at early year one level **to get useful feedback** on their reading
- The tests highlighted that children's **decoding skills were far more advanced than their comprehension skills: this inspired a new focus on comprehension** with his year twos

Why did you change the tests you used?

At the moment, we're using another test provider for our testing across the school. The tests we were using have been very much a 'one-size fits all' approach. It is rather brutal for the less confident readers, as the tests are pitched to the new National Curriculum expected level. With my class, this pitch is much higher than your average child at this particular point is. Although they're fine for the most able, I find that the tests are a blunt instrument on the whole. I noticed that the Progress & Assess tests were structured by bookband so I thought I would give them a try for one half-term.

With the other tests it was really, really tough for our least confident children. If a child didn't do well, then unfortunately their paper is filled with question mark after question mark. It got to the point where I thought 'you're wasting your time, their time, everybody's time' with these tests.

How have Progress & Assess tests worked for children with different attainment in your class?

Certainly, we've found that for the less confident children, with the Progress & Assess tests they're doing a test where they've got a much better chance of performing than the old system. I'd sum up the difference as, the Progress & Assess tests are set up to follow a child's progress in many stages. Other tests I've used assess in big, heavy chunks that assume a child makes big leaps in progress from one term to the next.

We're now able to tailor the test to the child's ability, and we've found that Progress & Assess are perfect for children working at the lower end. In my year two class, we've still got children emerging in year one, nevermind emerging in year two, so tests for year two just do not work. With the bookbanded tests, I've found that as the questions are pitched for the bookband, they often give a lot of pictorial cues, and the questions are easy to complete, without having to read too much. I then have useful information on where these children are, and what their next steps are, rather than just a generic 'below' statement.

“ It got to the point where I thought you're wasting your time, the children's time, everybody's time with a one-size fits all test. ”

What did the test results tell you?

I'm finding that the children came up to us from year one with a bookband against their name. We initially followed that by giving them the respective bookbanded books in Bug Club. Children were getting through one or two books per week and by October half-term, I gave them a test at the bookband at which they were currently working at. I noticed that Orange B was the recommended bookband for that term of year two. Some of the children were on it, but most were on higher bands.

I was shocked to see that children's results came back poor, with many children not passing the tests they'd taken. I had to reflect on why this was, and it pointed to there being a considerable dislocation between children's decoding and comprehension skills. I found that although children were decoding and reading out loud beautifully, at much higher levels than expected, their comprehension skills were not at the same level. It was a shock to find this out, but one that I needed.



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Have you changed anything in your teaching practice as a result of the new Progress & Assess tests?

As a result I've had to take some quite drastic action. For a start, I've moved all my children back one or two bookbands. I started to use some of the yellow bookband tests instead. I did have quite a lot of children taking the purple and turquoise tests, but the test results showed really clearly that they just weren't able to perform when faced with a comprehension test at that level.

“ I've moved all my children back one or two bookbands. ”

So what we've done is allocated them in Bug Club as it is much easier to read the books, and we have made it explicit that the focus is now not on decoding, but on comprehension. After all, this is ultimately how children are going to be judged. I now coach children in our guided reading sessions on their comprehension skills. I expect them to be reading fluently and focus on skills, especially inference. With our previous tests, as it is one test for all pupils, we wouldn't have got this information. I'm also emphasising with children that the answers are in the text, and encouraging children to look back in their books for the answers. A lot of the children thought the questions were just a general knowledge test, and hadn't developed the habit of referring to the text. I show children how to go back to the text. I ask them to avoid going to the question page on a comprehension activity straight away and then do your best. They need pushing to constantly go back and forth, as they would do on a test.

I piloted the Bug Club Progress & Assess tests in year two, but am definitely going back to my Head and recommending that they're adopted across the school.

Find out more

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