

The Dales School view on: P-scales, Progression and National Expectations

Whilst 'high expectations and good progress are entitlements for all learners' (DCSF 2009) the question as to how to measure progress, and the related question of what counts as good progress, remains unresolved for pupils with severe learning difficulties with a wide number of solutions being proposed at local, regional and national levels. In particular the claim that the P-scales provide an adequate assessment tool has been challenged by alternative models (Routes for Learning, 2006., Quest for Learning, 2006). The following observations address the issue of pupil progress as set out in The National Strategies' Progression Guidance 2009-10 (DCSF 2009), and argue that a careful reading of that document does not support the view that all learners should make two levels of progress over a key stage, but that different expectations apply to National Curriculum levels and P levels.

The National Strategies' Progression Guidance 2009-10 states that 'all learners should make at least two levels of progress' from the end of one key stage to the end of the following key stage. (DCSF, 2009, p12). Despite the universality of this statement does it apply to those pupils whose progress is being measured against P-level descriptors? The guidance suggests that it does *not* since this national expectation applies only to '... learners identified as SEN, who are *working within age-related expectations...*' (ibid., p12,) (my emphasis). Elsewhere, however, the guidance appears to conflict with this, saying that '...the majority of learners with SEN, including those who are working below age-related expectations, should be able to achieve this rate of progress' (ibid., p8). Taken on its own this second statement seems to indicate that the expectation of two levels progress does indeed apply to pupils with severe learning difficulties. However this needs to be read in context of the statement that '...the vast majority of learners with SEN/LDD, including those in special schools, *are working at the main National Curriculum levels*'. (ibid.,p8) (my emphasis). *So the guidance applies to pupils who fulfil either of the following conditions: (a) they are working within age-related expectations or (b) they are working below age related expectations but are also part of the 'vast majority' of pupils who are working at National Curriculum levels.*

Neither of these conditions applies to pupils with severe learning difficulties, or to those pupils who are working within the P-levels for most of their school careers. The conclusion must therefore be that pupils who have severe learning difficulties (a small minority who make up approximately 0.35% of the total population) together with the overlapping set of pupils who are working within the P-scales (and who are therefore not working within age-related expectations) *do not form part of the population to which the progression guidance applies and that therefore the national expectation of two levels progress per key stage does not apply to them.*

This reading of the guidance is supported by advice from other sources. The Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM) at Durham University has been analysing P-level data since 2005 and collects data for over 250,000 pupils. The director, Francis Ndaji, writes that '... most learners with SEN have attainment levels below the National Curriculum in various subjects, and our data reveals that only a very small proportion of these children make two or more levels of progress (even within the P scales) from the end of one Key Stage to the end of the next... the national expectation that all pupils should make at least two levels of progress from the end of one Key Stage to the end of the next, does not seem to be realistic

and should be reviewed.’ (Ndaji, F., Timms, P. 2010). Indeed, for pupils judged to have profound and multiple learning difficulties ‘average attainment remains almost constant from yr 6’ (CEM 2011).

In guidance on P-scale assessment John Brown, the advisor for inclusion at the QCA, states that the P-scales are best fit level indicators of where pupils’ abilities lie within National Curriculum programmes of study, (QCA, 2009). The same guidance adds that ‘it is ... inappropriate to’ ... ‘expect the P-scales to predict how far or how fast individual pupils or groups of pupils should progress’ or to ‘hold staff to account for the fact that pupils with learning difficulties do not make progress in accordance with any supposed national norms or expectations of progress’. More recently advice published by the QCDA on using the P-scales states that ‘... the P scales operate independently of chronological age. So you shouldn’t expect pupils to reach any given level at a particular age or to progress through the levels at a predetermined rate.’ (QCDA 2011).

In conclusion:

- **A careful reading of The Progression Guidance 2009-10 does not support the view that pupils with severe learning difficulties, or those pupils working within P-levels for most of their school career, should make two levels progress per key stage**
- **Progress for these groups of pupils cannot be pre-determined**
- **Progress for many pupils will not be reflected in P-level scores even where their progress is good as judged against alternative, and more appropriate, measures**

References

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