

About making progress at early levels

Assessing Progress

Though the Early Years Practice Guidelinesⁱ does include some reference to aspects of very early learning, neither the Foundation Stage Profile; Early Learning Goals; or National curriculum performance descriptions; match to the learning levels of the pupils with very special needs, who function at earlier levels of development throughout their school lives. To provide a framework for assessment on which teachers could observe progress towards the national curriculum the QCA introduced P scales and guidance in 2001, they were revised in 2004 – and guidance was updated in 2009ⁱⁱ

About Using P scales

It is important to put P scales into perspective and QCA DVD and booklet 'Using the P scales' is important guidance, it is specific that :

- The P Scales are not a curriculum
- The descriptions given in the P scales do not provide a full account of all that pupils might need to learn or achieve in subject or strand.

It is important to realise that we should not teach just to P scales. As assessment descriptions they are useful markers of broad levels of performance – but they do not provide us with a comprehensive set of steps to use as a curriculum or targets for planning individual progress.

P Scales are intended for use with any pupils between ages 5 and 16 who have any kind of disabling condition which has affected their development so that they have not reached national curriculum levels. Consequently they relate to a very wide range of abilities.

- At P1 they describe aspects of learning from the earliest levels of reflex responses and sensory encounters.
- Whilst at P8 they dovetail into the performance expected of typical five year olds who are rapidly developing reading and writing skills and becoming numerate.

Since this wide range is covered in only eight progressive levels the descriptors have to be very generalised. This generality allows for some flexibility in relating the descriptors to individual children but it also calls for careful use of professional judgement and interpretations, taking account of both disability and age, to ensure they are applied with relevance.

Planning for progress

The P Scales provide a framework on which teachers can observe progress in national curriculum areas and are useful to summarise attainment at the end of a year or key stage. However they are not sufficiently detailed for planning, because many children need to take smaller steps of learning, as they journey between level descriptors.

Though some commercially available systems add additional statements to P scale descriptors they still do not entirely address the breadth of pupils many different needs and conditions. Nor do they reflect differences across the whole school age range. Navigating the pupils journey will always require teachers to use professional knowledge, judgements and adaptations for teaching.

Relevant targets need to be based on:

- Knowledge of the individual child – the nature and effects of the barriers to learning that they suffer, including physical, sensory, cognitive or personal and social difficulties.
- Knowledge of how environments and contexts affect the Childs ability to learn and apply what they have learned.
- Knowledge of appropriate learning. Which may include knowing how to support various learning difficulties and understanding how to break down learning into smaller steps than is specified by the conventional curriculum e.g. *recognising that the Childs understanding of 'object permanence', or understanding about pointing, or appreciating one to one relationships, are all elements of learning about 'counting'*

Similarly assessing progress using P scales will always require making professional judgements and for this reason QCA guidance and Progression Guidance 2009ⁱⁱⁱ both stress the importance of moderation processes to ensure equable understanding and judgements between staff ,

An example at the end of this article relates to the mathematical development of a key stage 3 pupil. It illustrates how it may be necessary to enable the child to develop learning skills, or develop fundamental concepts that are not specifically described in the P scales – but which are precursors to later mathematical learning,

There is a great deal more information and many more examples relating to these elements of progress in the Equals Guide to developing mathematics section 5¹ About Development – which outlines many examples of activities cross referenced to P scales

The roots of P scales

When working with P Scales it is useful to remember their roots. The numbers P1 to P3 etc do not in themselves convey a picture of the child. However if we consider the language and logic behind the P scales they make much more common sense for us.

The QCA guidelines which first published P scales used work from Brown^{iv} and Byers^v to develop the framework which shows progressive levels of development which is illustrated in the table below. Which is published in QCA guidelines 2009 and is also used in Routes for Learning.

A framework for recognising attainment

Encounter	Pupils are present during an experience or activity without any obvious learning outcome, although for some pupils, <i>for example, those who withhold their attention or their presence from many situations</i> , their willingness to tolerate a shared activity may, in itself, be significant.
Awareness	Pupils appear to show awareness, noticing that something has happened and, fleetingly focusing or attending to an object, event or person, <i>for example, by briefly interrupting a pattern of self-absorbed movement or vocalisation</i> .
Attention and response	Pupils attend and begin to respond, often not consistently, to what is happening, <i>for example, by showing signs of surprise, enjoyment, frustration or dissatisfaction</i> , demonstrating the beginning of an ability to distinguish between different people, objects, events and places.
Engagement	Pupils show more consistent attention and can tell the difference between specific events in their surroundings, <i>for example, by focused looking or listening; turning to locate objects, events or people; following moving objects and events through movements of their eyes, head or other body parts</i> .
Participation	Pupils engage in sharing, taking turns and the anticipation of familiar sequences of events, <i>for example, by smiling, vocalising or showing other signs of excitement</i> , although these responses may be supported by staff or other pupils.
Involvement	Pupils actively strive to reach out, join in or comment in some way on the activity itself or on the actions or responses of the other pupils. <i>For example, by making exploratory hand and arm movements, seeking eye contact with staff or other pupils, or by speaking, signing or gesturing</i> .
Gaining skills and understanding	Pupils gain, strengthen or make general use of their skills, and understanding knowledge, concepts or understanding that relate to their experience of the curriculum, <i>for example, they can recognise the features of an object and understand its relevance, significance and use</i> .

The words in the headings of this framework describe successive levels of children's interactions with their world and people. The words are keys to effective observations of children's progress or for planning learning experiences at early levels of development.

They form the basis of the descriptors for P levels 1 to 3 and though the framework lists the words as successive levels, within P level descriptors the words actually reoccur in different levels. This encourages us to understand that levels are not completely distinct steps – they naturally overlap and pupils may fluctuate between them over periods of time. The diagram below summarises the occurrence of key words and their relationships across progressive levels.

Some schools have used these words to generate commonsense understanding of levels amongst staff, for example characterising

- P1 as the **Encounter** level through which pupils developing awareness and attention
- P2 as the **Response** level through which children develop interaction and participation
- And P3 as a level where intentional **participation** is developing .
- Some schools have usefully characterised pupils working at P4 and above as being '**creative learners**' – because they are becoming actively inquisitive and readily involved in exploration using their remembered knowledge to experiment.

How the framework of P scales progresses

P1

Encounter - Aware - Attend

- (i) May **encounter** without obvious learning - may be passive or resistant
- (ii) Becoming more **aware** of sensory experiences and developing **attention** to events

P2

Attend - Respond - Interact - Participate

- (i) Learning to **attend** and **respond** share attention and coactive exploration .
- (ii) Proactive interested **participators** in supported activities , shared exploration
—*Turn taking , using looking , early pointing.*

P3

Participate – Intentional – Exploration

- (i) Intentional communicators who **participate** in exploring and anticipating events and routines
- (ii) Manipulate objects with **deliberate intentions**, observe effects of action
Remembering responses and anticipating events

P4-8

Inquisitive learning extending understanding - connecting knowledge and skills

Acquire and practice skills, make connections absorbing new information.
Using active thinking , adapting to new ideas.
Becoming progressively more independent as inquisitive and creative learners

Children are becoming involved in self directed creative learning.

Overlapping and extending P8

Active participation and involvement in gaining skills and

Early learning goals

N C Level one

Different kinds of progress

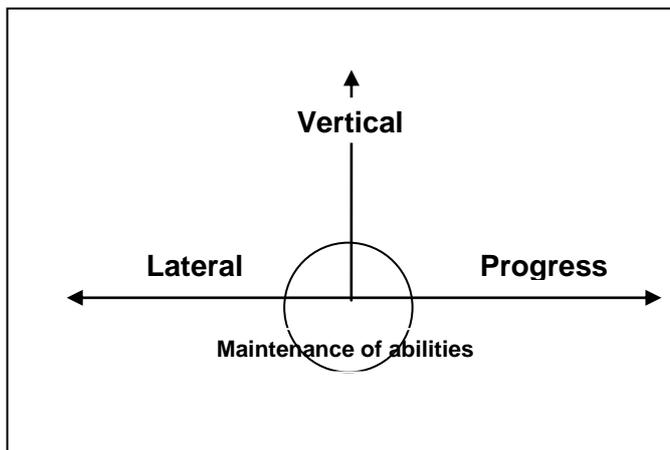
QCA guidance is specific

'For pupils with learning difficulties progression is not necessarily only movement up a hierarchical ladder of skills and knowledge. Lateral progression is also important'^{vi}

This acknowledges that there are different aspects to pupils progress:

- Vertically – as they develop increasingly sophisticated skills and understanding
- Laterally – as they consolidate and widen the application of their knowledge
- We need to plan for all kinds of progress as appropriate to pupils needs.

This also includes acknowledging the importance of maintaining the skills of those children who suffer regressive conditions.



Pupils may shift around – browsing and learning within a level, making connections and consolidating learning. Sometimes reaching to a higher level during some exploratory experience and at other times revisiting earlier functional levels when they find themselves in different circumstances/contexts of learning, social settings, or when medical or social or psychological conditions present problems for them.

Evidence of progression – useful aspects for lateral targets

The QCA guidelines 2009^{vii} describe a number of areas which might reflect evidence of progress, and these areas may also be helpful for us when we are considering appropriate targets for individual pupils, particularly those who may take a long time to progress up to the next level.

When assessing, aside from vertical steps up the scale of P Levels, we might look for progress relating these areas. Or when planning we may develop targets that relate to providing opportunities for wider experience or extension within levels.

For example the QCA guidelines say that pupils progress in various ways

Skills Development.

Which may reflect both vertical and horizontal progress e.g. gaining new skills or practising, combining, developing, refining, transferring, generalising, existing skills

Breadth of curricular content.

When pupils experiences are progressively widened e.g. from year to year reflecting age appropriate applications of knowledge, and providing access to experiences and knowledge in different ways.

Extending their application of skills knowledge or understanding in new settings.

And

Extending their experience by providing a range of contexts for learning.

Offering a variety of activities resources and environments appropriate to age, interests, prior achievement.

Extending the variety of support equipment.

That the pupil experiences or can use to interact with, affect and control their environment, e.g. *to, develop use and practise communication skills, to develop looking and tracking, to improve manipulation and increase mobility*

Extending their experience of a range of teaching methods.

Changing approaches to match and extend pupils' strengths and learning styles and accommodate different stages of development.

Developing negotiated learning.

Encouraging pupils to take a greater part in the learning process, make choices, consider success, look forward to next steps.

Encouraging them to develop strategies for independence

Help pupils move away from adult support towards independent application of their skills and knowledge, in and beyond school.

Phases in the development of skills – progress within levels.

Learning rarely occurs in sudden steps, it is more usually a process. New knowledge begins by being observed through experience, it has to be tested and practiced and then used and generalised. These different phases may be regarded as progress that occurs as within levels. For instance though a child's particular counting skill may stay at the same numeric level for a period e.g. as at P7 accurate to 5 – this accuracy may become more reliable, or the pupil may become more able to use the skill in different circumstances, or for different purposes and for him these developments may be good progress.

The table below adapts a description of a hierarchy of phases in skill development outlined by (Haring *et al* 1981)^{viii}. It is used in 'Routes for learning' produced for schools in Wales – and 'Quest for learning' used by schools in Northern Ireland. Whilst those documents used the table in relation to PLD pupils I would like to suggest that the table may be also useful to teachers of SLD pupils who wish to review a finer grain of progress than given by P scale descriptors, or who need short term perspectives on objectives that are taking a long time to achieve.

A hierarchy of phases in skill development	
Acquisition	In which learners learn correct new responses through demonstration, modelling or physical prompting with an emphasis on developing accuracy. At this stage learners need a great deal of support.
The words below describe various ways in which pupils progress after initial acquisition	
Fluency	in which learners, through repetition, reach a level of mastery combining speed and accuracy. The action still takes time to complete
Maintenance	in which learners consolidate and maintain a high level of competency and fluency over time by over learning through repetition and familiarity. They will remember how to do the task after a break
Generalisation	in which learners develop and achieve mastery in different settings or contexts, with different stimuli or materials or with different staff
Application or adaptation	- in which learners recognise similarities and differences between key elements of new situations and select appropriate responses, adapting their established skills and understandings to new problem-solving opportunities.

The following table is an example of how the words from the table could be used to show phases of progress within the attainment of P Level descriptors. It could be used either by dating or highlighting and could support written notes which gave examples of how pupils were developing greater fluency; generalizing or applying skills etc.

Number – P level descriptors	Acquiring	Attained			Extending	
		Developing fluency	Maintenance	Generalisation	Application	Adaptation
P6 -Pupils demonstrate an understanding of one-to-one correspondence in a range of contexts, <i>for example, matching objects such as cups to saucers, straws to drink cartons.</i>						
-Pupils join in rote counting up to five, <i>for example, saying or signing number names to five in counting activities.</i> -						
They count reliably to three,						
make sets of up to three objects and use numbers to three in familiar activities and games, <i>for example, touching one, two, three items as an adult counts; counting toys or pictures; counting out sets of three, for example, knife, fork and spoon.</i>						
-They demonstrate an understanding of the concept of 'more', <i>for example, indicating that more cups, counters, food items are required.</i>						
They join in with new number rhymes, songs, stories and games.						
<i>Note alternative examples that fit this level but which may take account of the impact of particular disability or learning difficulty.</i>						
P7 -Pupils join in rote counting to 10, <i>for example, saying or signing number names to 10 in counting activities.</i>						
-They can count at least five objects reliably, <i>for example, candles on a cake, bricks in a tower.</i>						
-They recognise numerals from one to five and understand that each represents a constant number or amount, <i>for example, putting the correct number of objects (one to five) into containers marked with the numeral; collecting the correct number of items up to five.</i>						
-Pupils demonstrate an understanding of 'less', <i>for example, indicating which bottle has less water in it. In practical situations.</i>						
- They respond to 'add one' when working with a number of objects, <i>for example, responding to requests such as 'Add one pencil to the pencils in the pot', 'Add one sweet to the dish'.</i>						
<i>Note alternative examples that fit this level but which may take account of the impact of particular disability or learning difficulty</i>						

What the Progression guidance 2009 says

Progression guidance 2009 seeks to develop the use of P Scale data in the same way that other National Curriculum test data has been used, in processes of analysis for school improvement. These processes are developing at this time and it is expected that analysis will refine and become more accurate as national data sets become more comprehensive.

The guidance explains that the national expectation of good progress for learners working within age related expectations is 2 levels across a key stage and that schools working with children with SEN should aspire towards that progress¹. However alongside this it acknowledges that some pupils particularly those at lower P levels may not make 2 levels of progress over a key stage. – It particularly stresses that a purpose of using assessment and data is to enable **discussion and decisions about what is good progress**. These processes are essential elements in generating the high expectations that are important for those pupils

The guidance emphasises that

- 'Reliable judgments are based on a shared understanding of the basis for making a 'best-fit' judgment and of the range of evidence on which a judgement should be based.
- Judgements about progress based on the data alone will not be the most effective means of evaluation
- Effective moderation is an essential element in the development of that shared understanding'

It is the suggestion of this document that the ideas in the tables provided here – which are drawn from QCA guidance and other research and curriculum documents contribute helping staff see progress within the broader framework of the P levels, and as such in addition to facilitating detailed planning – they support staff in making accurate assessments of progress.

¹ P scale sub divisions for P1 to P3 being accepted as equivalent to a level.

Example

In the end of year assessment the teacher reports that Clyde – who is a key stage 3 pupil with cerebral palsy and a visual impairment is generally working at P level 7 in Number.

The P Level descriptors for P7 include:

- Pupils join in rote counting to ten.
- They can count at least five objects reliably.
- They begin to recognise numerals from 1 to 5 and to understand that each represents a constant number or amount.
- They demonstrate an understanding of less
- In practical situations they respond to 'add one' to a number of objects

He is given this level because

- He is confident in rote counting when opportunities occur in games and social activities, being able to lead in a rhythmic sequence and will go to 11 or 12 - *though he uses random or repeated sounds for teen numbers.*
- He recognises numerals up to 6 or sometimes 8 –he can identify high contrast numerals, and large numerals on the computer screen or whiteboard and select large tactile numerals to put on a wall chart etc . He will count towards the corresponding number when either taking objects out of a box sequentially, or counting other children seated around the table. In this he is reliable to five but sometimes loses track if the sequence is longer.
- he will respond by getting another one if he sees or the teacher tells him there are 'not enough'

There are concerns that he needs to consolidate within this level because

- At levels beyond 5 he does not always maintain accurate 1 to 1 pointing – the speed of saying the rote sequence of words overtakes the accuracy of his pointing / itemisation
- If objects are small and difficult to manipulate he will lose track of the count even before 5.
- If objects are randomly arranged on a table he will either:
 - Lose track of the count.
 - Continue the rote count beyond the requested number.
- If counting a row of more than 5 he sometimes keep on counting beyond the requested number.
- He does not independently count to find out how many items are needed- e.g. cups or biscuits for a group - he uses distribution or matching to plates set around the table,
- He can only count objects not marks.

Considering appropriate objectives for teaching Clyde

Though Clyde is working generally within P7 as tested on PACE and his rote counting may soon reach the next level, the mistakes he makes when he is counting things suggest:

- His physical and visual difficulties present him with difficulty in fluently coordinating the processes involved in counting.
- He uses learned routines but may not fully appreciate either :
 1. The essential principles that have to be applied to make counting accurate such as:
 - *Applying the one to one principle*
 - *Applying the stable order principle*
 - *Applying the cardinal principle*
 2. How the practical purposes of counting can be applied in many contexts – to find out and check .

The teacher needs to use professional judgements to decide upon targets and activities that will enable Clyde to

- Consolidate – sensory and physical skills used in counting – *i.e. Developing fluency -*
- Extend his understanding of applying the principles of counting. - *i.e Developing fluency and Generalisation*
- Develop his appreciation of the practical purposes of counting. - *i.e Generalisation through experiences of application and adaptation of his knowledge and skills*

To develop targets or objectives for teaching, rather than looking entirely to the written descriptions the next P level - or looking to the next level it may important to evaluate whether Clyde needs to consolidate and be able to carry out his existing skills more reliably, or in a wider range of circumstances

– this may include things which are not actually written in the P Scales descriptors – but are nevertheless important aspects of developing skills and knowledge within the levels. They also relate to the hierarchy of skill development described above.

Examples may include

Developing greater fluency

- refining his looking, touching and handling skills.
- Improve the coordination of pointing with production of number words,
- Help him improve his ability to maintain counting when the demands of manipulation and mobility make processing and remembering more difficult for him.

Promoting generalisation

- Help him understand and organise counting when objects are arranged differently.
- Consolidate his understanding of the cardinal principle by wide experience of practical examples.
- Offer more opportunities for him to count for practical purposes in different contexts

Application and adaptation

- Participation in practical activities that require him to use his counting skills in different contexts.

Acquiring new knowledge

- Help him to begin to use marks and relate the one to one principle with marks or raised marks.

Whilst this list is quite general through professional knowledge the teacher may define actual examples that relate directly to Clyde's abilities and behaviours

All these may relate to progressing within the existing level P7 but they are also essential to consolidating skills and understanding that need to be well established to enable development to the next level which includes.

- extending the accuracy of his counting skills
- Understanding about using 'counting on' as a form of calculation (addition)
- Understanding about estimating and checking.

ⁱ **Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage – (2008)**

Download at

http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/12629/EYFS%20Practice%20Guidance%20May%202008.pdf

ⁱⁱ **Planning, teaching and assessing the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties**

http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_11583.aspx

ⁱⁱⁱ Progression Guidance 2009 – 10 DCSF ref:00553-2009BKT-EN

<http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/190123>

^{iv} Brown E.(1996) Religious Education for All. London: David Fulton

^v Byers R. (1996) 'Classroom Processes' in B. Carpenter, R. Ashdown and K. Bovair (eds)

Enabling Access – effective teaching and learning for learners with learning difficulties.

London: David Fulton

^{vi} QCA "Planning, teaching and assessing the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties" 2009

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^{vii} QCA "Planning, teaching and assessing the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties" 2009

general guidelines pg 18 ISBN978-1-84721-887-2 order ref QCA/09/4020

^{viii} Haring, N., Liberty, K. and White, O. (1981) *An Investigation of Phases of Learning and Facilitating Instructional Events for the Severely/Profoundly Handicapped (final project report)*. Seattle: University of Washington College of Education.