

An examination of the usefulness of the school's own pupil assessment schedules as a tool to support the whole school target setting.

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Aim

To identify the strengths and weaknesses of utilising the current system of assessing and recording pupil progress as a tool for whole school target setting comparison to Performance criteria (P Scales).

Dimensions of this study

A graphical analysis of current pupil progress records in foundation curriculum areas was made, for 8 pupils in a year group cohort over a three year cycle (current year 1) This was used to compare evidence of progress with available data from P scale assessment. Tentative conclusions have been drawn as to the usefulness, reliability and validity of these methods in contributing to the setting and evaluation of whole school targets.

Target Setting in Special Schools

Reports of East Midlands DFES Regional Project Best Practice Research

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Summary of the findings of the study

The study showed that both systems of assessment displayed strengths and weaknesses in the context of whole school target setting.

- The school system highlighted change (both progress and loss of skills) in pupils of all ability levels whilst the P scales did not identify progress (or loss of skills) in the group of pupils working at early levels.

The study identifies implications for schools that include

- Schools should consider carefully the way the process can support improvements for the pupils in areas that really matter to the pupils and their parents.
- Schools should be wary of allowing particular cohorts of pupils to be targeted and receiving unfair proportions of resources.
- Schools should strive to use the most effective and manageable tools to assess pupil achievement and progress and bear in mind any shortcomings of the chosen schedules.
- Schools should strive to moderate the use of the chosen tool to improve the reliability and the validity of the results.

Characteristics of the School

Fairfields is a school which caters for pupils with physical disabilities and associated learning difficulties (mild, moderate, severe, profound and multiple) between the ages of 3 and 11. Some children also have multisensory impairments, or associated medical conditions. There are approximately 65 pupils on role.

Pupils come from a wide range of locations around Northampton, which can involve single journeys of over one hour in duration. They come from a broad range of social and cultural backgrounds.

The school is well equipped, with 10 spacious classrooms, specialised, designated rooms for music, PE, design and technology, out door learning area, swimming, sensory and soft play, library and movement education. Each room has been designed to facilitate access with pupils with varying physical and sensory needs.

We aim to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum, with strong emphasis on the development of communication, self-esteem and physical independence. Our Curriculum directly supports the aims of the school and is made up of 4 intertwining strands, which interact to make up the child's whole curriculum.

- The Foundation Curriculum
- The National Curriculum
- The Experiential Curriculum
- Personal, Social and Health Education

The proportion of each strand present depends on individual needs and as such there will be some variance in the curriculum provided for different pupils.

The Foundation Curriculum contains, within it, the Early learning areas and goals of the "Foundation Stage Curriculum" but extends and expands the contents. It focuses on the acquisition of skills and knowledge, ranging from the earliest sensory learning up to skills and knowledge described in Level 1 of the National Curriculum. It is an area that provides the base for further learning and as such provides an ongoing strand for all pupils, not ceasing as a resource at the end of reception. Each area of this curricular strand has a

scheme of work and assessment schedule to monitor progress and assist teacher planning.

All pupils of an appropriate age are entitled to access to the National Curriculum. Pupils are given access to the Programmes of Study at a level reflecting their current level of achievement or through experiences related to the appropriate Key Stage. The recommendations of the Numeracy and Literacy hours have been implemented within our classroom teaching.

The Experiential curriculum aims to provide pupils with a wide range of stimulating situations linked to the nine areas of learning (The Curriculum 5 – 16). This aspect of the curriculum often focuses on the processes involved in learning.

Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) is viewed as a separate strand in order to acknowledge its importance in Fairfields curriculum and to emphasise the greater content area than is specified in the National Curriculum. PSHE should develop, at an appropriate level both conceptual understanding, personal qualities, and personal and social independence skills.

The school has some particular specialisms, which have been highly praised by OFSTED (2000). These include Movement Education (based on the principals of Conductive Education as practised at the Peto Institute in Hungary) and music therapy.

Background to the study

National Position

As part of the Governments strategy for raising strands in education, statutory requirements for schools to set targets for overall pupil performance have come into effect. Initially some school's, whose pupil's progress is not illuminated by National curriculum assessment materials, set zero-rated targets in English and maths. From December 2001, schools will be required to set "measurable performance targets for 2003 at the relevant Key Stages using the P scales or other performance criteria where appropriate" (DFEE 2001). The P Scales are differentiated performance criteria which provide descriptions of attainment leading to level 1 and within level 1 and 2 for English and maths in the national curriculum, and descriptions leading to level 1 for other curricular subjects. The P scales are a series of best-fit statements, designed to provide a summative framework for assessment upon which pupil progress can be mapped. Schools are required to set a target for English, maths and science. Additional Targets may also be set.

School Response

The School has done much development work over the past two years around the area of target setting including: -

- Taking part in the P Scale Project (CEM) – using P scales to chart pupil progress.
- Tracking and Analysis of pupil achievement in IEP Targets set at annual reviews (overall targets, numerically and literacy targets)
- Participation in county wide group on Target Setting in special schools (much focus on the use of P Scales, Equals Baseline assessment and moderation)
- Setting of School Target – Quantitative process target set, addressed and evaluated.
- Curriculum development work:

Focus on priority areas for our pupils, including detailed assessment work, which may be more useful multifunction tools, to measure progress in our pupils learning.

The Research Questions

The research aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses of using the schools own pupil assessment schedules in foundation subject areas to identify and monitor progress, in comparison to the Nationally developed tool of the P Scales.

Implications for these tools usefulness in whole school target setting are sought.

The Study:

Implementation

The school has developed assessment schemes related to the Foundation curriculum areas, (e.g. Maths including early cognition skills, Physical development- gross and fine motor etc) where the large majority of our pupils will show progress as they gain skills, knowledge and attitudes throughout their school careers. The schedules are used in both formative and summative procedures.

The records are used and update throughout each year providing teachers with a tool for curriculum planning and information for reporting to parents. A colour coded key system allows progress to be charted from entry to leaving. The key currently records - experience, emerging skill/ knowledge, achievement and mastered/generalised.

The information contained within the pupil progress files has been used for curriculum planning for individual pupils and to show individual progress, both lateral and horizontal.

Analysis in terms of pupil cohorts has not occurred before.

It was decided to examine a year group cohort and provide visual representations of pupil progress/change to investigate the tools usefulness in identifying progress, trends, rates of progress and average gains.

Graphical analysis presented each pupils level of achievement (in each subject) in terms of the number of objectives mastered at entry, end of nursery and end of reception and year 1. The analysis gave easy access to all information from the year group cohort.

Similar analysis occurred with information on pupil progress from comparable areas where P-scale data was available, (Maths, PSE) and a retrospective look at progress in the area of PE (as these scales have only just been published).

Limitations of the data are acknowledged. Neither the time scale for collection of the data, nor the sample periods for P Scale and school assessment are the same and so are not directly comparable. There are also some difficulties arising from modification of P Scales between the two data collection times. The

"retrospective " scoring of pupils on PE P scales was based on schools records and teacher knowledge of pupils. This obviously affects the reliability and validity of the data, but the information gained is still felt to be illuminative.

Results

Graphical analysis occurred enabling a visual comparison to be made, comparing progress in related curriculum areas from the Performance Criteria and the schools schedule e.g. PSE and PSHE, Mathematics and Mathematics (including cognition) and PE and gross motor development. N.B. Where pupils score above 8 on scales they have moved into NC level descriptors e.g. 9=1C, 10=1B.

Examples are shown below

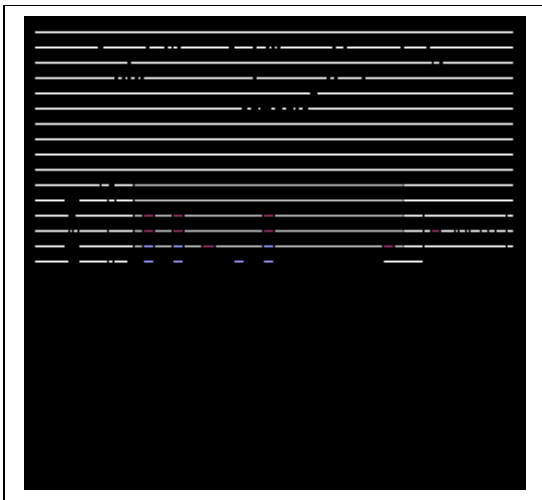


Fig 1

Progress in PSE (red) as illuminated by Progress in PSHE as illuminated



Fig 2

P Scale assessments by school schedule assessment

Visual comparison shows that P Scale assessment fails to allow pupils working at earlier developmental levels (e.g. pupils F. G. H) to demonstrate their progress in PSE skills, in comparison to developments shown by the schools own schedule. The two tools covered similar content areas- that of relating to others, developing and coping with emotions and an emerging moral awareness. The school has an addition schedule recording progress in personal independence skills.

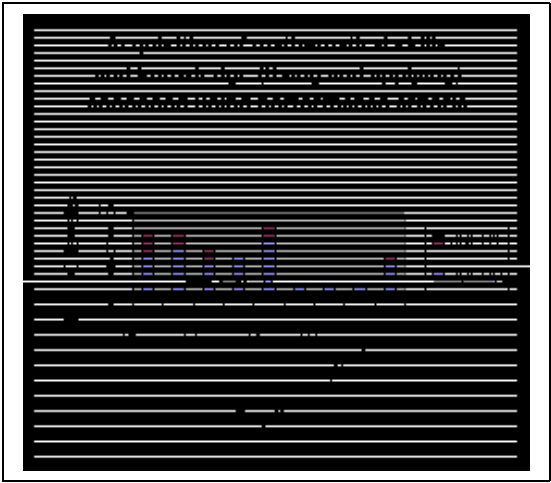


Fig 3



Fig 4

Figures 3, 4 and 5 illuminate progress in mathematics as assessed by the P Scales (red areas)



Fig 5

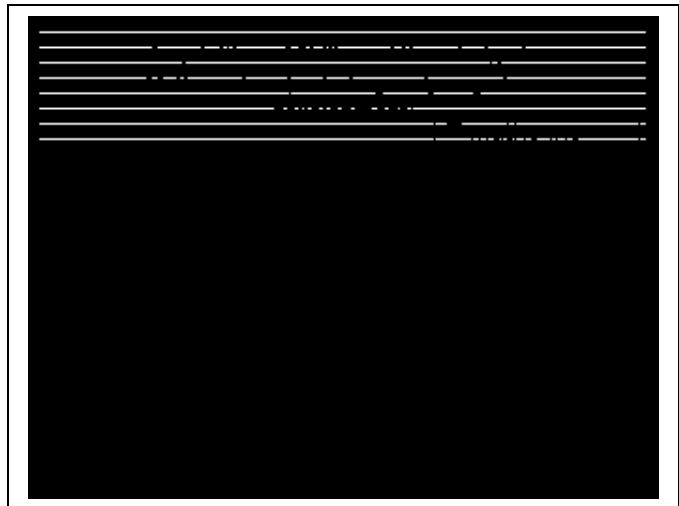


Fig 6

Shows progress in mathematics and early cognitive skills as assessed by the schools assessment schedule

Again the same group of children show no progress on the P Scale assessment, whilst progress is shown for the same period on the school schedule.



Fig 7

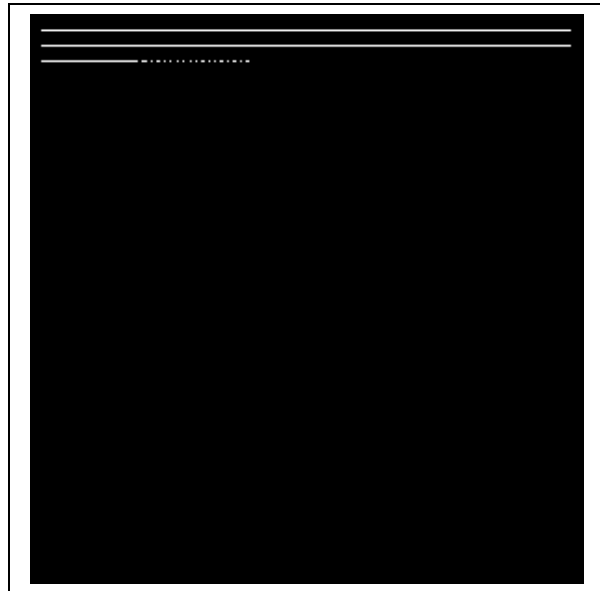


Fig 8

Shows progress in PE skills Shows changes in gross motor skills as as assessed by the P Scales assessed by the schools assessment schedule

The two schedules contained quite different content. The P Scales focused, initially on movement demonstrating communicative or cognitive development, and latterly on responding to language and relating to others. The school schedule concentrates on functional movement skills.

Findings:

Analysis of this data illuminated a number of issues, pertinent to the key question

- The schools assessment tools were of sufficient detail to show change (largely gain – but in one case significant loss of skills/ knowledge) for all pupils in the study
- Whilst the P Scales showed progress for more able pupils over a two year period it failed to allow progress to be demonstrated for pupils working at an earlier learning level.
- Similarly the P Scale assessment failed to show the loss of skills in a pupil with a degenerative condition.
- Consideration should be made to the content of each schedule
- The examination of the data collated for the pupils in the cohort has raised additional areas of concern for the researcher in the use both of the school schedules and P Scales. These centre on moderated use of these tools, both in the mechanics of the system and in the interpretation of the levels.

Discussion:

As self-evaluating institutions schools are constantly striving to improve their practice to benefit pupils learning. Target setting is a powerful tool in this process and should be utilised with great through to serve the pupils for greatest benefit. The use of effective tools to measure pupil attainment and progress are an integral part of the cycle. The analysis has shown both systems to have strengths and weaknesses.

The schools system had the advantage of being able to pinpoint pupil attainment, through a series of

objective statements, rather than a best fit model. Rates of progress can be inferred and cohorts of similar children may be identified to support the target setting process. Improvements in pupil performance, which we are striving towards as delineated in our targets, can be identified for cohorts of children functioning at a variety of different levels, and not, as the analysis of P scale results would suggest, just for the more able pupils. It is possible to paint a scenario in which, if P scales were only to reveal the progress of more able pupils, targets would only be set for these pupils and consequently resources may become heavily focused upon them, at the expense of others.

The school schedules also focus on areas of learning, largely unfocused upon in the P scales, such as gross motor skills e.g. sitting standing and walking and personal independence skills, e.g. feeding and toileting. Parental questionnaires and IEP targets indicate that these areas are priorities for both pupils and parents. Schools must therefore ensure that these areas do not become less important in their teaching because they are not measured by the P Scales. Schools should consider carefully if and in which way they will set their additional targets. By nature of its content there are areas of the school scheme, which are appropriate to pupils with different difficulties e.g. multisensory impairments or severe physical difficulties. The P scales being a much more concise document have not been able to encompass the particular learning patterns or modes of demonstration of knowledge within their statements, meaning that these pupils attainment and progress is often misrepresented.

The school system is designed to be a detailed assessment scheme and as such is not as quick to administer as best fit summative records, (although it is kept up to date by the teacher as part of normal classroom practice). There is also no internal consistency between subjects or between statements in each area, and this in particular would be a major difficulty if used to set whole targets.

The school system is of course specific to our school and as such cannot be used to benchmark, making comparison between similar schools or pupils elsewhere in the country. It does not have internal consistency between the subjects. P Scales are becoming more commonly utilised in special schools throughout the country and will facilitate this process.

The analysis of both systems in the data collection process illuminates issues surrounding the need for moderation, both in the mechanics of recording and in the way the statements are interpreted. These difficulties will effect the reliability of the results, particularly as in many school settings different teachers will complete the initial and evaluatory assessments that relate to the targets as the pupils move class.

The study has implication for the target setting process in special schools.

- Schools should consider carefully the way the process can support improvements for the pupils in areas that really matter to the pupils and their parents.
- Schools should be wary of allowing particular cohorts of pupils to be targeted and receiving unfair proportions of resources.
- Schools should strive to use the most effective and manageable tools to assess pupil achievement and progress and bear in mind any shortcomings of the chosen schedules.
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