Rochford Review - assessment of pupils working below the standard of national curriculum tests

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Author Andrew Crompton
LGiU/CSN Associate

Summary

The Rochford Review: final report focuses on national curriculum assessment arrangements for pupils working below national curriculum standards. Its context was set by the new National Curriculum published in 2014 and the work of the Commission on Assessment Without Levels published in 2015. Its recommendations are founded in a concept of good assessment practice that does not pre-determine the curriculum. They include:

• the abolition of the existing statutory P-scales (performance scales that sat below previous level descriptors)
• pre-key stage 1 and pre-key stage 2 standards for those who have not been able to fully complete these key stages,
• a set of 7 learning and cognition descriptors for those whose progress in school cannot be described by the pre-key stage standards.
• recommendations on national data collection, and on the support teachers, schools and settings will need to adapt to these new arrangements.

This briefing will be of interest to elected members and officers with responsibility for school education as well as teachers and leaders in schools, governors and parents. It will be of particular interest to those whose responsibilities include pupils with special educational needs and disabilities.

Background

The development of national curriculum assessment

Attainment targets and levels were introduced with the national curriculum in 1988. End of Key Stage tasks and tests were introduced between 1991 and 1999, for the purpose of testing seven, eleven and fourteen-year-olds against nationally regulated educational standards. The essential purpose was to create an assessment system that demonstrated what children know, understand and can do. It did this through assessing pupils against 8 levels of attainment with those not achieving level 1 described as ‘working towards’.

Teachers working with children with complex needs found that the NC level descriptions started at too high a level for their children, and it was clear that some pupils, especially those with learning difficulties, disabilities or special needs, were remaining in the working towards category for a long time. Consequently, as an afterthought, the P-scales were developed for all the subjects of the National Curriculum as well as Religious Education, Citizenship and PSHE (Personal, Social and
Health Education) providing a ladder into the NC level descriptions for children who had not yet reached level 1 in their learning.

In order to describe attainment and progress for these children the P-scales set out eight levels within each subject from ‘P1’ to ‘P8,’ with the former representing the lowest level of attainment and the latter the highest. The first three levels apply across all subjects as they reflect initial engagement with learning, whilst the remaining five are subject specific. P levels 1 to 3 were later divided into two sub-levels (for example, P1(i) and P1(ii)) following a review of the P scales intended to provide smaller steps in learning at the earliest stages of development.

Teachers use their professional judgement to decide which descriptors provide a ‘best-fit’ description of a child’s knowledge skills and understanding, and if practice is good, this would then be ‘moderated’ by cross referencing a teacher’s judgements with other teachers and across other schools and settings. Moderation was never co-ordinated nationally leading to concerns that assessments across different schools, settings and local areas may not be consistent. Within each school or setting P-scales did however provide a shared framework for talking about achievement between home and schools for this group of pupils. This enabled a joint approach to agreeing priorities and setting targets in learning and supported home and school working towards a more coherent and consistent approach.

**New National Curriculum and assessment without levels**

A new National Curriculum was published in 2014. From September 2015, levels were no longer to be used for statutory assessment. The Commission on Assessment Without Levels: final report published in September 2015 gave advice to schools about how to develop new approaches to pupil assessment that (a) are based on needs of the pupils, (b) follow the school’s curriculum, and (c) support effective teaching. Interim Frameworks for teacher assessment at the end of key stage 1 and the end of key stage 2 were published in July 2016 and statutory assessment arrangements changed from Summer 2016 to align with the Commission’s content and principles.

P-scales for those working below the national curriculum were initially left in place, pending the outcomes of the Rochford Review. Whilst the support P-scales gave to describing small steps in progress was seen as useful, there was now a gap between a national curriculum assessment system without levels and a pre-national curriculum assessment framework that still relied on level descriptors. Many practitioners considered the interim frameworks for teacher assessment and identified a bigger gap than before between the P8 (top) level and Level 1 (the bottom) of the teacher assessment frameworks, and whereas P-scales had got away from the negative connotations of describing working towards, it now seemed to some practitioners that assessment practice could be moving back to that (see for example Assessment without levels for pupils with SEN by GL Assessment).

Issues identified with P-scales include a lack of coherence across different subjects and areas of learning. Some areas of learning (such as literacy or numeracy) have a much more substantial research base for their descriptors than others. It has been much harder to define small steps to learning in an area such as information and communication technology that does not have this extensive knowledge base to draw on. A subject focused P-scale framework may also underplay aspects of social development, which are nevertheless critical to learning, particularly at the early stages.
Briefing in full

The Rochford Review: final report was published on the 19 October 2016. The review group chaired by Diane Rochford, the executive head of a special school, contained a mix of practitioners, experts and representatives of parent/carer groups. It saw assessing pupils with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties who are not likely to be involved in subject based learning as a key area, setting out a concern for “inclusive assessment” which allows for progression within it and provides continuity across different educational settings. In her foreword, the chair pointed out the group had taken account of the “ambitious aims of wider SEND legislation”, characterising P-scale assessment for these pupils as “too narrow” and “restricting the kind of creativity and innovation that should be used to engage these pupils and to tailor teaching and learning to their unique needs”.

Prior to the publication of the final report the review group had published in July 2016 interim statutory guidance for pupils working below the test standard entitled 2017 pre-key stage 1: pupils working below the test standard and 2017 pre-key stage 2: pupils working below the test standard. These documents described what the ‘foundation’, ‘early development’ and ‘growing development’ for the expected standard would look like. They focused on reading, writing and mathematics. When the document (and this briefing) refers to pupils not yet ready for subject standards, they are referring to these three core areas.

Recommendation 1- The removal of the statutory requirement to assess pupils using P scales.

P scales were described in the report as combining the previous linear levels based assessment framework with a best-fit approach to assessment, producing an incentive for schools to encourage progression onto the next P level before pupils have acquired or consolidated all the elements of the previous one. The report suggests that ensuring a greater depth of understanding and practical application of new knowledge can be more beneficial for a pupil’s longer term progress and that approaches which recognise lateral progress, improvements in pupils’ depth of understanding or in the range of contexts to which they apply new concepts and skills are particularly beneficial for pupils with more severe or profound special need.

The report also points to the reliability and validity of expectations and comparisons based on P scale data as an issue because (a) assessments are un-moderated nationally, and (b) they use a ‘best-fit’ model; two pupils described as within the same P level may well have achieved different combinations of knowledge and skills and may therefore also progress differently from this point onwards. They contrasted this with the interim teacher assessment frameworks used for statutory teacher assessment for the first time in 2015 to 2016 and the interim pre-key stage standards created by the Rochford Review, both of which use a secure-fit model to assess the standard a pupil is working at.

The review group acknowledged that P-scales had provided a common and consistent language and milestones but wondered whether this was the right language, and whether setting expectations according to comparisons with other pupils and schools is the right approach to assessment for all pupils with SEND. Given that the national curriculum which P-scales were designed to complement had now changed, the review felt it’s interim pre-key stage standards support progression to the new national curriculum better than existing P-scales do. Over 70% of respondents to the review agreed that P-scales were no longer fit for purpose, although opinion
was then split between those who felt they should be revised, those that felt they should be replaced, and those who felt they should be abolished to give teachers space to devise their own assessments appropriate to the pupils.

**Recommendation 2 - interim pre-key stage standards for pupils working below the standard of the national curriculum tests made permanent and extended.**

The review group want to see an inclusive assessment system that enables as many pupils as possible to access mainstream assessment and which promotes progression. This would provide continuity across different educational settings, allow for movement between schools and settings where necessary or appropriate, and facilitates the development of shared good practice.

Because the Review’s interim pre-key stage standards were designed to align with and complement the new statutory national assessment arrangements the report says they can ensure consistency between the two and create a clear pathway for progression. They already assess pupils’ knowledge and understanding in the 3 core subjects of English reading, English writing and mathematics which are the focus of statutory national assessment for the large majority of primary school pupils, The review has developed 2 new additional standards (Emerging and Entry), which are subject to consultation, to sit below the existing pre-key stage standards in each of the 3 subject areas. The review group suggests these will allow for the assessment of all pupils engaged in subject-specific learning. They expect these 2 new additional standards to be included in any national collection of pre-key stage standards data.

**Recommendation 3 - Assessing pupils with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties**

The review feels that for a small number of pupils nationally who are not engaged in subject-based learning by the time they reach the end of key stage 1 or 2, there needs to be an alternative form of statutory assessment. The review suggests that all schools have a wider duty to assess and promote development and progress than that represented in statutory assessment. In their view this should also be reflected in assessment arrangements for those not yet accessing subject based knowledge. For these pupils they suggest that the SEND code of practice 4 areas of need (cognition & learning, communication and interaction, social, emotional and mental health, and sensory and/or physical development) should provide the wider frame of reference for assessment. They therefore recommend that schools should assess pupils’ development in all 4 areas, but statutory assessment for pupils who are not engaged in subject-specific learning should be limited to the area of cognition and learning.

**Recommendation 4 - a statutory duty to assess pupils not engaged in subject-specific learning through 7 aspects of cognition and learning**

The review considered how cognition and learning can be demonstrated and assessed for pupils with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties, for whom it takes longer to acquire new concepts and skills and to establish them in a range of different contexts. The review’s recommendations build on the Complex Learning Difficulties And Disabilities Research Project which identified 7 inter-related indicators that can be used to inform the assessment of pupils with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties and provide evidence of pupil progress.

The Review suggests the 7 areas of engagement can be used as an observational framework to monitor the varying ways in which, and degrees to which, a pupil can demonstrate attention, interest and involvement in new learning. The also suggest that “the skills and concepts pupils
acquire through the application of these indicators form the necessary foundations for moving on to later subject-specific learning”. The 7 areas are:

- Responsiveness: change in a pupil’s behaviour that demonstrates he or she is being attentive to a new stimulus or reacting in a meaningful way
- Curiosity: demonstrates how a pupil is building on an initial reaction to a new stimulus
- Discovery: the changing ways in which a pupil interacts with, or responds to, a new stimulus, sometimes accompanied by expressions such as enjoyment and excitement
- Anticipation: demonstrates whether a pupil is able to predict, expect or associate a particular stimulus with an event
- Persistence: the extent to which a pupil is sustaining attention towards a particular item or action and is therefore beginning to develop conceptual understanding
- Initiation: demonstrates the different ways, and extent to which, a pupil investigates an activity or stimulus in order to bring about a desired outcome
- Investigation: measures the extent to which a pupil is actively trying to find out more about an object or activity via prolonged, independent experimentation

Recommendation 5 - schools should be free to decide their own approach to assessing progress for pupils not yet engaging in subject-specific learning

The Review says that pupils with the most severe or profound and multiple difficulties often do not make progress in a linear way. The review group accepts that an assessment profile for these pupils at any point in time will not necessarily be comparable to other pupils, and that their learning journeys are often unique. They suggest that it is neither possible nor desirable to set national expectations for what these pupils should have learned at a particular age or by the end of a key stage; assessment should be “tailored for the individual”. As schools already have the freedom to use any curriculum they feel is appropriate for the needs and requirements of these pupils, they should also have the freedom to assess them in a complementary way.

To support the implementation of recommendations 3, 4 and 5, the Rochford Review has developed some principles for assessing pupils not engaged in subject-specific learning against the 7 areas of cognitive development and learning. These good practice guidelines include:

- setting realistic, but stretching, success criteria specific to the pupil, and then setting out how progress can be monitored.
- the means of assessment should capture the pupil’s interest and be appropriate for his or her age and interests.
- it is good practice to engage parents and carers in dialogue about assessments.
- where possible, each of the 7 aspects of cognition and learning should be assessed in a range of different ways.
- assessments should evaluate whether the pupil is able to exhibit the different areas of cognition and learning independently or the extent to which support is required
- assessments should demonstrate whether a pupil is able to sustain new skills and understanding over time and whether a pupil is able to apply the indicators of cognition and learning in a variety of different situations.
- good assessment should look at all the 7 areas individually, but should also consider the whole picture. One assessment activity can assess more than 1 of the 7 aspects.
- overall assessments should be informed by evidence from a range of different sources and outside agencies.
assessment methods should be sufficiently flexible to be adapted to the needs of the pupil.
there is no expectation that pupils should be able to demonstrate attainment or progress in all 7 areas, just that assessments will take place to demonstrate whether they can.

Recommendation 6 - training should reflect the need for staff working in educational settings to have a greater understanding of assessing pupils working below the standard of national curriculum tests

The Commission on Assessment Without Levels recommended the development of training materials to improve understanding of good assessment within schools and across those working with schools, such as inspectors and regional school commissioners. The Review would like to see this work, both for initial teacher training and continuing professional development, take account of the need to develop good practice in assessing pupils with SEND and pupils working below the standard of national curriculum tests for other reasons, including disadvantage and EAL.

Recommendation 7 - Driving improvement in assessing pupils working below the standard of national curriculum tests

The review recommends that where there is demonstrable good practice in schools, it should be actively shared with other schools and that schools in need of support should actively seek out and create links with schools that can help to support them. In the absence of any outside authority (national or local authority) coordinating this type of school improvement activity, the review feels it is important that schools and multi-academy trusts (MATs) are pro-active. There should be a sense of a responsibility to share knowledge and experience where possible, and also a sense of duty to identify and pursue possible sources of support in schools where experience and confidence is lower.

Recommendation 8 - Responding positively to change

Although there is already good practice in many schools, the proposed reforms provide the opportunity to build on what is already happening in some schools and support further innovation and improvement. The review recognises the importance of schools engaging in research to support good practice, recommending that schools work collaboratively to develop an understanding of good practice in assessing pupils working below the standard of national curriculum tests. The report suggests that schools are well-placed to carry out this type of research, and that this can often be particularly beneficial when it happens across different types of educational setting. It also suggests that establishing mechanisms for evaluating practice is a mark of institutions investing in continuous improvement. The review further recommends mechanisms such as school governance and peer review because they provide appropriate scrutiny as well as support for a growing body of evidence and shared understanding of good practice in assessment.

Recommendation 9 - no requirement to for those working below the pre-key stage standards to submit assessment information to the DfE

Because the review group believe that the unique nature of learning and development for pupils working below pre-key stage standards requires a creative and tailored approach by schools to curriculum and assessment, it has therefore rejected any national data collection as this would inevitably impose constraints on schools. Schools will report that these pupils have not demonstrated evidence of all the statements at 'entry to the expected standard'. Assessment against the 7 areas of cognition and learning provides further information to support accountability
for the work schools do with these pupils, but this will be through discussions between parents, carers, schools and those working with them, such as inspectors, local authorities, regional school commissioners, school governors and those engaged in peer review to ensure robust and effective accountability for assessing pupils not engaged in subject-specific learning with SEND.

**Recommendation 10 - further work should be done to consider the best way to support schools with assessing pupils with English as an additional language (EAL).**

The report recognised that this covers a diverse group including pupils newly arrived to the country who may have come from difficult circumstances and those from monolingual, bilingual and multilingual home backgrounds. They therefore suggest that the right approach to supporting assessment for all these pupils may be different.

For the review it is important that these pupils can be assessed within wider statutory assessment arrangements. For those pupils judged to be working below the standard of national curriculum tests, teachers need to know how to apply the pre-key stage standards or how to assess against the 7 areas of cognition and learning effectively. Because the review had limited time, it has recommended further work in this area.

**Comment**

The [Rochford Review](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rochford-review-final-report) complements and extends the work of the [Commission on Assessment Without Levels](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/commission-on-assessment-without-levels-final-report) providing a coherent and inclusive approach for all pupils at whatever standard they are working at that is founded on good assessment principles. The pre-key stage standards seem to provide a better fit with the new curriculum than P-scales, although there may be debate amongst practitioners around the detail in the documents. The report will be consulted upon in early 2017.

The report’s recommendation of 7 engagement scales for those working below these standards may prove to be more contentious. SchoolsWeek published [Rochford Review: Experts praise ‘brave’ proposals for new SEN assessment](https://www.schoolsweek.co.uk/news/rochford-review-experts-praise-brave-proposals-for-new-SEN-assessment) providing a range of responses from headteachers and practitioners, most of which were positive. They also referred to some ‘SEN experts’ who felt that progress in the 7 areas of cognition and learning for those who were not working within subject pre-key stage standards should be collected and recorded by the DfE. The Times Education Supplement (TES) reported on the views of the National Association for Special Needs (NASEN) in [Rochford Review: changes to SEND assessment could lower expectations, warns charity](https://www.tes.com/news/feature/1/Rochford-Review-changes-to-SEND-assessment-could-lower-expectations-warns-charity) that the use of the 7 engagement scales could represent a lowering of standards for some pupils. Nasen feel the use of these engagement scales should not be statutory, with schools deciding where they are appropriate. Nasen are already collecting the views of members with a view to responding to the consultation.

**External Links**


STA: [2017 pre-key stage 1: pupils working below the test standard](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2017-pre-key-stage-1-pupils-working-below-the-test-standard) (July 2016)

STA: [2017 pre-key stage 2: pupils working below the test standard](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2017-pre-key-stage-2-pupils-working-below-the-test-standard) (July 2016)

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CSN POLICY BRIEFING

STA: 2017 interim frameworks for teacher assessment at the end of key stage 2 (July 2016)
STA: 2017 interim frameworks for teacher assessment at the end of key stage 1 (July 2016)
DfE & STA Commission on Assessment Without Levels: final report (September 2015)
The School, student and teachers network: Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities Research Project
GL Assessment: Assessment without levels for pupils with SEN (2015)

Related Briefings

Commission on Assessment without Levels – report and DfE response (October 2015)
Key stage 1 and 2 assessment for 2015/16 – DfE consultation (November 2014)
Primary assessment and accountability – DfE consultation (August 2013)
Draft SEN Code of Practice: local authority and institution roles and functions (October 2013)
Draft SEN Code of Practice: processes and children in specific circumstances (November 2013)

For further information, please visit www.lgiu.org.uk or email john.fowler@lgiu.org.uk

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