



Assessing progress in children with severe/profound intellectual disabilities: what are the issues?

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ABSTRACT

Capturing and recording progress made in schools by children with severe/profound intellectual disabilities has always been problematic as assessments based on academic subjects are not always achievable or appropriate. To ensure equality with mainstream children, performance (P) levels were introduced by the government to assess children with intellectual disabilities and were utilised on a national level. However, they have recently been criticised by the Rochford Review, and the government has asked special schools to provide their own assessments. This means that, unlike mainstream education, each school have to create their own assessments and possibly a reorganisation of their curriculum. Children in special schools are thus being treated differently to those in typical schools as there are currently no national progress levels for children with severe or profound intellectual disabilities and special schools are unable to ensure that their data is both valid and robust.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 December 2019
Accepted 15 January 2020

KEYWORDS

Assessment; capturing progress; equality; special education; holistic development

Difficulties with assessment can be illustrated by two pupils in a special school; a boy throws his shoes in lessons, and a girl splashes the teacher in a swimming lesson. Some people/teachers might regard these as challenging or difficult behaviours but in both cases they are a means of communication. The boy shows he wants something but does not have the language to communicate what that is, and the girl shows her enjoyment of her swimming lesson by splashing the teacher, indicating she wants the activity to continue. Assessing and analysing these types of behaviours occur every day in special schools as they are used as a basis for measurement to enable progress to be made. Teachers will analyse what can be done in lessons to help the boy's frustration and help the children to use alternate means of communication. However, it is very difficult to measure or record progress in these types of situations using the traditional or typical measures used in education.

Measuring the progress made by children in mainstream schools is generally concerned with their academic studies and is obtained using formative and summative assessments which are recorded and compared with their previous results (Black and Wiliam 2006). It is challenging to measure progress in children with severe/profound intellectual disabilities as they are generally not able to read and write except at the most basic levels, and many students only make lateral progress rather than the kind of linear progress seen in non-disabled children. Indeed, there are questions regarding the need for assessment of any kind in this population, due to their apparent lack of progress (Ware and Healey 2018), but in order to ensure the equality of choice and opportunity given to typical children there needs to be some sort of measurement to assess progress (Simmons, Blackmore, and Bayliss 2008). In point of fact, this could be considered a human right since it is through assessment that choice and opportunity are offered to children with ID (Intellectual Disabilities). This is even more important in the case of children who may need additional educational support such as speech and language therapy which will not be provided unless they can be accurately assessed as to the level of their needs. Further, there is the necessity for parents and carers of all children to feel that our education systems are ensuring that their children reach their full potential (Hodge and Runswick-Cole 2008). Thus, measuring progress must be achieved using other methods (Rayner 2011) and if the progress of these children cannot be measured on their academic performance, how are we to measure progress and what are we going to measure?

Prior to the 1970 Education Act, some children were considered to be 'other' and 'unsuitable for education' and were generally taught functional life skills in the institutions or hospitals in which they resided (The National Archives 2019). Due to the UK's government's policy that all children should be treated equally, the Department for Education (DfE) took over the role of educating all children. Changes were made in that hospitals and institutionalised establishments were closed and children with ID taught in special schools using an adapted curriculum to fit the children's needs. The National Curriculum was first introduced as part of the Education Reform Act in 1988 along with National Curriculum assessments, but teachers found that it was totally unsuitable for children in special schools (Rayner 2011). It was not until 1998 that Pre-National Curriculum Performance Scales (DfE 2014) or 'P Scales' (later called levels) were launched to assess students with intellectual disabilities working below the level of National Curriculum tests and assessments.

The advantage of the P levels was that all teachers of children with intellectual disabilities were able to use the same measurement of children's abilities across the country. If a child moved school and their record stated that they were working at Level P4 in Maths, their new teacher would know

generally the level of ability of that child without having to put the child through a number of assessments (Imray and Hinchcliffe 2012). All schools were also able to report data of their pupils' abilities allowing for special schools to benchmark progress nationally and compare and moderate their data with similar schools in the same way as mainstream schools.

However, the Rochford Review (Rochford 2016) recommended P levels were no longer fit for purpose as they were considered too limited to assess the complex difficulties associated with many children in special schools. The government response (2017) was to disapply P levels except for the first three P levels (P1–P3ii) which were retained in order to have a measurement in place for children with the most profound intellectual disabilities which record very basic states, movements and behaviours, and to introduce new pre-Key stage 1 and 2 standards.

Thus, statutory duty is currently for schools to report English and Maths levels when children are aged 7 years and 11 years. However, schools are expected to make their own assessments in other subjects according to the children's special educational and health needs, and there is no guidance as to what secondary special schools should do to assess progress either academically or otherwise.

In the UK, as there is no longer any prescribed format for the reporting of progress for secondary students who are working below 'Level 1' of the National Curriculum or for primary aged students except English or Maths, schools in the UK have the freedom to report utilising their own systems (Ofsted 2014). Students with intellectual disabilities often make little measurable academic progress, but progress can be recorded in a variety of areas including both academic and non-academic domains, and it is important that teachers can capture all the learning that takes place throughout the day and show that students can make progress. This could include capturing progress in communication skills, or social skills, or how students can generalise skills in different contexts. For example, a student may make progress during lunchtime routines by learning to collect their cutlery, tray and choose their food independently; or another student may develop their communication skills by learning to use a head switch to start a musical phrase, or to initiate group music playing.

It is essential to assess all the learning students make within a variety of areas to capture their strengths rather than focus on deficits due to the impact of their intellectual disabilities (Simmons et al. 2008). For example, life skills such as communication and independence are identified as key areas of learning for these students, therefore supporting the importance of assessing non-academic as well as academic subjects (McIntosh 2015). In addition, consolidating knowledge in different environments and situations is just as important as gaining new knowledge (McIntosh 2015; Rochford 2016).

Thus, holistic development, which can be described as intertwined areas of learning, is considered to be essential (Bautista et al. 2016).

The interrelationships between the areas of learning suggests the need to develop an assessment broadly similar to the Early Years Framework (DfE 2017). If we are to capture progress more holistically for all students with intellectual disabilities, it raises the question of the need to review the curriculum; for example, if we are to formally assess areas outside of academic learning such as in personal and social development or interaction, does the curriculum need adapting? In addition, how can schools ensure their data is both valid and robust, and whilst progress is so individual make judgements about groups of students?

As there is no longer specific guidance to measure progress, many special school teachers in the UK are writing their own levels and assessment systems or continuing with P and NC levels in the hope of something more definite being produced from national guidance. This is often a source of frustration, as schools even in the same borough are creating vastly different assessment systems, thus making moderation between schools much more difficult, and reverting back to the same situation for which P levels were initially created. While some teachers welcome the chance to re-organise or design a new curriculum and associated assessments, many teachers are left perplexed and exasperated by the fact that they have no statutory guidelines or framework to work with and are expected to create their own. And if schools are creating their own assessments, how can they ensure these systems are not just viewpoints or opinions but are valid assessment frameworks grounded in theory? This would never happen in mainstream schools, so why are special schoolteachers being left to cope with all this extra work without the time and resources to do so? Despite governments' policies promoting equality amongst all children and the need for inclusion of all, children in special schools are again being treated as 'other'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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