

# Pupil Achievement Profiles: An approach to Assessment without Levels

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The new curriculum for England gives schools the opportunity to move away from the notion of levels of achievement and determine how best to track the progress that pupils make.<sup>(1; 2)</sup>

I wish to propose a framework for monitoring and assessing pupils' achievement and progress which supports teaching and learning, is helpful to pupils, teachers, parents, school leaders and others and avoids some of the problems associated with the old "levels" system.

Pupil Achievement Profiles are based on grids which tease out the different areas of knowledge, skills, understandings and attitudes of a subject and list statements representing progression within these areas. The rows in the grids show the different areas of the subject. Statements, which are expected learning outcomes for each area, are listed in columns which correspond to school year groups. Statements are, wherever possible couched in "I can..." terms, using language accessible to pupils of that age-group.

Teachers and pupils use these grids (the Pupil Achievement Sheets) to build an on-going profile of the child's progress and achievement in the different areas of each subject by indicating what the child knows, understands and can do. So, in each subject, a child would have a Pupil Achievement Sheet which would show, at a glance, what he or she can do and therefore any strengths and weaknesses would be clear. This would represent their Achievement Profile for that subject.

## Where to go from levels

A major problem with the "levels" system that we, as teachers, have been working with until recently is that they do not carry the information that we need in order to best help the children make progress. A level was obtained either by a best-fit judgement against a series of criteria or by re-interpreting a test score into a level or (possibly worse) an artificially constructed sub-level. While the "numbers" (be they levels or points scores) are easy for others to use to make judgements about the performance of schools or individual teachers in comparison with others, best-fit by definition obscures any strengths or weaknesses. The latter is of particular concern to teachers as gaps may significantly inhibit opportunities for future learning. It is this information we need to provide our pupils with a coherent learning experience.

What teachers need, I would suggest, is an indication of strengths and weaknesses in a subject – for individuals, for groups, for whole cohorts and for schools. It is only by knowing this that we can plan effectively to match the curriculum to the learning needs of the children.

In order to make assessments of our pupils, teachers in the classroom have been considering the attainment of individuals in a range of aspects of their learning in each subject. So, for example, in history we have been thinking about how pupils use and evaluate sources of evidence; how well they can describe, compare, explain and give opinions about features of different historical periods and how well they communicate their thinking. In the assessment regime that has been in place across the country since 1989, this understanding has then been summarised in a number – a level

of attainment – which has been communicated to colleagues, to receiving schools, to parents and even to the children themselves. My argument is that the levels approach easily loses much too much information vital to the teaching and learning process.

## **Pupil Achievement Sheet and Pupil Achievement Profile: An example to highlight features of the approach**

Explaining the way a Pupil Achievement Profile is developed in a specific instance may make my proposal clearer. A Pupil Achievement Sheet for Year 5 Mathematics and Art and Design may be found at these links:

[http://mrjennings.co.uk/teacher/mathsroa/Y5\\_Maths\\_Progress\\_and\\_Target\\_Sheet.pdf](http://mrjennings.co.uk/teacher/mathsroa/Y5_Maths_Progress_and_Target_Sheet.pdf)

[http://mrjennings.co.uk/teacher/art/ART\\_Pupil\\_Achievement\\_Profile\\_Booklet\\_WEB.pdf](http://mrjennings.co.uk/teacher/art/ART_Pupil_Achievement_Profile_Booklet_WEB.pdf)

As a normal part of my maths lessons, I make sure that the children know which areas of maths we are considering in a lesson. I would be making connections with what the class or group had been taught before in this context – the Pupil Achievement Sheet helps support this. Learning Objectives for the lesson would be related to the next step and, again, the organisation of the sheet supports this by highlighting the element of progression.

Having statements on the sheet which show progression in the National Curriculum areas of learning helps me create graded informal pre-tests for use before the present learning to check that necessary knowledge and skills are remembered and in place to be built on. Evidence of learning and results of any informal post-tests allow me then to tell pupils (either by writing in their maths book or just telling them) what they may record on their sheet to show the further knowledge, skills and understandings they have demonstrated.

To take a specific example, the expectation is that, by the end of Year 5, pupils will be able to round any number up to 1,000,000 to the nearest 10, 100, 1000, 10,000 and 100,000. Along with many teachers, I would wish to identify which pupils cannot already round numbers to the nearest 10, 100 or 1000 sufficiently reliably (this being an end of Y4 learning outcome) and provide suitable activities for them to help reactivate that knowledge.

After the learning activities for the class, I would normally give a quick post-test a week or two later (usually at the start of a maths lesson) and, on the basis of this, ask some children to mark in one of the boxes next to the Place Value statement (in column 4 or 5 as appropriate for them) which represents what they were able to demonstrate in their books and in talk. (Interestingly, some children will tell me that they can now also round any numbers and ask if they can they put a tick in column 6 too - a quick challenge easily determines whether this is appropriate.)

At any point in the year, the pupil, the teacher, teaching assistants and parents, can see more or less at a glance areas of the subject in which the child has already achieved or exceeded end-of-year expectations and areas in which achievement is below end-of-Y4 expectation (or indeed ones which have not been approached in the current school year). This snapshot represents the Pupil Achievement Profile for maths at that time.

## Organisation of the Pupil Achievement Sheets: rationale

### Rows of the grids

As mentioned above, different areas of learning within a subject are separated out and these are presented in a series of rows. The different areas identified correspond to areas which might be the focus of one or more lessons and, for grids used at the school where I work, I have tried to make these divisions specific enough to be useful coherent categories without creating too many. I have used the areas highlighted in the National Curriculum document as my guide here wherever possible.

Some schools are using Learning Ladders<sup>3</sup> or Steps to Success as their main assessment tool. I like these as (like the items on the Pupil Achievement Sheets) statements are in age-appropriate language wherever possible and help the children recognise what they have already achieved and know what they are working towards. The rows on the Pupil Achievement Sheets correspond to these sequenced, progression statements. The grid format, retaining the good features of laddered steps, puts these strands of progression within the context of the whole subject. This adds the additional advantage that an individual's strengths and weaknesses within that subject are clear to the pupil, teacher, parent and others.

### Columns of the grids

Statements intended to indicate progression within each area of a subject are assigned to columns which are intended to relate to end-of-year outcomes and expectations. (The Programme of Study for the current maths national curriculum is organised in this way.)

Associating the statements with the school year does give us an easily understood way of communicating with parents and others beyond school.

For example, a particular pupil may be: *working in line with his/her age group expectations in Number (including counting, place value and recording number), Measurement and Addition and Subtraction. Work on written Multiplication and Division is about a year below expectation as is work on Maths Problems presented in words. However, his/her Geometry and Statistics is at nearly a year in advance of his/her age group.*

This seems to me to be much more helpful and comprehensible to people outside the education system than reporting that number, measurement and geometry work for this pupil is at 3A, multiplication, division and problems work is at 3C while he/she is performing at 4B in geometry and statistics.

## Fine-tuning assessment through the school year

Many schools are used to breaking the old levels into three progressive steps with pupils having "started to work" at a level, "working well" at a level or "working securely at all aspects" of a level. In APP terms attainment may be judged low, secure and high and both these are often related to sub-levels (c), (b) or (a) respectively. This notion of sub-division remains useful in relation to the steps on the Pupil Achievement Sheets and their Profiles.

As an illustration, having demonstrated in their work that they have just mastered adding and subtracting fractions with the same denominator (end-of-Y4 expectation) it is unlikely that they will be able to reliably and securely add and subtract fractions with denominators that are multiples of the same number (eg  $3/8 + 1/4$ ) straight away. They will first begin to be able to do this, perhaps with adult support or scaffolding before they can usually do this correctly by themselves and, later still, be able to do this reliably and independently. Three steps or divisions within a year (rather than three steps across two school years as in the previous assessment system) helpfully correspond to our three school-term year.

So, children who have achieved a prior step will be working towards achieving the next one in a given area of learning. They may require an adult or friend to help remember all the processes, they may need scaffolded activities, they may need help to know where and when to apply the knowledge or use the process for example. These pupils will be beginning to achieve at this new step and currently be low attainers at this point. Equally, for many of the areas of learning within a subject, there are several different statements at any one step. Pupils beginning to achieve at this new step may have mastered one or two of these, but fewer than half.

When they reach the point when, working without support (either of others or significant scaffolding) they generally produce correct answers (in maths, for me, this is about 75% - 80% of the time or being correct on almost all but the questions with the most challenging numbers or examples), then they are working well at this step. Again, this would be the designation if they had thoroughly mastered about half of the different statements at this step.

High attainment at a step would be recognised when a pupil is consistently able to show that they demonstrate success and/or when they have mastered all the separate elements identified at that particular step for that area of learning.

## **Communicating Assessment Outcomes**

Pupil Achievement Profiles, which tease out different areas of learning within a subject, retain the key information needed by teachers, the pupils themselves and their parents/carers. Knowledge of this information is, as I have suggested, a prerequisite of effective teaching and learning.

I recognise that one size does not fit all, however. The detail of the Pupil Achievement Profile is needed by the teacher (for both planning relevant new learning and for reporting) and by the child and parents/carers (so they may contribute to the identification of targets for learning and to recognise achievement in a way they can meaningfully relate to what they have done in school). Nevertheless, I accept that some kind of summary measure of achievement is necessary in order for teachers, head teachers and others to track rates of progress and to make comparisons between groups and thus ensure, for example, that appropriate provision is being made for vulnerable groups.

Because the progression steps (i.e. from one column to the next) within each area of learning represent a year's progress, then it is possible to statistically summarise any Achievement Profile with a number which has at least some currency. Teachers looking at the Achievement Profile of a child would easily be able to identify the step at which he or she was working. Moreover, although it currently remains untested, I would suggest that teachers would be easily able to use their

professional judgement to give a decimal point adjustment to this figure to indicate the extent of the child's further progress through that step. At the end of Year 4, the age-expectation for a child would be that their Pupil Achievement Profile score would be 5.0 – they would have achieved all the Y4 learning outcomes and be in a position to be fully ready to progress through Y5 learning. Halfway through Year 5 it would be expected to be 5.5 and at the end of Year 5 it would be expected to be 6.0. Halfway through Year 4, a child who was working a year ahead of expectation would have a Pupil Achievement Profile score of 5.5, and so on.

These numbers have no real meaning in educational terms and, I would maintain, should not be used as labels for children or to compare them individually since the implication is that “all Learning Outcome statements are equal” and there is no such assumption underlying the National Curriculum programmes of study. However, as noted above, I accept such summary measures are helpful and almost certainly necessary for the different purposes of Ofsted, head teachers, senior leadership teams, subject leaders and appropriate others.

Pupil Achievement Profiles produce “scalable” outcomes. In addition to the two outcomes elaborated above, teachers may wish to use a similar decimal numbering system to record, in a kind of short-hand form, a full Pupil Achievement Profile in a subject. So, for example, a child whose learning suggested that they were beginning to work on Counting step 5; were secure on Place Value step 4 and were already secure on Recording Number could be recorded as: 5.3; 4.7; 5.7 respectively on these areas. Such data could allow statistical comparisons between groups and summary graphical representations could also be constructed.

(The Pupil Achievement Profiles, being based on statements designed to be at age-related levels, should also link easily with new test result systems being developed which according to reports circulating are likely to be linked with age-related expectations and peer-group performance.)

## **Other beneficial features of the Pupil Achievement Profiles approach to assessment**

As already mentioned, use of the Pupil Achievement Sheets helps the children understand what they are learning and helps put this in the context of the subject as a whole and in the context of their prior learning. Statements are expressed in language which, in as far as is possible, they can understand and is what their teacher is using which, again, should help the children understand what they are learning and understand and even help identify targets. Further, it gives the children the language to discuss their learning and therefore supports the metacognitive aspects of learning which are increasingly recognised as being significant in helping to embed their learning and understanding.

## **Adopting the Pupil Achievement Profile approach to assessment**

Schools adopting the Pupil Achievement Profile approach to assessment would need to create for themselves (or find and adapt) end of year outcomes for each of the subjects being taught through the school. This will, I suspect, not be a one-off task and schools would wish to monitor and regularly review their sets of learning outcomes and update these as the curriculum develops.

## Pupil Achievement Profiles and the DfE Assessment Principles

The following criteria are those set out by the DfE<sup>4</sup> by which schools should judge systems of pupil assessment.

I would suggest that Pupil Achievement Profiles contribute in a significant way to a school meeting the appropriate standards in a way which maximises our aims to help the children reach their potential in all areas of development.

### Effective Assessment Systems:

Give reliable information to parents about how their child, and their child's school, is performing

a. Allow meaningful tracking of pupils towards end of key stage expectations in the new curriculum, including regular feedback to parents. [This is inherent in the design and content of the grids. Close reference to National Curriculum programmes of study and learning outcomes associated with age-related expectations make the tracking meaningful.]

b. Provide information which is transferable and easily understood and covers both qualitative and quantitative assessment. [Use of learning outcomes associated with age-related expectations and breaking down subjects into sensible elements make the assessment information easily understood and summary information would be very easily transferable. Pupil Achievement Profiles together with the results of optional End-of-Year tests meet this criterion.]

c. Differentiate attainment between pupils of different abilities, giving early recognition of pupils who are falling behind and those who are excelling. [Pupil Achievement Profiles not only facilitate early recognition of pupils who may be falling behind or excelling, but highlight areas within a subject in which a pupil may be falling behind and which may, if not addressed, give rise to problems for future learning. Similarly, strengths apparent within a subject may indicate dispositions and abilities which may be used to accelerate learning in other areas.]

d. Are reliable and free from bias. [Reliability will stand and fall on the quality of the wording of the learning outcome statements. These will be constantly under review. Judgments about bias are difficult to make at the moment. There should be no inherent bias in the National Curriculum programmes of study but gender bias, for example, in the use of a tool is as much of a risk, if not more so, than bias arising from the tool itself.]

Help drive improvement for pupils and teachers

a. Are closely linked to improving the quality of teaching. [This close link is a key feature of the Pupil Achievement Sheets and therefore the Pupil Achievement Profile.]

b. Ensure feedback to pupils contributes to improved learning and is focused on specific and tangible objectives. [Frequent use of the Pupil Achievement Sheets and the language in which Learning Objectives and Success Criteria are couched will made this a strong feature of the Pupil Achievement Profile approach.]

c. Produce recordable measures which can demonstrate comparison against expected standards and reflect progress over time. [The opportunity to convert the Pupil Achievement Profile into a decimal number for this specific purpose will make this easy.]

Make sure the school is keeping up with external best practice and innovation

a. Are created in consultation with those delivering best practice locally.

b. Are created in consideration of, and are benchmarked against, international best practice.

[This would be an on-going aim and we would recognise the necessity of it. As a class teacher, I have limited time in which to do this but professional reading would be my main approach.]

1. National curriculum and assessment from September 2014: information for schools DfE September 2014
2. Reforming assessment and accountability for primary schools DfE March 2014
3. <http://www.learningladders.info/> Learning Ladders Copyright © Learning Ladders Education Ltd 2014
4. Assessment Principles DfE Published: April 2014.