

Making sense of P Scales - Particularly P1 to 3

The P scales used to assess and report on the progress of our very special pupils may seem to be a code. We often refer to the Levels P1, P2 or P3 etcetera but to many, who are not familiar with the original P level descriptors, these letters and numbers are mystifying. How do those letters and numbers relate to our real children? Actually the roots of the P scales go back to some very commonsense thinking and language, first suggested in 1996 by Richard Byers and Erica Brown and if we know about that we can make better sense of the P scales.

The QCA 'Guidelines for planning teaching and assessing the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties'ⁱ (2009) contain an important table which draws from the work of those authors. The table describes ways that we might see children respond to experiences - they begin at the very earliest levels of learning. The words used in the table were important in the original development the P Scales, It is summarised below. The words in the column on the left describe progressively more active and complex forms of engagement that children might use in response to stimulation and interaction – they travel a journey from developing consciousness to independent learning.

Levels of response	
Encounter	Pupils are present during an experience or activity without any obvious learning outcome
Awareness	Pupils appear to show awareness, noticing that something has happened and, fleetingly focusing or attending to an object, event or person
Attention and response	Pupils attend and begin to respond, often not consistently, to what is happening
Engagement	Pupils show more consistent attention and show they can tell the difference between specific events objects and people in their surroundings
Participation	Pupils begin to share, take turns and the anticipate of familiar sequences of events, 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 or on the actions or responses of the others.
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

*The table is drawn from the work of Richard Byersⁱⁱ and Erica Brownⁱⁱⁱ
It is worth noting that both Routes for Learning and Quest for Learning which are the PMLD documents used in Wales and Northern Ireland both refer to the work summarised table above as a source*

If you look carefully into the P level descriptions published in the QCA guidelines you will find that they contain words from the table above. The table below illustrates how the words occur and re occur in successive levels, showing a degree of overlap between levels encouraging us to understand that pupils progress may involve a spiral or convection of development rather than simple precise linear steps. Just as the Welsh materials 'Routes for learning' recognise that pupils learning is not entirely linear so the P levels as originally described have an inherent flexibility which matches our pupil's pathways of learning. Which makes them very useful as observation tools for assessment for teaching – though some of the virtues of that flexibility are lost when they need to be strictly interpreted for data measurement purposes.

P Scales working towards The National Curriculum Level One

P4-8

Gaining skills and understanding

Practice skills, make and extend connections absorbing new information adapting to new ideas and becoming increasingly **creative learners**

P3

Participation - Involvement

Including developing exploration communication & using memory

- I. Communicate intentionally - eye contact or gesture etc. participate in exploration requesting events and routines.
- II. Emerging conventional communication to initiate and anticipate events .

P2

Attend -Respond - Engage—Coactive participation

- I. Begin to respond consistently accept and engage in coactive exploration .
- II. Begin to be proactive during interactions & cooperate in shared exploration, using briefly remembered responses and using some trial and improvement.

P1

Encounter - Aware - Developing Attention

- I. Encounter experience without obvious learning—may be reflexive, passive or resistant
- II. Emerging responses becoming aware of sensory experience developing attention to events



ⁱ 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

ⁱⁱ 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.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brown E.(1996) Religious Education for All. London: David Fulton