

Profiles, Tests and Tasks

Profiles

A profile is a description of features of a pupil's behaviour. Profiles have been devised to describe many aspects of behaviour, e.g. early communication (Kieran and Reid, 1987) complex aspects of language (Crystal, Fletcher and Garman, 1976; Crystal, 1992) or emotional and behavioural development (Bennathan and Boxall, 1998; QCA, 2001).

The primary purpose of constructing a profile is to enable an accurate description of the pupil's strengths and needs to be made – sufficient to provide a basis for planning a teaching programme. It identifies the skills that the pupil has achieved and suggests a way forward. However, a profile does not add up to a scheme of work – it does not tell what must be taught next even though it provides evidence to enable an informed decision to be made.

A profile is not a statement about true ability. As Crystal (1992) points out in relation to linguistic profiling, a profile provides a summary of performance. It tells little about level of understanding which can only be inferred. Much depends upon the adequacy of the sampling strategy. Clearly, it is not a realistic aim to arrive at a full understanding of a pupil's abilities and characteristics since it is only possible to observe selected aspects of the pupil's behaviour and then only in particular settings. And what constitutes an adequate sample? It is unwise to generalise but surely sampling should continue until a pattern emerges. In some cases five minutes of observation will be enough, in other cases sampling will have to go on for much longer and in a range of settings. Even so there will be little contextual evidence for what the pupil and others in the setting say and do.

Tests and tasks

In tests there is a standardised set of questions or tasks and prescribed procedures for administration. The aim is to elicit particular responses. These responses are then interpreted as measures of characteristics or capabilities of the pupil. Tests tend to be short and easy to administer and, therefore, there has to be a radical selection of the responses to be elicited. As a result, tests do not necessarily provide a guide to teaching objectives and strategies. Much more detailed assessment and analysis is required in order to determine what to teach next.

A feature of the past two decades is that teachers have been continually expected to provide evidence or proof of 'value added'. Standard tests and tasks have been devised at the behest of the state as a way of trying to prove the worth of teachers and schools. Perhaps this is one of the main reasons why children today are some of the most 'tested'. Tests provide a score or set of scores as a summary of achievement and the raw data can be subjected to all kinds of analyses as many schools have found to their cost. The negative impact on pupils, teachers and schools is why that teachers and others are seeking to exert pressure on successive governments to move away from a culture of disruptive testing and summative assessment in schools.

Tests do have a value of course if used with care and understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Taking the example of speech and language tests, there are a range of

published tests that have been standardised using a sample of pupils in order to gain an idea of the probable responses to test items. They are described as norm referenced because they relate the performance of the pupils to peers of the same age. Tests help us to focus on specific aspects of communication., for example the *Boehm Test of Basic Concepts* (Boehm, 2000a; 2000b) focuses on concepts of space, time and quantity.

Tasks

It is important to remember that, whatever test is used, it cannot provide a full picture of the pupil's language and communication skills. Another valuable tool in the assessment toolkit are criterion-referenced assessments. Part of the panoply of National Curriculum assessment now includes a range of optional tasks that teachers may use to gauge pupils' levels of understanding in relation to different aspects of various subjects.

In relation to the P Scales of the National Curriculum, the EQUALS organisation has designed PACE to enable professionals to carry out objective assessments of pupil attainment in a format that allows for straight forward conversion into P level 'performance descriptor' scores. The strength of PACE is that it seeks to give precision by carefully describing the conduct of assessment in terms of activities, presentation and settings. Success criteria are made explicit. Sample pages can be downloaded from the Equals website (<http://www.equals.co.uk>). The *Welsh Routes for Learning* assessment materials also provide criterion-referenced assessment in relation to important milestones in the development of communication, cognition and social interaction of pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties (Ware et al, 2006).

References

Bennathan, M and Boxall, M (1998), *The Boxall Profile: Handbook for Teachers*, The Nurture Group Network.

Boehm, A. (2000a) *Boehm Test of Basic Concepts* (3rd Edition) New York: The Psychological Corporation/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Boehm, A. (2000b) *Boehm Test of Basic Concepts* (Pre-School Version) New York: The Psychological Corporation/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Crystal, D. (1992) *Profiling Linguistic Disability*. 2nd edition London: Whurr Publishers.

Crystal, D., Fletcher, P. and Garman, M. (1976) *The Grammatical Analysis of Language Disability* London: Edward Arnold.

EQUALS (2005) *PACE 2: P-Scale Assessment Of The National Curriculum From EQUALS*. North Shields: EQUALS.

Kiernan, C. and Reid, B. (1987) *The Preverbal Communication Schedule (PVCS)*. Windsor: NFER-Nelson. Out of print.

QCA (2001) *Supporting School Improvement: Emotional and Behavioural Development*
Sudbury: QCA Publications.

Ware, J., Jones, W., Martin, P., Alton, L. and Loftus, P. (2006) *Assessment materials for learners with profound learning difficulties and additional disabilities*. Produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Group, Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, Castle Buildings, Womanby Street, Cardiff CF10 1SX.