



Chailey
Heritage
Individual
Learner
Driven
Curriculum

The Engagement Model – a year on.

September 2022

P levels 1 – 4, descriptors for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, have been 'abolished' and replaced with The Engagement Model, statutory since September 2021.

There were many faults with P levels but the biggest, in my opinion, is that they inevitably became a curriculum for pupils with special needs. This was because they were used as a measurement of pupil progress and teachers were required to show progress using 'data' from P level descriptors having been achieved. Realizing that many of these P levels were too big to show progress within, schools took to breaking them down into smaller steps. Businesses caught on that they were doing this and produced expensive software, with many more boxes to tick, and which gave headteachers lovely charts and graphs to show Ofsted. These were ridiculous (don't get me started!) but the serious point is that teachers needed to show progress up the P scales, in some instances linked to pay progression, so they started teaching to the P level descriptors, no matter the what the real life needs of the children were. I remember Mathew's teacher for the third year on the run trying to teach him the names of 2 dimensional shapes to tick a box. Why? For Mathew's good? No, it was all box-ticking.

So in the sense that schools are freed from that now that the Engagement Model and pre-key-stage standards (PKSS) have been brought in instead, this is a good thing (tho' as an aside, many, many schools have simply re-labelled the P Levels and continue to use them).

Firstly a brief mention of PKSSs. These are for children of roughly P4 up to P8 (the top P level) but still below level 1 of the National curriculum, defined as 'pupils engaged in subject-specific study' unlike those at P1 to P4. Data from testing these children has to be submitted. The tests are of reading & comprehension; writing; maths. (There is a warning in place stating that the criteria should not be used as a curriculum.) Unlike measuring by P level, the criteria are simple and it's quick and easy to grade a child's attainment levels, altho' who it's of use to is beyond me. Bizarrely, PKSSs are only in place for Key Stage 1 & 2. There is nothing after that.

So to The Engagement Model, good and bad aspects as there are both. I will start with the good, some of which, I'm extremely proud to say are in there because of Chailey Heritage's influence.

The good.

- Engagement as a fundamental principle for pupils making progress is sound, at whatever cognitive level they might be at. Professor Barry Carpenter's work with the complex learning difficulties and disabilities research project contains lots of very clever and interesting concepts. When we designed our own CHILD curriculum in 2014, engagement was the first aspect of the curriculum we looked at.
- The document itself published by the Standards and Testing Agency states that is for pupils 'not working at subject-specific study'. To me this is brilliant as it validates the fact that some children are not going to benefit from subject-based teaching: geography, science, literacy, history etc. It therefore gives schools with PMLD cohorts official permission not to have subjects on their PMLD curriculum. (We don't have any subjects on our curriculum, each child has their own individual targets, written with parents, teachers and therapists, aimed at making that child's life, and their family's, as good a possible.)
 - The recent downside to this is that in 2019 Ofsted introduced 'subject-based deep dives' as the fundamental instrument in their inspecting, including in special schools. Schools which had been brave enough to move away from subjects for PMLD pupils are now moving back. It will be an interesting discussion with the inspector when they phone up to work out which 4 subjects they will be deep diving into at Chailey Heritage...
- The documents gives a lot of freedom as to how the Engagement Model is implemented in a school. It gives freedom in the way progress is assessed, and freedom in how it is reported internally. It talks about 'qualitative' assessment providing evidence of progress, and how this can be part of forming 'a personalized curriculum and pedagogy for the pupil' which is, of course, exactly what PMLD pupils need – not subjects!
- The document again emphasizes that for this cohort, assessment needs to be holistic, looking at how they use their senses, how they improve their motor skills and communication, as well as engagement itself.
- Most importantly, in my opinion, is that it states: 'The Engagement Model does not use a numerical scale or provide a quantitative score. This is because the complex behaviours of pupils not engaged in subject specific study cannot be adequately by a single number'. This is what Chailey Heritage has been arguing since 2014. Even Prof. Carpenter's complex learning difficulties and disabilities research project produced an 'engagement scale' including a laborious scoring system to produce numbers. Why do we need numbers?!?!
- Schools have to tell the DfE at the end of key stages 1 and 2 how many pupils are being assessed using the engagement model, but do not have to submit data about progress. They state that: 'This is because the progress that these pupils make will be personal to them, and it is not possible to meaningfully consider data for these pupils.' Perfect. Exactly what we've been saying at conferences and in publications for years.
- 'Schools should report (internally) progress in the form of a qualitative narrative.' Again, perfect. Our annual progress report, part of the annual review, is

massively detailed, giving far more than numbers ever could. But they are simple in structure. For each important area of the child's life, including engagement, we describe exactly what they could do 12 months ago, what we have done or tried to do over the last 12 months to support progress, and give any other necessary context, and what they can do now.

The bad.

- There is one simple but fundamental and possibly very damaging flaw in the Engagement Model (as well as in the engagement scales I mentioned earlier), which is the concept of the assessments. The document gives schools the freedom to decide when to assess and how frequently. However this implies a set date and time for an engagement assessment. Jack will be assessed on the 14th of December at 10 am. Now this does upset me, it just doesn't work like that! There are so many factors which affect engagement and who knows what Jack is going to be feeling like, or doing, at that time? So when do we assess at Chailey Heritage? ALL THE TIME! All day, every day. Noting down observations of what engages the child, and what doesn't. making sure we're asking ourselves WHY we are wanting the child to be engaged with this particular object or activity – where are we hoping to go with it?
- Businesses. I very much expect that there will be products on offer, for schools to buy, which will 'help' schools measure engagement progress. Whatever is produced will take teacher time to implement, will be expensive, and won't help the child to progress. And if there's an engagement tick-box spreadsheet sold to schools, we'll be back to where we were with P Levels – the assessment tool becoming the curriculum.

Conclusion.

Study your pupils all the time that you are with them – we call this 'learning' them. Note down your observations – we use post-its – quick and easy. Try everything and see where you go. Be flexible with targets – no fixed number of them, no SMART targets, no set time limit, bin them if they turn out not to be useful, add new ones in when you spot something that may turn out to be something worth working on.

Ask WHY all the time – why are we doing what we are doing, and don't do anything you don't need to, including setting up discrete 'engagement assessment' sessions. PMLD teams should be assessing all the time, every day, discussing with each other and with parents, what we might try next.