Thoughts on Curriculum and Assessment.
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Curriculum
The Rochford Review, designed to tackle the thorny issue of assessment for pupils working consistently and over time within the P levels, has also thrown up some very interesting thoughts on curriculum in stating that

‘schools already have the freedom to use any curriculum they feel is appropriate for the needs and requirements of these pupils’ (Rochford Review, 2016, p20)

where ‘these pupils’ are defined as those who are not engaged in ‘subject specific learning’, particularly English and Maths as defined under the National Curriculum. It is recognised that Rochford draws this line around P4/5, but it has not said that we have to teach specific subjects to learners working at P4 and above, merely that the P scale descriptors describe subject specific learning as starting at P4/5, given that P1 to P3 are generic across all teaching and learning. Rochford did not after all, either have or seek the remit to give instructions on curriculum, as it’s terms of reference were strictly limited to KS1 and KS2 assessment.

Others suggest that the issue of subject specific learning, effectively the National Curriculum, is highly controversial for learners who are consistently and over time working within the P scales (Imray and Hinchcliffe, 2014; Imray and Colley, 2017). There is certainly a case to answer for the National Curriculum being an entirely inappropriate model if learners are never (by definition) ever going to get beyond it’s very earliest levels, and where most never even reach the start. It has been argued that

‘...children, young people and adults with severe or profound learning difficulties will not succeed in the National Curriculum, or indeed, in any curriculum model designed for neuro-typical conventionally developing learners. They will not succeed because they have severe or profound learning difficulties. It is not possible for them to succeed. If they could succeed, they wouldn’t have severe or profound learning difficulties’ (Imray and Colley, 2017, p58).

Such sentiments echo previous suggestions that a curriculum geared to the norm cannot be an appropriate model for those 70,000 or so learners with PMLD and SLD who make up less than 0.8% of the whole school population in England and Wales (Pinney, 2017) yet have the greatest complexity of need.

‘By definition, exceptional students require an extraordinary response from educators – something different from the ordinary, even if the ordinary is good........Failure to create these explicit structures to accommodate students at the extremes of performance distribution inevitably results in their neglect. They are forgotten. They don’t just fail a little. They fail a lot, and their noses are rubbed in their failures.’ (Kauffman, 2002, p259)
Mary Elliot School acknowledges the growing interest in the concept of a three tiered curriculum approach (Swiss Cottage School, 2014) which sees Informal and Semi-Formal curriculum models working in with the existing Formal model that is the National Curriculum. It is known that other Ofsted ‘outstanding’ schools besides Swiss Cottage, such as Priory Woods School in Middlesborough, The Bridge School in Islington north London, John F Kennedy School in Stratford east London, Three Bridges School in Bath, St Ann’s School in Hanwell, west London, Columbus Grange School in Sunderland and The Russett School in Chester, just to give some examples, have also adopted this approach, and we have spent time discussing the pros and cons with a number of them.

**Fig 1. The relationship between models in a three-tiered curriculum approach**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informal Curriculum</th>
<th>Semi-Formal Curriculum</th>
<th>Formal Curriculum</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PMLD P1 to P3 ish</td>
<td>SLD, SLD/ASD P4 to L1/L2</td>
<td>Academic, ASD/MLD, mild, or specific learning difficulties</td>
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In the model above, it is neither necessary nor advisable to adopt a hard line on which curriculum might be appropriate for each learner as it is evident that learners on the edges of a learning difficulties spectrum, such as are described by the terms PMLD, SLD or MLD, may benefit from some involvement in the adjacent curricula. That is, those assessed as P3 (i) and (ii) may benefit from some elements of a semi-formal curriculum; those on P4 or P5 from elements of an informal curriculum; learners working at P8 or L1 may well cover some elements of a formal curriculum. Similarly, learners working consistently and over time at levels at or even above L2 may still benefit greatly from elements of a semi-formal curriculum, especially in for example, independence.

There is therefore a fluidity about this model which both allows for and encourages a personalised (or individualised) approach, whilst still recognising that core elements of each curriculum will broadly fit the learning needs of all learners within the PMLD and SLD spectrums.

The logic behind this approach comes from the sure and certain knowledge that our learners can make progress within curricula specifically designed for them, but will struggle to do so within curricula that is not.

We believe that the nature and extreme complexity of both the severe and profound and multiple learning difficulty spectrums, as well as the absolute necessity of extensive repetition being built in to the learning process mitigates against fulfilling one’s potential in both academic and alternative curriculum models. Choices have to be made, because not making such choices leaves insufficient time in the school life of the learner. For us, the argument is made by the fact that, by definition, the very best that can be achieved by the most able on the SLD spectrum (that is, fulfilling their potential) is equivalent to the start of the academic model, and for most on the SLD spectrum and all
on the PMLD spectrum, well below the start. Why would anyone make such a choice when so much can be achieved through a non-academic model?

This also opens up another debate about the relevance of neuro-typical (mainstream) time frames. There is some logic to seeing the validity of a curriculum framework as being in its ability to prepare the learner for the next stage, whatever that might be. In UK mainstream terms, there is a fairly seamless transition from 3 to 5 (early years), from 5 to 11 (primary), from 11 to 16 (secondary), from 16 to 18 (sixth-form), from 18 to 21 (university) and then on to work. Each curriculum model builds on and extends from the last.

These time frames however do not make sense and therefore cannot apply to those on the SLD or PMLD spectrums, because of the degree of repetition required, the difficulties with communication and cognition, and the naturally extended time required for progress to be established within independence, fluency, maintenance and generalisation even within a specific SLD or PMLD curriculum model. For these learners the key ages are 2 or 3, when they enter the education system and 19 when they leave it. It is not an accident that the majority of UK special schools specifically for those with SLD and PMLD, cater for the 2 to 19 age range, and see this as a perfectly normal and sensible arrangement. For learners on the SLD spectrum, there may be some logic in delivering a broadly academic framework, particularly within literacy and numeracy, until the age of 8 or so, because this would allow sufficient time (i) to assess the accuracy of a SLD or PMLD ‘diagnosis’ and (ii) to make a reasonable judgment on academic potential. A reasoned, informed, experienced and expert multi-disciplinary judgement can then be made, and if it is decided that a non-academic route is more appropriate, still leave 10 or 11 years to concentrate on a specialised SLD or PMLD curriculum model.

Our conclusions on curriculum and curriculum design are therefore that the current school cohort (and indeed, cohorts for the foreseeable future) are not best served by the National Curriculum alone. Our experience, concurring with a number of outstanding special schools, has led us to adopt a much more flexible and personalised approach which sees the curricula on offer changing to meet the needs of the pupil rather than the other way round. The learner must be at the centre of curriculum design.

Assessment
Returning to the Rochford Review, and its primary function of determining on assessment for learners working consistently and over time below age related expectations, we believe that there are a number of other key statements.

As it is neither possible nor desirable to set national expectations for what these pupils should have learned at a particular age or by the end of a key stage, the members of the Rochford Review do not believe it is appropriate to apply a framework to statutory assessment that evaluates their attainment in that way. It would be neither fair to the child, nor to the school.’ (Rochford Review, 2016, p20)

‘As assessment for pupils with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties should be suitable for each pupil’s individual needs, the review does not feel that it would be appropriate to prescribe any particular method for assessing them.’ (ibid, p6)
That is, schools should be responsible for determining the best way to assess the attainment of their particular pupils, and that this must be an ipsative judgement, rather than one which is comparative to other learners. This is an important statement, as it establishes that attempts to design assessment schemas by using estimations of ‘expected’ progress over a specific time period (such as was used with the P scales and other variations of this, notably Pivats and B Squared) are not effective and can often be counter-productive in their tendency towards assessment led teaching.

‘Assessment is a good master but a terrible servant……..Too often we start out with the idea of making the important measureable, and end up making the measurable important.’ (Williams, 2015).

Nevertheless, Mary Elliot School accepts the fundamental need for accountability and fully supports the notion that

‘schools must be able to provide evidence to support a dialogue with parents and carers, inspectors, regional schools commissioners, local authorities, school governors and those engaged in peer review to ensure robust and effective accountability.’ (Rochford Review, 2016, p7)

With this in mind we have adopted a wide ranging 'basket of assessments' after the approach mooted by Swiss Cottage School (2014).

**Figure 2. Basket of Assessment Approach**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAPP (Mapping and Assessing Personal Progress) for SLD learners working on a Semi-Formal Curriculum</th>
<th>Routes for Learning for PMLD learners working on an Informal Curriculum</th>
<th>P Scales as a broad guide to the cognitive and academic levels of the school’s cohort</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PKeS (Pre Key Stage) Standards for all learners engaged in SSL</td>
<td><strong>A BASKET OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND APPROACHES</strong></td>
<td>Engagement Scales for all learners not engaged in SSL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longitudinal individualised case studies, using apps such as Evidence for Learning</td>
<td>External accreditation schemes such as Moving On or ASDAN</td>
<td>Rigorous internal and external moderation</td>
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Our conclusions on assessment of pupil progress are therefore that

i. accurate formative and summative information is vital, but that this cannot be achieved by a single measurement
ii. the assessment schemas used must be able to show both lateral and linear progress, and reflect the real progress made by learners wherever and however that may be made
iii. the assessment schemas used need to reflect the curricula on offer and the effectiveness of teaching, not drive them.

References