PROMOTING GOOD PROGRESS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

CAROLINE WHITING
PAUL RICHARDSON

LM Learning Matters

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DIFFERENT WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING PROGRESS

KEY WORDS: ASSESSMENT; CURRICULUM; KNOWLEDGE; LEARNING

KNOWLEDGE AND VALUE – THE IDEAL PUPIL PRODUCT

> *Progress ranks with education and science as three of the most used and abused words in our contemporary vocabulary.*
>
> (Bossard, 1931)

On the surface, the term 'progress' may seem clear and incontrovertible. It is a term frequently used in schools, by the government and by other individuals or organisations involved in primary education. The Oxford English Dictionary defines progress (noun) as the '[o]nward movement following a prescribed course, in a specific direction, or towards a particular place' (OED, 2023). Or, in its verb form, progress is defined as '[t]o go or move forward or onward in space; to proceed, advance (through or along some course, path, etc.)'. Progress, therefore, is understood to be movement between points or, more precisely, an advancement, from one point to another, often following a specific course or path. How does this definition apply to the context of primary education? What are these 'points' and how do we move between them? And how do we know which path or direction we are supposed to be moving towards?

In seeking answers to these questions, we will try to clarify the idea, and use, of the term 'progress' in primary education. It will hopefully become clearer that the concept of progress is particularly obscured by its association with other elements within primary education, primarily knowledge, curriculum, learning and assessment. Additionally, as we explore the concept of progress together, we will see how our understanding of this term does not exist in isolation but is in fact framed and influenced by our assumptions regarding knowledge, curriculum, learning and assessment. This is why is it important to briefly unpick these concepts and a few of the assumptions behind them; in particular, how our own assumptions may have influenced our own understanding of and use of the term 'progress' and other associated terms with this concept.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) defines 'progress' as '*knowing more (including knowing how to do more) and remembering more*' (Ofsted, 2019a p.4). Ofsted do clarify that 'progress' '*should not be defined primarily by meeting standards or hitting the next data point*'. Instead, they explain that *'learning the curriculum itself is progress'* and stipulate that if pupils are attaining *'within a well-sequenced, well-constructed curriculum, they are making progress'* (Ofsted, 2019a p.5). This description aligns well with this definition of progress shared at the beginning, of it being a movement that follows a

prescribed course, or towards a particular place (OED, 2023). Ofsted interpretation of progress is very much situated within the discipline of cognitive psychology, which defines learning as an alteration in long-term memory. Cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience have had a significant impact on educational policy and practice within England. Evidence of this can be seen in the level of research done by the Education Endowment Fund and the increased presence of key concepts such as memory retrieval in the Core Curriculum Framework and Early Career Framework. Indeed, scientific terms such as retrieval practice, cognitive load and spaced learning have become part of the established lexicon in primary school settings and no doubt is something you have been exposed to in your career as a teacher.

There are those such as Professor Claxton (2021) who oppose the idea that learning, and consequently progress, can be reduced to 'knowing more' and 'remembering more'. He argued that drilling facts and formulae into long-term memory works quite well for some limited types of learning, but we need to be careful. Otherwise, knowledge can end up being reduced to 'facts' and 'subject content' which children are then tested on further down the line. This reductive view towards learning, argues Claxton, ignores significant learning that helps children to take penalty kicks, empower and enable them to tell entertaining stories, support children's appreciation of artists such as Matisse or understand the complexities of climate change. Claxton (2021) explains that children cannot learn to do these things by merely learning about them or by being told and tested. He argues that they need to listen, read, remember, rehearse and reproduce.

Additionally, Nuthall (2001) raised concerns regarding any reductive perception of knowledge, and subsequently progress, which carries the position that both learning and consequently progress can be reduced to numerical values. The attraction of this approach is that it enables, and encourages, comparisons to be made between individual child and their peers. Further still, this reductive approach carries the assumption that progress can still be measured in a meaningful and accurate way (Selfridge, 2019) that benefits children. As we further explore this later in the book, it will become apparent that this emphasis on reducing progress to numerical values becomes less about informing and improving teaching and learning, and instead more about holding schools and teachers to account (Selfridge, 2019). Due to performativity (Ball, 2023) and established accountability measures within education, such as school league tables, there is a vested invest in ensuring this numerical-based approach is maintained within education.

Selfridge (2019) argues that systems that rely on this reductive approach, particularly national assessment systems, have a powerful sense of self-assured certainty in the use of numerical values to denote progress. Alarmed by this self-assuredness, Selfridge poses the question, 'what if comparing an individual child's progress with another is in fact a complete fallacy?' This question targets the held assumption that accurate (and fair) comparisons can be made between similarly aged children and can do so without including significant factors such as the children's social, economic and geographical backgrounds and experiences. Selfridge recognises how these factors can have a considerable influence on children's learning and progress, as we will come to see later in the book though it might not be in the way that you anticipate or presume. Nutall (2001) and Selfridge (2019) share concerns that numerically measurable progress will be assumed to be most valuable, or worst still, will be considered the only valid option in recognising progress in education.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROGRESS AND OTHER KEY CONCEPTS

In exploring our understanding of 'progress', we will come to see that this concept is inextricably linked to certain crucial terms within education, principally, curriculum, knowledge, learning and assessment. All of

these play a vital role when considering and discussing the concept of progress. We have provided a diagram to help illustrate how these key terms relate to one another (see Figure 1.1). The three/four spokes of the 'progress wheel' are crucial in understanding and discussing progress in any educational setting. The first spoke is knowledge. Knowledge plays a key role because, from an instrumental perspective, knowledge makes up the constituent units or 'points' mentioned earlier in this chapter that children travel or progress along. Second is curriculum; this is the choosing and sequencing of knowledge that children will learn; in other words, the role of the curriculum is arguably to provide the designated/specific path that children follow. This is to ensure clarity and consistency on what should be measured to discern whether progress has taken place. The third is learning. Learning is considered the process with which enables or facilitates the advancement of progress. The last is assessment, which plays a crucial role in measuring and recognising the movement/advancement that has taken place and help signify whether 'progress' has occurred.

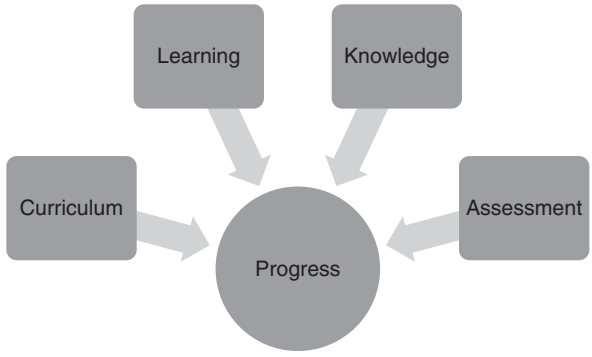

Figure 1.1 Key concepts

KNOWLEDGE

When the word 'knowledge' is used by others or yourself, how do you perceive this term? What do you believe qualifies as knowledge, and consequently, what does not qualify as knowledge? It is important to recognise how your own viewpoint towards knowledge is influenced by your experience of education, all of which contributes to and frames your beliefs towards knowledge and the purpose of education as well. This chapter will not be able to give justice to the enormous amount of literature on knowledge; the purpose is to encourage you to reflect on your own assumptions around knowledge, in particular what we regard as knowledge, and consequently what we might disregard as 'knowledge'. Currently, there is strong emphasis on the need to provide a 'knowledge-rich curriculum' in schools, to provide opportunities for all children and to ensure 'levelling up' occurs within schools (Gibb, 2021).

One major influence behind this increased emphasis on a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum in schools is the American educationalist and literary professor, E.D Hirsch (1988). He argued that the main purpose of education ought to be focused on ensuring children achieve social mobility, especially those children he considered were from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development describe social mobility as a 'change in a person's socio-economic situation' so they can gain 'equality of opportunity', regardless of the socio-economic background of the individual, or because of their *'gender, age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, birthplace, or other*

circumstances beyond their control'. Hirsch (1988) claims that all children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, require a certain level of cultural literacy to achieve social mobility. Claxton (2021) states that this cultural literacy is often tied to the dominant (and privileged) culture within that society. This emphasis on ensuring all children gain this 'cultural literacy' can be seen in Gibb's assurance that the National Curriculum offers children the 'best that has been thought and said' (Gibb, 2021). Ofsted have expressed a similar point of view, evident in their definition of progress being '*knowing more'* and '*remembering more*' (Ofsted, 2019a p.4). They state that children need to be introduced to certain forms of 'essential knowledge', echoing word for word Gibb's sentiment above: 'the best that has been thought and said' (Ofsted, 2019b p.10).

In response to these calls for 'knowledge-rich' curricula, Claxton (2021) raises the issue of what type, or sort, of knowledge should be included within our curriculum? He explains that there are various forms of knowledge so *'we need to be clear about which forms of knowledge we want our schools to be rich in*' (Claxton, 2021 p.32). Additionally, Claxton advocates the teaching of skills and the inclusion of discussing these skills explicitly with children. He argues that this current 'knowledge-rich' approach is deliberately separating the teaching of skills and the teaching of 'knowledge' at opposite sides of the spectrum. One concept that links strongly with this idea of a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum is 'powerful knowledge'. The educationalist Michael Young (2014) advocated this idea of 'powerful knowledge'. He described it as (relatively) context-free knowledge, which offers opportunities for pupils at all ages to move beyond their own experience, to acquire knowledge that is not tied or bound by their experience. What is particularly attractive about the idea of powerful knowledge is the intended emphasis on children being introduced to new ways of thinking and subsequently being able to think about alternative futures (Young et al., 2014). So, children have power over their own knowledge and gain insight into what they can do to influence their own futures (Young et al., 2014).

Powerful knowledge and cultural literacy are considered to be important for those children who are recognised (and consequently labelled) as 'disadvantaged' as they '*may not have access to cultural capital, both in the home and then in their* school' (Ofsted, 2019b p.8). This 'cultural capital' is considered essential if children are to '*succeed in life'* and become *'educated citizens'* (Ofsted, 2019b p.10). Recent interpretations of this term used by organisations such as Ofsted are closer to Gramsci's (cited in Lears, 1985) idea of cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony was the idea that most of the population within society consented to having preferred social values and norms imposed upon them by another more dominant and privileged group. This was accomplished through the dominant group's use of status and prestige within society which emphasises that certain 'culture literacies' are better to have over other cultural literacies, principally the cultural literacies of the privileged group which tends to be white middle class, in order to succeed in this society. Though this will be discussed further in chapter, it is important at this stage to recognise how this perspective inadvertently positions various cultural literacies, and cultural capital, into a hierarchical relationship. Evidence of this can be seen in the use of terms such as 'high' cultural capital, used by educationalists like Quigley (2022). It begs the question, 'what or, more importantly, who decides on what cultural capital is 'higher' than another?' Additionally, how does this emphasis on certain dominant cultural literacies over others influence educational policy, schools' institutional cultures and the personal experiences of children?

Another major influence on the concept of knowledge has been this idea of the 'knowledge economy', particularly people's perception of the purpose of education, and what should be taught in schools.

This idea places great emphasis on education being about preparing children for the job market, so schools should be focused on providing the skills, learning and knowledge to innovate to successfully participate in the economy (Ball, 2023). Moore and Young (2001) argue that as we have become a 'knowledge society', this will require more 'knowledge workers'. Thus, the expectation would be that children would need to learn '21st-century skills' to successfully thrive as citizens and workers in the 21st century (Partnership for 21st Century Skills cited in Biesta, 2019). Biesta (2019) argues that emphasis on the economy has been highly influential within educational policy, but it can result to a reductionist approach towards education which only favours literacy and mathematics, leading foundation subjects to be considered less essential. This way of interpreting knowledge, and the purpose of knowledge, is argued to be driven by economic imperatives which downplay the importance of 'powerful knowledge' which is believed to be required to critically engage with the world. This economic emphasis could lead, Biesta argues, towards a one-size-fits-all education that places intense pressure on teachers and schools to resolve the social and economic issues within society.

In response to his own question concerning which forms of knowledge we want our schools to be rich in, Claxton (2021) in his book *The Future of Teaching and the Myths That Hold It Back* has provided alternative perspective towards different forms of knowledge, included in the table below (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Forms of knowledge (Claxton, 2021 pp.32–33)

Type of knowledge	**Description**
Rote knowledge	Things you can retrieve and repeat, but which you may have no deep understanding of. Some of this may be useful, for example, learning your times tables by rote. Some of it may not be.
Factual knowledge	Isolated pieces of information that are taken as true.
Maxims	Rules of thumb that you know when and how to apply. Maxims are things you must remember to follow under specific circumstances, as guides to action. You can verbalise them, but they don't reflect states of the world; they tell you how to act.
Expertise – aka tacit, implicit or procedural knowledge	This is what philosophers call knowing how as opposed to knowing. . .as expertise becomes more subtle and nuanced, so the ability to articulate what you are doing becomes harder and harder.
Memories and impressions	Recollections of specific experiences. Memories present themselves to us as reliable records of our past, but we know only too well that a vivid memory and a strong feeling of 'having been there' are not always accurate. So, are memories and impressions strictly knowledge or not? And who is to say?
Feelings, emotions and intuitions	Being moved by a piece of music or a poem or having a hunch about the right way to proceed count as valid kinds of cognition.

Claxton (2021) argues that those who support a knowledge-rich curriculum are trying to re-create a traditional grammar school curriculum for all schools. Evidence of this approach can be seen in Nick Gibbs' speech to the Social Market Foundation panel event, where he states:

> *Since 2010, the reforms that we put in place have been driven by the idea that the transmission of rich subject knowledge should be the priority for schools.*
>
> (Gibbs, 2021)

In doing this, Claxton's concern is that in creating these 'knowledge-rich' curricula, certain types of knowledge identified by Claxton such as memories, impressions, feelings and emotions will be classified as invaluable knowledge. What is deemed valuable or invaluable is also dependent on whether this knowledge can be reduced to measurable, numerical values and consequently can be tested. This leads to 'invaluable knowledge' having to compete with other types of knowledge that are considered far more valuable and may subsequently lead to the former being 'squeezed out of the classroom' (Claxton 2021).

CURRICULUM

Priestley (2019) explains how the concept of curriculum is often contested and misunderstood. Simply put, curriculum means a course of study. Priestley explains that word is derived from the Latin word meaning 'racecourse' or 'race' and has come to mean a general course which conveys the idea of going somewhere in a predefined direction. Priestley and Biesta (2013) claim that there is a close relationship between the two concepts knowledge and curriculum, because assumptions about the former contribute towards defining the structure of the latter.

Priestley (2019) does insist that the racecourse definition above does not sufficiently help us to understand the complex processes that take place in designing and implementing a curriculum. This is especially as the term 'curriculum' comes to mean different things to different people; additionally, the term 'curriculum' has a complex relationship with such concepts as pedagogy and assessment. Rather than being an objective and value-free process, Priestley (2019) believes that curriculum planning is fundamentally a political process because it involves and asserts certain values and (normative) judgements over other areas within education. For instance, Young (2014) states that curriculum can be considered the knowledge that children will acquire whilst at school, and pedagogy relates to the activities that teachers will prepare for these children to enable them to acquire this knowledge specified by the curriculum. From Young's point of view, these aspects are linked to one another, but are not influenced or dependent on the other. Priestley, on the other hand, claims that specific curriculum-planning models can exert a major influence on pedagogy:

> *For instance, a framework that emphasises content to be learnt might encourage teacher-centred approaches to teaching, whereas a model based on processes and skills may encourage activities that are student-centred.*
>
> (Priestley, 2019)

Therefore, this and similar processes in education are not value free. Instead, we need to ask important questions regarding curricula such as 'Whose curriculum?' 'Who is it for and who chooses it?'

Some believe that content should be chosen to meet children's needs and/or interests. Others suggest that there are bodies of knowledge that have intrinsic value or help us access society's conversation, and which should be taught to all children. For instance, Young and Muller (2013) believe that children will be disadvantaged if they are not taught knowledge from the academic disciplines (which are recognised bodies of knowledge developed over generations by scholars using rigorous methods). Young (2014) argues that what distinguishes schools from other social institutions such as the family and work/business is that school's primary concern, '*as embodied in the specialist professional staff they recruit, and in their curriculum, is (or should be) to provide all their students with access to knowledge*' (p.8).

This links with the discussion earlier in this chapter on 'powerful knowledge' which is concerned with introducing new ways of thinking that will empower children to think about alternative futures.

To help provide an overarching sense of the different curriculum-planning models, Kelly (1999 cited in Priestley, 2016) offers three models and explains that each model is cohesively linked with an underlying purpose and particular conception of knowledge, as well as a preferred pedagogical approach (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2 Curriculum planning models (Kelly, 1999 cited in Priestley, 2016)

Curriculum-planning model	**Description**
Curriculum as content and education as transmission	The starting point for this model is the content to be taught, often neglecting questions of purpose, and frequently conflating knowledge (an end of education) with subjects (one of various means available for accessing knowledge).
Curriculum as product and education as instrumental	In this approach, education is defined as assessable statements, such as learning outcomes, often specified in great detail across multiple linear levels. This approach has been associated with bureaucracy, over-assessment and instrumental 'tick-box' approaches to curriculum development (eg, Priestley and Minty, 2013).
Curriculum as process and education as development	In this approach, planning will start with consideration of purposes and values, and content and methods are selected to be fit for purpose. Process approaches can be complex and demanding on schools and teachers.

A curriculum can become technicist in its approach, which can result in learning becoming a disjointed 'tick-box' process, leading teachers to become too focused on checking that children have acquired competency (Priestley and Biesta, 2013) or the right type of knowledge (Hirsch, 1988; Young, 2014). Biesta and Priestley do argue that an appropriate task for curricula is to help emancipate students from the existing world to be able to foster a sense of critical democratic agency.

LEARNING

It is important to recognise that learning is not exclusively gained in the classroom environment but, like the discussions earlier regarding knowledge, what is counted as 'learning' will differ and depend on your point of view. Pritchard (2018) provides a useful table to portray the range of definitions concerning the process of learning (Table 1.3):

Table 1.3 Definitions of learning (Pritchard, 2018 p.1)

A change of behaviour as a result of experience of practice.
The acquisition of knowledge.
Knowledge gained through study.
To gain knowledge of, or skill in, something through study, teaching, instruction or experience.
The process of gaining knowledge. A process by which behaviour is changed, shaped or controlled.
The individual process of constructing understanding based on experience from a wide range of sources.

Unsurprisingly, there is a repetition of one specific key term: knowledge. There is also a recognition in a few of these definitions, that learning also occurs through experiences and how our behaviours or understanding are changed or reshaped by this (new) knowledge or experience. Learning plays a crucial role in understanding the concept of progress because it provides the path and the process with which we recognise children's progress.

Within school environments, learning can sometimes be interpreted as both process and, contradictorily, as a product. You may come across examples of this in your school setting where the term 'learning' has been used as an alternative to 'work', for example, teachers or support staff using expressions such as 'Talk to me about your learning'. Or in staff meetings, the term 'learning' almost being used as a synonym for 'productivity', for instance, 'How can we improve learning?'. Biesta (2015) would arguably attribute this to the increased 'learnification' of education and educational discourse. 'Learnification', Biesta explains, includes the rise of a 'new language of learning' within education. This new language includes referring to pupils, children and adults as 'learners' and the redefining of teaching as 'facilitating learning', 'learning opportunities' or 'learning experiences'. The expansive use of the term 'learning' within education, in particular, steps to conceptualise it as a 'product' rather than as a process, is arguably motivated by the need to capture and quantify this elusive concept for assessment and comparison purposes.

Pritchard (2018) argues that there has been a substantial reduction in time and opportunity to learning about 'learning', and the different theoretical standpoints on this process, within initial teacher education courses in the United Kingdom. This has arguably been in response to the emphasis by the government for beginning teachers to focus on 'what works' from those classrooms and schools that have been identified as 'successful'. During the time of Pritchard's writing, 2018, there may have been less emphasis, or perhaps less time available, on initial teacher training courses to ensure teachers knew about and understood the mechanics of the learning process. There is certainly, as Pritchard comments, some recognition in the Teachers' Standards which states, teachers must 'demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how pupils learn and how this impacts on teaching' (DfE, 2011). And that teachers are required to have a 'secure understanding of how a range of factors can inhibit pupils' ability to learn' (DfE, 2011). Perhaps part of the reason for the reduction of time being spent on learning theories is that they do not give teachers instantaneous ready-made tools to use in teaching (Brante et al., 2015 cited in Pritchard, 2018), which tends to be the preferred outcome in following a 'what works' approach. Despite this, Brante et al. do emphasis the critical value of classroom practice that is underpinned by a sound knowledge and understanding of current, and other relevant, theories related to learning.

ASSESSMENT

From nursery to university, children are constantly assessed (Wood, 2011), and with the adoption of the reception baseline, as we will see later in Chapters 2 and 3, this process seeks to start measuring pupil progress from the age of 4 (Richmond and Reagan, 2021). When considering the purpose and selection of specific assessment methods, McIntosh (DfE, 2015c p.18) explains that the following elements should be considered:

- Why pupils are being assessed.
- The things which the assessment is intended to measure.
- What the assessment is intended to achieve.
- How the assessment information will be used.

Wood (2011) argues that assessment could be interpreted more broadly to include even non-verbal cues from teachers, such as certain looks and gestures, which could also be recognised as forms of 'assessment'. The choice over which forms of assessment to use, or value, is dependent on how we interpret the nature and purpose of education. Additionally, how these are interpreted will be influenced by certain major players such as the government. As McIntosh (DfE, 2015c) explains, different forms of assessment can, and will, be used for different purposes by different interested parties and stakeholders, including pupils, parents, staff, school governors, the government, and of course Ofsted. For instance, national statutory assessments such as the standardised assessment tasks (SATs) are used by a range of individuals and organisations. For certain individuals and organisations, '*SATs are an invaluable tool for measuring the attainment and progress of both pupils and schools in an objective and consistent manner across England's 16,800 state-funded primary schools'* (Richmond and Regan, 2021 p.1).

There are concerns that SATs can be a stressful, burdensome and potentially an unnecessary way to monitor pupils and schools, so they need to be reformed or scrapped completely (Richmond and Regan, 2021 p.1). Recently, research has shown that many teachers, researchers, educators and parents have been concerned about statutory assessment processes in England (Wyse et al., 2022). These concerns are motivated by the negative impact these assessments can have in presenting children as failures and be interpreted as a measurement of their future potential (Wood, 2011). For instance, a survey conducted by the National Education Union in 2018 found that 89 per cent of the 1,254 teacher respondents agreed that SATs had negatively affected pupils' wellbeing, and 86 per cent thought the SATs narrowed the curriculum (cited in Wyse et al., 2022). Furthermore, these types of assessments can reduce learning to the memorisation and regurgitation of facts and information, which particularly focus on propositional knowledge (Claxton, 2021).

This has plausibly contributed to schools feeling they needed to 'teach to the test' or narrow the curriculum (Richmond and Regan, 2021 p.70) to ensure children knew what they needed to know for the test. Evidence of this can be seen in Bradbury et al.'s (2021, cited in Wyse et al., 2022) study which reported that preparation for high-stakes assessments had altered both classroom and pedagogical practices, which included a narrowing of the curriculum. Claxton (2021) argues that these changes in pedagogical practices can rely on more knowledge transmission-based approaches, where teachers tell children important things; this is repeated to ensure children become proficient in memorising and demonstrating this

knowledge in examination-like conditions. Concerns have been shared regarding the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic widening gap, but the high stakes nature and stressful impact of statutory assessments have potentially compounded/exacerbated this issue. This was identified in Bradbury et al.'s (2021 cited in Wyse et al., 2022) study where participants discussed the increased use of interventions for certain prioritised pupils, who were recognised as 'borderline' in relation to national benchmarks, to enable them to 'catch up', similar to the practice, described by Gillborn and Youdell (1999 cited in Wyse et al., 2022) as *'educational triage'*, where specific groups of students are prioritised over others because they stand a better chance of demonstrating significant results, and consequently progress, in SATs tests.

Assessments play an essential role in the education system which has led to what Richardson (2022 cited in Wyse et al., 2022) has described as *assessment dysmorphia,* where the purpose of assessments has become distorted, resulting in a reduction of pupils' achievement in education, as assessments use a very narrow criteria to determine pupils' success. It is important to recognise that even though the situation is the way it is now, it does not necessarily have to continue to be that way. For instance, the British Educational Research Association expert panel released a report called *High Standards, not high stakes* (Moss et al., 2021) that presented an alternative assessment system to the present SATs system we have at present. The report recommended the removal of all annual tests which would be replaced with a longitudinal sample of pupils. This approach would arguably allow for contextual variables such as the location and size of the school, the makeup of the catchment area and diversity of the student population in the area. Another two key recommendations, as part of the overhaul of the present system, would be the formation of new organisation to act independently of the government and a different inspection process. Other researchers such as Nuthall (2001) provide an alternatives perspective on knowledge, arguing that it is more of a continuous landscape, rather than a set of discrete countable objects, which consequently means knowledge cannot be accurately understood, or be quantitatively represented as a number. He argues that the scores that pupils receive on tests are 'primarily the result of the students' motivations and cultural background, and only secondarily about what the student knows or can do'.

CRITIQUING REDUCTIVE VIEWS OF PROGRESS

If we understand progress to be 'learning' that is recognised, measured and accounted for, then it becomes very important to understand how (and why) this happens, and the underlying assumptions behind what seems to be a reductive perception towards progress. Conceptualising 'progress' as knowing more and remembering more (Ofsted, 2019a) conveys a particular view regarding 'progress' and 'learning' and how the process of learning is captured (eg, the assessment of this learning to help identify progress). The complex origins behind these 'reductive' interpretations towards progress will be explored in further detail in the Final thoughts and reflections section. It is important though to briefly question this motivation to quantify progress, to an also numerical level, and the potential impact it has in reducing our perception of learning as something only to be known and remembered.

An example of this influence can be seen in children's progress in reading. In the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), England moved up to fourth place (from joint eighth place in 2016). In response to this outcome, former Minister of State for Schools Nick Gibb attributed this result to consistent commitment in England to teaching systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) in schools (Martin, 2023). Currently in England, direct SSP instruction is started with children aged 4–5 (Reception) as

stipulated in the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. This direct instruction is continued with children aged 5–6 (Year 1) through SSP lessons over two years, as specified in the National Curriculum and the reading framework (Wyse, 2023a). This process intensifies and culminates with Year 1 children completing the phonics screening check. The purpose behind this test is to 'confirm that all children have learnt phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard' (STAb, 2017 p.4). It was believed that using the phonics screening check would increase the number of children who could read competently by the time they reached the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 (STAb, 2017).

One of the criticisms of the check is that it narrowly focuses on decoding, so children do well in the phonics screening check, but this does nothing to encourage a love of reading. Additionally, concerns were voiced that assessing just decoding skills could led to schools just exclusively focussing on phonics training as the only way to learn to read. Arguably, the result of this approach was recognised in the 2021 PIRLS study which asked children directly about how much they liked reading and found that England was 42nd out of 57 countries (Wyse, 2023b). So, despite moving to fourth place for progress in reading, Wyse identifies that the 2021 PIRLS data state that 24 per cent of England's pupils said that they did not like reading; 48 per cent said they somewhat like reading; and only 29 per cent said they very much like reading.

It is possible to see how several concerns have been raised regarding the exclusive use of explicit phonics instruction as the only way to learn to read and the impact this is having on children's enjoyment of reading, which is recognised and encouraged in the national curriculum. Gee (2004) argues that instructed processes (such as SSP) involve practising skills divorced from the context of reading (eg, books that interest readers) and neglect the other important reading skills used by more adept readers. Gee identifies that children become successful readers because learning is a cultural process, rather than purely an instructed one; this includes children being exposed to books, reading with others and developing a love of reading. Instructed processes of teaching, and tests such as the phonics screening check, perceive progress in reading through a technicist lens, causing teachers to become more focused on checking that children have acquired competency (Biesta and Priestley, 2013) or that the right type of knowledge has been learnt (Hirsch, 1988; Young, 2014). It leads to a reductionist interpretation of reading, which primarily perceives decoding and reading as synonymous with one another.

Part of this interpretation can be attributed to the focus and pressure of the phonics screening check, and its reductive nature to what qualifies as learning. Evidence of this was captured by Wyse and Bradbury (2022) in their survey of 2,200 teachers, 936 of whom were negative about the compulsory screening check and commented that they felt pressured to teach to the test. This leads us back to the issue of *assessment dysmorphia* (Richardson, 2022 cited in Wyse et al., 2022) where assessments such as these result in a reduction of pupil achievement in education, as assessments use a very narrow criteria to determine pupils' success. Gee states that those who advocate that children are poor readers because they have received poor skills instruction early on in school tend to perceive reading in a reductive way. This leads to early and overt phonics instruction being considered the solution to the issue of poor reading. This is openly stated in the phonics screening check guidance which states that process should 'identify children who have not learned to decode using phonics by the end of Year 1. These children will then receive additional support to ensure they can improve their decoding skills' (STA, 2017b p.5). So, children who are assessed with reading difficulties are given even more intensive SSP instruction (Wyse, 2023a). Rather than bringing children up to the same standard as those who are considered confident readers, Gee argues that more intensive phonics instruction for those readers who struggle can put them at a greater disadvantage

compared to their more privileged peers because they are not receiving a balanced reading experience that include cultural process of learning.

We have already discussed that learning occurs through various experiences and that our behaviours, or our understanding, are changed or reshaped by this (new) knowledge or experience. Our interpretation of learning, and what counts as learning, does play a significant role in how we understand the concept of progress as it provides the path and the insight into what we recognise as 'progress'. We need to be mindful as teachers that reductive interpretations do not hold sway over us. Indeed, Wyse (2023a) suggests that a clear emphasis on phonics is necessary, but he does caution that this should not be taught exclusively through separate synthetic phonics lessons. He instead suggests there needs to be a more balanced approach which incorporates other important aspects in the teaching of reading, such as comprehension, motivation for reading and engagement with real books rather than just an exclusive diet of decodable books. This balanced approach considers other interpretations of learning, and aspects that perhaps cannot be quantified so easily and succinctly, such as reading enjoyment, but nonetheless play a significant role in children's learning, and their motivation to learn.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What is currently your understanding of progress in the classroom?
- What do you consider to be 'knowledge'?
- Have you seen reductive views of progress in the classroom?
- How has reading this chapter challenged your perspective towards 'progress'?