

Reassessing the value of the graduated approach in England: A tool for inclusive school improvement

The graduated approach, also known as the Assess-Plan-Do-Review (APDR) cycle, is a systematic framework for identifying and addressing barriers to learning. Usually associated with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), its potential extends far beyond this narrow application.

This paper highlights the value of the graduated approach as a tool for fostering inclusive education and driving whole school improvement. By reframing its purpose, providing clear guidance, and illustrating its broader applications, schools can employ the model to enhance outcomes for all students.

Understanding the graduated approach

The graduated approach, as defined in the SEND Code of Practice (2015), is a cyclical process designed to address individual needs through increasing levels of support and intervention. It involves four stages: assess, plan, do, and review. This iterative process ensures that support and interventions are continuously refined based on evidence of their effectiveness.

Originally conceived as a tool for supporting students with SEND, its principles are universally applicable to any barrier to learning.

At its core, the graduated approach emphasises collaboration between teachers, families, and learners. It prioritises understanding the unique experiences of each learner and tailoring support and interventions accordingly. This makes it a powerful mechanism not only for addressing specific challenges but also for embedding inclusive practices across schools.

Current challenges in implementation

Despite its potential, the implementation of the graduated approach in England has been inconsistent. In many cases, it is narrowly perceived as a SEND-specific tool used primarily to gather evidence for Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) applications. This reactive and deficit-driven interpretation limits its impact.

For example, some schools view the graduated approach as a procedural requirement of Local Authorities rather than an opportunity for proactive intervention. Teachers may

only engage with the cycle after consulting with a SENCO and collecting multiple cycles of evidence to demonstrate a child's lack of progress. This siloed use reinforces the misconception that the graduated approach is solely relevant to statutory processes.

Local authorities have also misused the graduated approach to delay support rather than facilitate it. Reports indicate that some authorities require extensive documentation from the cycle before considering statutory assessment, a practice that is both illegal and counterproductive.

Reframing the graduated approach

To unlock its full potential, the graduated approach must be reframed as a tool for inclusive school improvement rather than a SEND specific mechanism. This shift requires rebranding and clearer guidance on how it can be applied to address a wide range of barriers to learning.

Broader applications

Schools that have successfully embedded the graduated approach have been able to demonstrate its versatility:

Example 1

Addressing non-SEND specific barriers: Some schools use the cycle to tackle issues such as attendance gaps or behavioural challenges. For instance, one head of inclusion noted that their school applies the methodology broadly to remove various barriers to learning, not just those related to SEND.

Example 2

Whole school inclusion: As seen in schools like Greenshaw High School (Greenshaw Learning Trust), staff conceptualise their practices through the lens of the graduated approach. This includes recognising that every action taken to support students is an intervention, whether it involves minor adjustments or targeted strategies for specific learners. Embedding the graduated approach within broader systems enhances inclusion at every level from classroom practices to leadership strategies.

Example 3

Graduated approach drives school improvement cycles. Where the graduated approach is seen as a mechanism to improve inclusion, leaders recognise it as intrinsic; the very basis of how the SEF informs the SIP. This alignment of the graduated approach to the school's improvement cycle means marginalised learners are prioritised within that school improvement process.

International Perspectives

The Irish education system provides a compelling example of how the graduated approach can be used more effectively. In Ireland, teachers are encouraged to use a **"continuum of support" framework** to address barriers to learning without waiting for formal diagnoses. This proactive model empowers teachers to test hypotheses about why students are struggling, such as behavioural issues, ecosystem pressures like bullying or hunger, or other factors.

Teachers in Ireland routinely make classroom accommodations based on concerns about student progress or behaviour. The process emphasises collaboration among teachers, parents, and school leaders to develop tailored interventions, and clear roles and responsibilities ensure that all stakeholders understand their part in supporting inclusive education. The graduated approach is viewed as a problem solving tool for use by all rather than merely a diagnostic procedure that can lead to the release of resources, predominantly for use by the SENCO.

Key Benefits of the Graduated Approach

When implemented effectively, the graduated approach offers several benefits:

Promotes early intervention: By identifying barriers to learning early and addressing them systematically, schools can prevent small issues from escalating into significant challenges.

Fosters collaboration: The cycle encourages teamwork among teachers, families, and external professionals, creating a shared responsibility for student success.

Supports professional development: Training staff on how to use the APDR cycle equips them with a practical problem solving approach for meeting diverse needs.

Drives whole-school improvement: As seen in schools like GLT, embedding the graduated approach within broader systems enhances inclusion at every level from classroom practices to leadership strategies. In these settings the graduated approach is used to drive improvement at all levels.

Recommendations for Strengthening Implementation

To maximise its impact, several steps should be taken:

Rebranding: Reframe the graduated approach as a "problem-solving continuum" or "solutions cycle" to emphasise its broader applications beyond SEND deficits to enable pupil progress.

Update guidance: Provide clear exemplifications of how the APDR cycle can be used strategically and operationally across different contexts.

Workforce development: Incorporate training on the use of the graduated approach into leadership qualifications (e.g., NPQs) and professional development programmes for teachers.

Collaboration: Foster a culture of shared responsibility by clarifying roles at all levels from classroom teachers to senior leaders and ensuring alignment with whole-school policies.

Integration with formative assessment: Encourage teachers to use formative assessment data within the APDR cycle to identify barriers early and tailor interventions effectively.

Conclusion

The graduated approach has immense potential as an engine for inclusive school improvement. By moving beyond its narrow association with SEND and embracing its broader applications, schools can create environments where all students thrive. Whether addressing academic challenges, behavioural issues, or systemic barriers like attendance gaps, this model provides a structured yet flexible framework for fostering equity and belonging.

To achieve this vision, stakeholders must work together to reframe perceptions of the graduated approach, provide clearer guidance on its use, and invest in professional development that empowers educators at every level. With these changes in place, the APDR cycle can become not just a tool for intervention but a cornerstone of inclusive education in England and beyond.

References

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/set-guidelines-and-supporting-documentation-to-aid-schools-in-supporting-children-young-people-with-special-education-needs/#post-primary-schools>

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