

# EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING COMMITTEE

## Policy Review: School of the Future

### Assessment and testing for a learning country

#### Introduction

As in the school of today, the school of the future will give out signals about the learning of its students. The nature of those signals, and the way they are responded to by students, teachers and the wider community, will exert a powerful influence on the quality of each student's experience. The learning we aspire to in schools - the curriculum - is the first order question, but how that learning is measured – assessment – has such potential to shape and colour what students learn in school that it should be considered and planned alongside the curriculum. As with the curriculum, assessment is planned for groups of students but the experience of it, positive and negative, is very much an individual one.

In my grammar school all those years ago the main assessment events were GCE O and A level. In preparation for those ultimate judgment days the school put its faith in 'fortnightly orders'. Teachers must have spent much of their time totting up and scaling marks so that these 'orders' could be pinned on the noticeboard every two weeks. The theory, presumably, was that putting everyone in rank order rewards hard work and galvanises the slacker; any of us could be top of the class if we only tried hard enough. My argument here is that we should not be relying on such crude, one-dimensional assessment procedures and such a flawed view of what will motivate our students. Fifty years on from my grammar school days we have yet to take seriously the need to plan the way we assess learning as a complex set of overlapping, inter-related procedures.

Why do we need to assess? There are three main reasons we may have in mind when planning to assess our students:

- To guide the individual into learning more effectively.
- To give that individual (and anyone else who may be interested) an overall measure of his/her learning
- By aggregating the results for groups of students, to provide us with a performance indicator for a part of our education system.

If you like labels, these purposes are usually termed, respectively, the formative, the summative and the evaluative.

My grammar school was preoccupied with the second of these, although formative assessment was also seen as important by the better teachers, such as my English teacher with his detailed comments on my essays. I would argue that, over the past fifteen years, our system has become over-concerned with the third, the evaluative purposes of assessment. The challenge for the school system of the future is to put the three sets of purposes into a proper balance with each other.

## **The Assessment Reform Group**

In offering some pointers to that future I want to refer mainly to the work of a group of which I am a member. The 'Assessment Reform Group' is an *ad hoc*, self-motivated group of UK-based academics. Two things have brought this group of people together over the years. We are all academic specialists in assessment and we all believe that academics have a responsibility to engage actively with policy and practice in the system we not only study but also care deeply about. Of course each of us also spends most of his or her time doing research independently of the Group. For example, I co-directed a project that evaluated the first three years of Key Stage 2 testing in England and Wales. But when we work as a group we turn our collective thoughts to how best to relate the available research on assessment to policy and practice in schools.

I want to focus on two outcomes of that work (we have done, and are doing, other things as well!) in order to highlight two things we need to get right in the school system of the future:

- Making formative assessment, or 'assessment for learning', a more prominent, and more effective, element in assessment practice.
- Making sure that, when we assess for summative and/or evaluative reasons, it is as far as possible a positive learning experience and, at the very least, it doesn't do avoidable harm to the learning of the students involved and their motivation to learn.

## **Assessment for Learning**

We coined the term 'assessment for learning', in preference to 'formative assessment', because assessment can and does help students learn; assessment for learning is a commonsense term for what assessment can sometimes be directed towards

On this topic the Group has developed what has since become a familiar way of linking research to practice:

- Undertake, and report on, a review of all available research studies
- Summarise the research findings, and their implications for policy and practice, for a wider audience.
- Engage in a dialogue with policy-makers and practitioners about those implications

There have been several general publications arising from the review of research into assessment for learning:

- A pamphlet, *Inside the Black Box*
- Another pamphlet, *Beyond the Black Box*, pointing up the implications for practice
- A poster/leaflet, *Assessment for Learning: 10 Principles*.

It is the last of these that you have in front of you and to which I will refer. In addition, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam and their colleagues at Kings College London have recently published a pamphlet, *Working Inside the Black Box*, reporting on the experience of teachers working with them in developing assessment for learning in secondary school classrooms.

To refer to *Assessment for Learning: 10 Principles*, the guts of the principles are in the centre of the diagram. More clarification is offered in the outer part of the semi-circle. You may want to pick up on whichever of the 'principles' attracts, puzzles or annoys you. The message underlying it all is one for every school and for our whole education system. Assessment for learning is too important to be on the margins of our assessment practice, fitted in when students and teachers are able to turn away for a time from the pressures of being assessed for summative and evaluative reasons. Of course, it is often the case that teachers help students learn in informal, instinctive ways. But the development of assessment for learning as a central feature of our classrooms calls for a concerted effort to make the space for it and to ensure that it becomes central to the thinking of students and their teachers.

If there is one thing that should set the school of the future apart from most of the schools of today, it is that the students will see themselves as 'learning how to learn', with assessment for learning as an essential element in that process.

## **Summative testing**

The Group has also been looking at the research into those tests where the results are used to grade the individual and for system accountability purposes. We need such tests but we also need to ask if they are having the impact on learning we would want them to have. The public

concern is real enough and is highlighted in newspaper headlines referring to:

- Criticism of the fact that we now have so many of them in Wales and in England
- The way they impoverish the curriculum
- Their differential, and sometimes negative, impact on certain students.

Our particular interest has been in the way summative tests can affect that essential precondition for learning, motivation. There is clear evidence from research that summative testing can do lasting damage to the motivation of some students, especially low attainers. We have argued in the pamphlet, *Testing, Motivation and Learning*, that all those who are actively involved in such testing – planning the system, preparing students to take them, using the results from them – could do more to minimise the negative impact of the tests on learning and more to maximise the positive.

However, it would certainly help if the school system of the future were designed with fewer, and more carefully focused, summative tests. Why not design a testing procedure for Year 6 students that supports the transition of students from primary to secondary school? Why not test 14 and 15 year olds on skills and knowledge for adult life? I have argued elsewhere for a fundamental rethink of the way we approach the assessment of school students in Wales. For the moment we have to live with the Key Stage 2 and 3 National Curriculum tests, intended as an all-purpose assessment system but in fact costing us a lot of money and not serving any of those several purposes really effectively.

## Conclusion

I take it that what we are all doing in thinking about ‘the school of the future’ is trying to offer a vision of what could be and then planning the first steps on the long, slow road which can take us in that direction. Looked at from the angle of assessment there are there four main features to the school that I would like to see in the future:

- It has a clear and consistent focus on self-motivated learning as the main goal for all students.
- There is the space and support to ensure that assessment for learning, as an essential component in self-motivated learning, is a continuing element in all classroom activities
- Any systems of summative testing of individual students will be designed to supply evidence of attainment that is demonstrably useful for clearly defined, specific purposes.
- When we choose to use test results as a source of evidence for accountability purposes we will ensure both that such use does not distort students’ learning and that the necessarily limited evidence that any test can supply is placed in the broader context of an evaluation that properly reflects the goals of schooling.

In looking to develop such features in our schools in Wales we can share our experience with other countries around the world that are moving in the same direction. France, for example, where we could learn from their approach to testing as students move from primary to secondary school. Scotland, with their 'Assessment is for Learning' development programme. And to many other countries where they are recognising that if assessment is not supporting, enhancing and reinforcing learning then it should be.

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