

Without Levels: The Final Report of the McIntosh Commission (2015)

It is hoped that the government will accept the findings and recommendations of the commission which are an undoubted advance on previous political thinking. The Association welcomes :

The removal of levels which have so overbalanced and distorted primary teaching through a confusion between formative assessment and summative assessment through national testing.

The wholehearted endorsement of formative assessment summed up by the words, "...it is high quality formative assessment which goes to the very heart of good teaching."

The recognition that teachers are subject to conflicting pressures: trying to make appropriate use of assessment as part of teaching, while at the same time collecting assessment data which is used in very high stakes evaluation of individual and institutional performance. This has resulted in an unacceptable escalation in the bureaucratic workload shouldered by teachers.

The refusal of the commission to offer a template of assessment, preferring instead to express confidence in the judgement of teachers as they formulate and implement school assessment policy serving the needs of both children and teachers.

The provision of helpful guidance as schools consider commercial external assessment systems. Schools are advised to develop their own approach to assessment related to the school curriculum before evaluating how far the external system fits the schools work. "The school's curriculum should determine any use of external products, not the other way round."

The assurance, confirmed by Ofsted's clarification, that schools should not seek to devise a system of formative assessment that they think inspectors will want to see.

The report is at its weakest in the discussion of curriculum. This draws too much from the examination centred secondary curriculum which equates examination performance with learning. "...teachers should ensure pupils have a secure understanding of key ideas and concepts before moving on to the next phase of learning." Much learning, even in the fields of mathematics and science, is not sequential in character. Primary schools work on the sound assumption established through study of child development that ideas and concepts are learned by young children through personal experience together with the communication of that experience over a period of time and seldom through the teaching of a lesson. This is not the same as preparing for a test and what is required is not, as

indicated in the report, "intervention" but teaching. The unsound view of learning in primary education is epitomised by the statement, "Following high-quality instruction pupils undertake formative assessment that shows what they have learned well and what they still need to work on, and identifies specific corrective activities to help them to do this." Formative assessment is not just another kind of test. It is implicit in the act of teaching itself and continues whenever the teacher is alongside the child. Hence the report's recommendation of the establishment of a national item bank of assessment questions is deeply suspect. The standing committee on assessment which is also recommended should include a number of primary specialists who are prepared to ensure that the questions focus upon understanding and the grasp of ideas which are at the core of the primary curriculum .

The way the national item bank of questions is formulated is the key to how far the government is willing to honour the trust placed in the teaching profession by the report. Control of assessment is an all too clear way of controlling the curriculum. The new national curriculum embedded in the school curriculum offers much needed freedom to teachers as they strive to raise national standards. That freedom must not be weakened but must be enhanced.

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