

Assessment in Primary Education

We must learn to assess what we value and not simply value what is easy to assess.

At the present time the frequent national assessments of pupil progress are having seriously adverse effects upon the quality of primary education and the health of children.

Misconceived views regarding accountability, readiness for secondary education and the soundness of evaluative measurement through testing are three of the strongest prompters of current government policy. We must offer proposals for reform.

Testing

A test is a snapshot of performance at a particular moment and the snapshot is of what is measurable and inherently capable of being tested. Testing reveals only limited aspects of human development because performance in a test cannot show how far knowledge and skill are embedded in the individual to the extent that test performance is translated into behaviour. It is the application of knowledge and skill beyond testing which is the fundamental aim of education. Testing has a limited place in the classroom. It contributes information which can be used formatively by the teacher but this is simply one, quite transitory, aspect of the whole child.

The unintended consequences of testing are the greatest danger to the quality of education. When the results are used as an instrument of accountability the inevitable outcome is that children are instructed in order that they are sufficiently competent to pass the test. The process of education is narrowed and distorted, test performance becomes even more transitory and test performance skills are too quickly forgotten.

Testing should not be the primary instrument of the assessment of the educational progress made by children in primary schools. For a more comprehensive and accurate assessment of growth and development we must turn to the people themselves: the children, their parents and their teachers.

Human Assessment

Teachers of young children enjoy the considerable advantage of a close personal relationship with their pupils and their families. Later, as adolescents and beyond, the children will be taught by subject specialists and such relationships become much more

difficult to engender and maintain. Parents through the proximity of shared life have a unique insight into their children's growing maturity and the partnership between teachers and parents is crucially important in providing sound judgements of children's progress.

Progress in young children's learning cannot always be set out in steps denoting a smooth incremental progression. One step may often follow another but equally there can be recession or plateauing depending upon the child's circumstances in life.

Understanding is clearly related to the immediacy of direct experience. Different experiences may well provoke other levels of understanding or reinforce earlier understanding. To hold understanding in the mind separately to experience (and it must be stressed that a skill is of little practical use if it is not underpinned by understanding) the thread of ideas must be drawn out of experience as a single thread is drawn out of a multihued and textured cloth. It follows that the assessment of progress in primary education cannot be measured with any precision except in the much longer term. Reform of assessment must acknowledge the complexity of learning and the fact that young children are building up a network of understanding which may not be immediately observable or evidenced and this confirms that the evaluation of progress is best made by teachers and parents taking into account the self assessments of the children themselves.

A reliance upon the assessments made by those who share life with the children must however be cautioned in one important respect. The closer we are to the children, the greater the danger that our assessment of progress will be coloured by the relationship we have with them. We must expect and allow for the natural bias towards the child on the part of the loving parent but teachers must also guard against bias particularly those predispositions to favour or to be critical of which we are unaware. The answer is twofold. Firstly we must share and if necessary review our assessments with our colleagues who can discuss the child more objectively. Secondly we must always remind ourselves of the impossibility of entirely accurate assessment and be appropriately modest and respectful of the human lives we are presuming to assess. This latter requirement of all professional teachers is one of the greatest challenges we face. We choose to teach young children and are fortunate in receiving all the human rewards which such work brings to us yet when we assess we have to reach into the mind of the child and see him or her more dispassionately. It is indeed a formidable professional challenge and we must never fail.

Further considerations

Children should be assessed individually and never ranked one against the other.

Assessment is a vital part of teaching. It is only damaging when the results of assessment are used for accountability purposes.

Evaluation of progress is valuable to children in that it assists them to engage more fully in their own development and learning.

There must never be a backwash of assessment requirements into teaching and learning. The purpose of assessment for teachers and parents is to enhance children's opportunities to learn.

Assessments of progress are best expressed as descriptive profiles and never subsumed into numerical summaries. The use of figures implies an accuracy which is spurious since assessment can never be entirely accurate.

Children have a human right to contribute to the assessment of their own development.

When we assess a child, his or her age is more important than the organisational stage of education.

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