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Assessment for Learning?

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Bob has outlined for you the political history leading up to the changes in curriculum and assessment brought about by the Education Reform Act 1988. Before the proposals for national curriculum assessment became law a Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) was set up to advise on the detail of assessment arrangements. The group was chaired by an educationist, Professor Paul Black, and counted other education professionals among its members.

The group was not so naive as to be unaware of the political agenda which was already unfolding: towards creating a free market in schooling through the devolution of funds to schools as cost centres, through open enrolment whereby parents can chose schools for their children, and through the central prescription of a national curriculum and assessment system which would provide comparative results in the form of league tables on which parents could base their choice. The free-market theory (some would say dogma) subscribed to by the right wing of the Conservative Party was that 'good schools', that is, those that delivered the national curriculum and achieved the best results on national curriculum tests, would attract more children and therefore more

resources, whilst the worst would 'go to the wall'. Thus the operation of the consumer market would cause standards to rise.

TGAT knew that these were the assumptions on which government was basing policy. This meant that its proposals for an assessment system had to encompass the Government's desire for a means to call LEAs, schools and teachers to account for the attainment of children in national curriculum subjects. Accountability was writ large and TGAT's proposals would have been rejected outright had they not risen to this challenge.

Yet TGAT also knew that among some teachers and educationists there had grown up, over the last twenty or so years, an increasingly sophisticated view of what assessment might contribute to children's development and learning. This educational paradigm was in many ways philosophically at odds with the simplistic notions of how standards are raised, which politicians were currently propounding. TGAT was therefore faced with a dilemma that has faced many educationists in the Britain in recent years. Either they could get involved and engage in a damage limitation exercise, recognising that Government was not going to be deflected from a policy that it was pursuing with increasing vigour. Or they could stand outside as critics of developing policy in the certain knowledge that a Government determined to make assessment the key to accountability would turn elsewhere for advice. Thus their decision to get involved can be interpreted as an attempt to square the circle by trying to meet the demands of politicians whilst striving to preserve some of the best of developing assessment practices.

I do not intend to give the impression that every thing in the educational garden was rosy. If this had been the case there would never have been

such popular support for the reforms that the Government was introducing. But in pockets around the country, and in relation to certain initiatives, groups of teachers and educationists were reconceptualising what assessment is, how it is done and how it can be used. Initiatives that have been particularly important in this respect include the GCSE examinations at 16 which, in many subject areas, had incorporated the continuous assessment of course work; records of achievement which have much in common with portfolio assessment in this country; and vocational assessment post- 16 which has developed criterion-referenced assessment in relation to specific competencies whilst emphasising the importance of the involvement of students in the assessment process.

As a result of accumulated experience in relation to these developments, during the 1970s and 1980s, many teachers and educationists had already begun to look afresh at teaching, learning and assessment and at the relationships along these three activities. They had begun to readjust the balance away from an almost exclusive focus on what teachers teach towards a better focus on what students learn. They had been helped in this by recent developments in constructivist psychology and research projects which have applied constructivist concepts in practical teaching contexts. This did not diminish the role of teachers but encouraged them to extend their professional skills by taking on an investigative role. In other words they have begun, consciously, to develop their skills of observation, listening and questioning in order to find out about children's existing skills, knowledge and understanding. The idea behind this was that this kind of information would enable them both to plan the most appropriate curriculum experiences for children and to monitor the progress made by each child from his or her own starting point. This inquiry-based approach, which integrates assessment

with teaching and learning, has become known as formative assessment. Let me try to describe to you what it looks like in a British classroom.

I shall take as an example some work that Paul Barraclough, an elementary school teacher, did last year with Gary, a ten year old boy in his school. I am very much indebted to Paul and Gary for allowing me to share their work with you and to Paul for letting me construct a booklet out of his notes. (You should have a copy of the booklet). This work was supported by school district personnel in the London Borough of Enfield and by myself, representing the Cambridge Institute of Education in a partnership approach.

Paul, the teacher, says that Gary is a friendly child who comes from a very supportive and caring home. However, he lacks confidence - in himself and in his learning. When Gary is working in the normal classroom context he concentrates for short periods of time, especially after he has been helped by a teacher. But when he hits a problem that he cannot resolve by himself his attention often drifts off.

Gary experiences great difficulty with math. His understanding of number is comparable to that of an average six or seven year old. The published math scheme the school uses had not helped him to address his difficulties so Paul decided to plan an individual learning programme for him. To do this he needed first to find out what Gary does understand about number and about the learning strategies he employs. Paul decided to spend a number of short sessions working with Gary using math-based games to elicit his understandings whilst maintaining his motivation through enjoyment.

What did Paul learn from this? (Incidentally, Paul videoed the sessions with Gary and played back the tape to Gary so that they could discuss it together. He later discussed the video with Gary's parent which was also useful.) Paul says that it surprised him that Gary did not appear to be familiar with games such as dominoes, which are often assumed to be part of most British children's cultural experience. However, having introduced him to the game, he discovered - by observation and questioning - that Gary could recognise and match patterns. Gary also developed a strategy to divide the dominoes although he lacked the confidence to judge whether he had done it correctly, or to know whether he had divided the pieces equally. Paul was surprised, I think, by the extent of Gary's dependence on the teacher for assurances about whether he had got it right. Another example, one might argue, of a pupil seeing the task as guessing what is in the teacher's mind rather than solving the substantive problem.

Having assessed Gary's knowledge of number using dominoes, Paul then went on to assess his knowledge and use of number facts up to 10. He did this by using an activity using dice. This was, in fact, part of the 1991 Standard Assessment Task for number (part of the statutory national assessment for seven year olds last year). Paul wrote in his notes, 'For this, I found the SAT quite useful; it's got to be useful for something!' The idea was to stick numbers on 2 dice so that any two numbers couldn't add up to more than 10. Then to use another pair for subtraction of numbers of 10 or less. Although nervous about the activity, Gary was competent at addition and was able to self-correct. He was less confident with subtraction but made an attempt.

Over a period of weeks, Paul made a collection of data of this kind about Gary's achievements and about the precise nature of his difficulties. On the basis of this sampling he concluded that Gary needs lots of small group and individual work; lots of practical experience of applying the math he knows in different contexts; he needs help in using math language appropriately and he needs a wider experience of math. His experience through the published math scheme had been mainly with computation, which had highlighted his weaknesses but had done little to put things right. It had just compounded his belief that he couldn't do math and therefore it undermined his confidence. These insights enabled Paul to build a picture of Gary's strengths and weaknesses and to begin to plan a tailor-made programme for Gary for the following year to meet his special needs.

This then is what formative assessment, within an educational paradigm, is all about.

[OHT of two paradigms]

It is seen as a support to teaching, learning and curriculum development. It recognises that achievement, even in a single subject area, is made up of many different competencies. It misrepresents the truth to suggest that this complexity can be reduced to a single overall score for, say, math ability. Moreover, what is achieved is related to the student's interpretation of the context of the problem. Gary was able to demonstrate his knowledge of number in the context of a game although he could not demonstrate the same understandings when faced with a page of 'sums' or a pencil and paper test. Achievement therefore is specific, embedded in context and this needs to be recognised and

recorded - preferably in descriptive terms with a summary of the evidence for judgement. It follows from this also that assessment should not be a one-off special event but a continuous process integrated with teaching and learning. And in order that new learning should follow it is important that two conditions should be met. First, the collection of data on achievement needs to be followed by analysis to discover where both teachers and learners need to put their efforts next. This is now often referred to as target-setting. Secondly, assessment should not be the dispiriting experience that it has so often been for past generations. To make progress, the motivation and involvement of students is essential. To this end, advocates of formative assessment have encouraged teachers to assess and record what students can do, rather than dwell overlong on what they cannot do. And, when weaknesses are confronted, as they must be, to place the emphasis on devising strategies for overcoming them. All this gives a greater role to teachers and students in the assessment process. If the aim of assessment is to improve learning then students must understand and be involved in the process (through self -assessment and regular reviews of their work) and the skills and judgements of teachers in this area of activity need to be developed.

This view of how standards in education can be raised - through the professional development of teachers in ways that will support improvement in students' learning - is rather different from the 'make them accountable' view held by the current British Government. As mentioned earlier, government advisers advisers, first the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT), and later the Schools Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC), the government agency given the task of enacting policy, have tried hard to marry educational developments in

formative assessment to the demands of politicians for a summative system as a basis for accountability.

For example, TGAT advocated four purposes for national curriculum assessment. It should, at the same time, be formative, diagnostic, summative and evaluative. These purposes would be achieved through a combination of continuous teacher assessment (sometimes referred to as TA) in normal classroom contexts, and by the use of standard assessment tasks (SATs) developed by outside agencies. (Paul's dice game was one.) TGAT intended that these SATs should be used flexibly by teachers but enable national comparability of results. Confidence in the validity and reliability of teachers' assessment in both teacher assessment and SAT assessment would be achieved by a process of group moderation which would bring teachers together to discuss and harmonise their results. This procedure had proved its worth in the examination which middle ability 16 year olds used to take before the introduction of the relatively new GCSE. Particular gains had been noted in relation to the development of teachers' professional judgement and TGAT wanted to promote this development in relation to National Curriculum Assessment.

Much water has passed under the bridge since the publication of the TGAT recommendations. There is evidence, however, that SEAC has tried hard to maintain their spirit. For instance, the recent advice to *schools on* teacher assessment at key stage 3 (involving 13 year olds) has emphasised the role of assessment as part of teaching and learning, involving students in their own assessment and collecting evidence. The formative purposes underpinning this are reiterated. However, SEAC appears to be finding it increasingly difficult to hold the circle: to promote

both formative and summative purposes within a single system of assessment.

The politicians have now abandoned reference to standard assessment tasks in favour of standard assessment tests and examinations. This change in terminology is more than symbolic and reflects a real change in the most recent SATs away from activities that teachers could integrate into their normal patterns of instruction towards a far greater emphasis on timed pencil and paper tests which can be administered to whole classes in controlled conditions. Moreover, as Bob mentioned, the SAT results will in general take priority over results generated through teacher assessment. Since the marking of SATs will be in accordance with a marking scheme, this will, according to ministers, render any elaborate (and expensive) moderation procedure unnecessary. So what we are left with is something akin to the old psychometric model of assessment that many education professionals have spent two decades vying to get away from.

[2 paradigm OHT again]

Its emphasis, despite the attempts by SEAC to convince us otherwise, is clearly on the summative - on the comparative performance of students and schools, to identify failure as much as to celebrate success. It assumes that achievement in subject areas can be reduced to a single score, despite all the rhetoric of criterion-referenced assessment that has surrounded the introduction of the system. It distrusts teachers and implies a belief that only outside (commercial) agencies can be relied upon to develop test materials. Moreover, in order that results should be free from teacher bias, tests should (at least for eleven year olds and

upwards) be produced from sealed envelopes on an appointed day and administered and marked in controlled conditions. And so, many educationists will argue, reliability is achieved at the cost of validity.

They will also point out that the cause of one of the most exciting developments in education in recent years is in real danger of being put back thirty years. It seems that despite the fact that the education system stands accused of not responding to the demands of a changed world, British politicians think that lost ground can be made up by reproducing the assessment system that they were familiar with in their own private or grammar schools and which did not, apparently, allow our current prime minister to reveal his true potential. (He has forbidden his old school to reveal how poor his examination performance actually was.)

So what of the future? Nothing is for sure except that the idea of a single system for both formative and summative purposes does not appear to be working. 2 into 1 won't go! The original pluralistic proposals from TGAT merely disguised an inherent ideological contradiction that won't go away. A number of alternative future scenarios suggest themselves.

First the SATs could take over from teacher assessment and encourage teaching to the test. The object of instruction would then be to raise test scores rather than to encourage broad based learning. Most British teachers would be unhappy with this.

Or second, we might witness mass boycotts by teachers and parents of the SAT arrangements (as in Scotland) thus forcing politicians to reconsider the viability of a national assessment system pre- 16.

Or third, we might see the development of a dual assessment system, with short tests in the core subjects (English, math and science) as a form of minimum competencies monitoring for accountability purposes, and teacher assessment for formative purposes and for more detailed reporting to parents.

There is evidence that teachers would welcome access to a bank of standard assessment tasks that they could use flexibly for their own teacher assessment - which is not the same as the prescribed use that is currently legislated. For example, on the basis of a study of 32 elementary schools, Dr Caroline Gipps, at the London Institute of Education, has recently reported that teachers welcomed these tasks as a resource to incorporate into their teaching and there was evidence that it improved their practice, although she warned that these improvements might not be sustained by the move to pencil and paper tests.

This third scenario of a dual system might then be the best that teachers can expect if we accept - as we must - that the general public is likely to continue to demand a common means to evaluate standards in some curriculum areas across and within the educational system. It may be that teachers will have to come to terms with the fact that they have to "Render unto Caesar what is due unto Caesar and unto God what is due unto God" - as it were.

Things have changed in Britain and they are likely to continue to change whatever happens in the general election next Thursday. What is happening in Britain is very interesting if you are an observer; rather more unsettling if you are a teacher, as Barry will also illustrate.

PSYCHOMETRIC
ASSESSMENT

EDUCATIONAL
ASSESSMENT

WHY?	SUMMATIVE: SELECTION, PLACEMENT. EVALUATION, SOMETIMES DIAGNOSTIC OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT	FORMATIVE: A SUPPORT TO TEACHING, LEARNING AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT,
WHAT?	UNITARY ABILITIES OR GENERAL TRAITS, EG VERBAL REASONING, READING ABILITY.	BROAD DEFINITION OF ACHIEVEMENT EMBEDDED IN CONTEXT.
WHEN?	SPECIAL EVENT.	CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT, INTEGRATED WITH TEACHING AND LEARNING,
HOW?	TYPICALLY PENCIL & PAPER TESTS, UNDER CONTROLLED CONDITIONS (EMPHASIS ON RELIABILITY). RESULTS IN TERMS OF SCORES WHICH AID COMPARISON,	DESCRIPTION OF OBSERVED ACHIEVEMENT SUPPORTED BY EVIDENCE (EMPHASIS ON VALIDITY). POSITIVE RECORDING TO AID MOTIVATION AND DEVELOPMENT.
WHO?	TESTS DEVELOPED AND MODERATED PUPILS, TEACHERS AND OTHERS BY SPECIALISED AGENCIES, (EG PARENTS) IN PARTNERSHIP. TEACHERS ADMINISTER AND MARK ACCORDING TO LAID DOWN RULES.	