



Turn to teachers and technology

The chaos surrounding this year's National Curriculum tests gives us an opportunity to rethink what data is needed to monitor standards and whether the tests are a cost-effective method of collection.

Teacher assessments are valid and could be used. They have been shown to have an excellent correlation with the results of the external tests. In fact, when this correlation fails, a re-mark frequently shows the tests to have been poorly marked! Countries which rely purely on teacher assessment show a variation in standards but there is a happy medium. It is possible to maintain standards, verify validity and ensure reliability across centres. The alternative is to use the tests to monitor a sample from each centre or teacher after the teacher assessments are made.

With modern technology teachers could enter their assessments slightly earlier in the year, either using mark-sensed stationery, or directly online using software similar to that developed for the International Grades in Open Technologies or the software used by Edexcel to allow moderators to enter marks. This is technology that already works and is secure. From these results, a small sample can be chosen by the examiner, perhaps two per teacher at each level to take the tests. In a Y6 class this would be two at levels 3, 4, 5 and 6, a total of eight students. The actual students involved could be informed on the day of the test, reducing the possibility that they are going to be given extra tuition. The results of these tests are then used to verify the teacher assessment.

Some of the money saved on assessment could be used to send experts into centres; a) To help teachers who were under- or over- assessing; b) To help teachers improve standards in centres where children were performing below the standards expected; and c) To enable teachers to go into centres where children were performing above expectations in order to observe good practice and share it with their own schools. Sending in a critical friend to help in the classroom, working alongside the teacher could really help to raise standards.

Joan Knott FCIEA, Principal moderator in GCSE statistics for a major examining board, Stockport

REVIEW

A valuable exploration of assessment

In the latest of our occasional reviews, Graham Herbert finds that assessments can play a purposeful development role

Testing Times: the uses and abuses of assessment

Author: Gordon Stobart

Publisher: Routledge
ISBN 978-0-415-404754

Ratings: Usefulness (5); Relevance (5); Readability (5)

Tests and their usefulness have never been more in the public domain. With concerns over grade inflation, the multi-purposes to which National Curriculum Tests are put and the failure of universities to discriminate between candidates with A grades at A level, this book is a timely intervention. Stobart argues that assessment, in the form of tests and examinations, is a very powerful activity, shaping how both groups and individuals begin to understand themselves. He develops three specific arguments:



1. Assessment is not a culture-free activity but a value-laden social activity.
2. Rather than objectively measuring what is already there, the assessment of individuals creates and shapes what is measured.
3. Assessment can either undermine or encourage learning by impacting upon what we learn and how we learn

it. The author demonstrates effectively how, in our accountability culture, assessment can undermine learning by encouraging learning for the test and treating test results as an end in themselves. He goes on to explore how we can develop assessments which can play a purposeful role in developing ourselves as learners and individuals.

Without falling into the academics' trap of assuming the reader understands the technical aspects of the subject, Stobart makes difficult concepts accessible to all and should be of great interest to practitioners, other academics and researchers, as well as politicians and decision makers.

Graham Herbert is deputy director of the CIEA

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Time to pull together

John Gardner makes a plea for schools and stakeholders to work together on assessment

Last summer on these pages I asked the question: Is teaching a partial profession? I was pointing to the effects of years of external testing in which teachers lost or did not develop their own skills of assessment. What a difference a year makes! Teacher assessment is now securely embedded in the curriculum and assessment policies of all four countries of the UK.

So how can schools and teachers get involved? The twin messages are to plan thoroughly from the start and to base the developments on a consistent understanding of quality assessment.

These messages arise from recent work on teacher assessment, which the Assessment Reform Group has carried out through the Nuffield-funded Analysis and Review of Innovations in Assessment (ARIA) project. Over the past 18 months we have explored changing assessment practices in schools in a selection of major initiatives across the UK. A synthesis of its main conclusions is available in the pamphlet: *Changing Assessment Practice: Process, Principles and Standards*, available online at www.aria.qub.ac.uk.

We identified many of the key barriers to developing innovative approaches to assessment – and it is unlikely they will cause any surprises! Schools and teachers are beleaguered by initiative after initiative, imposition after imposition.

The Aria work has identified two key issues. The first is that planning for change must cover all of the key ingredients: having a good understanding of the Innovation itself; establishing its credibility; organising appropriate professional learning and dissemination opportunities; monitoring the impact of the changes and planning for sustainable change. The second key issue arose from finding many different perceptions of the purposes and types assessment, and of what is considered to be acceptable quality in assessment practice. We concluded that if we are to



Stating the obvious

create a situation in which everyone in the education system pulls together to develop effective assessment practice, then a set of widely acceptable principles and standards was needed.

The principles we offer (pamphlet p16) are designed to promote a shared way of identifying the purposes that assessment should serve. There are other versions of such principles and we particularly commend those of the Association for Achievement and Improvement through Assessment (www.aaia.org.uk) and General Teaching Council for England (www.gtce.org.uk).

The standards we propose (pamphlet p20-23) are not the same as examination grades, nor are they designed for accountability or accreditation. They are also not professional competence standards such as those of the CIEA, which are

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used to accredit chartered assessors. Instead they are designed to fill a major gap: a common language to express reasonable expectations of quality in assessment practices. Four audiences are addressed by the Standards: Teachers, School Management, Inspection and Advice Services, and Policy Makers. These are set out as general standards and standards for summative and formative assessment.

It may seem Panglossian to suggest that central and local government agencies can pull together with schools to ensure involvement of teachers in innovative assessment practice in schools. But guided by principles and standards for consistency in understanding, purpose and quality, and with an approach that begins with a full blueprint for moving from innovation to sustained practice, why not?

About the author

John Gardner is professor of education in the School of Education at Queen's University, Belfast

Chris Woodhead says its time to stop talking about assessment principles and show some action

Intelligent and sensitive assessment is fundamental to good teaching. It is, or ought to be, obvious to everyone that if teachers do not know what their pupils know and understand, and what they do not know and understand, they will not be able to teach that pupil.

I know from my days as Chief Inspector, that much assessment is patchy, ill-considered, and unhelpful therefore, to the pupil. Teachers spend too much time planning work individually, seeking solitary solutions to problems which are common across departments and schools. They are distracted from their fundamental responsibility to teach by countless ministerial initiatives, few of which have much to do with the craft of the classroom. In some subjects, like my own, English, too much written work is set and has to be marked. Too little thought goes into what the point of the work really is and what the focus of the assessment ought to be.

Does this report from the Assessment Reform Group add to my understanding of what assessment ought to involve and the reasons why improvements are so difficult to secure? It does not. Much space is devoted to a discussion of why educational reforms fail. Statements like 'Reforms do not take into account all the key dimensions of the change process or the needs of all the key stakeholders involved' litter the text. We know this, don't we? Have not teachers been complaining about the top-down ideas that have been dumped upon them ever since this hyperactive government came to power? 'Education systems must fully commit to all the necessary ingredients', we are told, 'of sustainable development'. Indeed they should. It is the argument I had with Tim Brighouse in the 1990's when I criticised the way Birmingham LEA moved breathlessly from a 'Year of Reading' to a 'Year of Something Else', expecting its teachers to trot obediently along.

Improvements in classrooms have to be driven by the headteachers responsible for those classrooms. This is as true of assessment as it is any other aspect of teaching. LEAs might have a role in identifying with their heads particular priorities over a given period of time, but the LEA and the individual school has to recognise that every improvement takes twice as long to bed in as they might have hoped. If the head is not fully committed to the reform nothing will happen.

Do we, though, need research into assessment to identify what has to be done? On the evidence of this report, the answer is that we do not. I do not disagree with any of the principles of good assessment which are identified. How could anyone? 'Assessment of any kind should ultimately improve learning'. Try reversing the proposition. But the

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involvement of the student can be taken too far. Assessment should seek to 'enable and motivate students', but it has, surely to be honest, too?

I would like to see some hard, very specific discussion of good assessment in different subjects and with children of different ages. Principles, like these, are unlikely to make much difference in the real world of schools.

Assessment matters. Headteachers ought to have improvements in assessment high up their agendas and they should have available to them materials that really promote thought in different curriculum areas. We might then see the progress we all want.

About the author

Chris Woodhead holds the Sir Stanley Kalms Chair in Education at the University of Buckingham. He resigned from Ofsted as chief inspector of schools in order to speak out on educational and political issues