

Teaching and Learning Research Programme News Release.

Assessment in Schools: Fit for Purpose?

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All those associated with school assessment systems need to consider the intended and unintended consequences of the decisions they take in this complex and highly influential area of policy, a major new report published as part of the UK's largest education research programme states today.

Policy-makers need to ask whether the assessment regimes in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are fit for the numerous purposes to which they are being put. Assessment policy must, in the end, be developed to advance the education of young people, says the report, but there are clear instances where certain uses of assessment data are in conflict with that overall goal.

Drawing on the expertise of 10 leading academics who have decades of experience in this field, the report – Assessment in Schools: Fit for Purpose? – sets out the characteristics which one should look for in high quality assessment and accountability structures.

It then poses four key challenges for policy-makers: putting effective in-class assessment into practice; enhancing confidence in tests and exams; justifying the costs of assessment; and avoiding political micro-management of the assessment process.

Professor Mary James, of the University of Cambridge, one of the authors of the report, said: "The next year is likely to be a crucial one for deciding future directions of assessment and testing in schools. This Commentary will help teachers, parents, policy makers, the press and the public to know what questions to ask about assessment policy and practices, so that the education of school students is enhanced rather than undermined."

The report is a commentary published by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme and draws on 20 years of work by the Assessment Reform Group, which was set up to ensure that assessment policy and practice takes into account relevant research evidence.

In a UK-wide context, the report:

- Challenges government claims that the same set of test and exam data can be used unproblematically for many different purposes.
- Estimates the cost of the assessment system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland at more than £750 million a year and questions whether this is an effective use of public funds.
- Makes a call for more transparency in this area of public policy, with "health warnings" setting out what test and exam data can tell those who use this information, and what they cannot. Exam results should be published with information about the possibility and likely scale of any error in the marking process.

It also finds that many teachers are committed to the ideals behind assessment for learning, which has been defined as “the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there”. However, they often feel constrained in their ability to realise these goals, partly because of the “performance” culture whereby schools are under pressure to raise published test and exam results. This helps to explain why take-up of true assessment for learning practices has been patchy.

In relation to policy-making in *England*, the commentary:

- Questions the micro-management of the assessment system by ministers and civil servants. Specifically, it cites the examples of a new national testing system which is currently under trial: single level tests, the characteristics of which were set out in advance by the Department for Education and Skills without reference to technical experts but which then ran into technical difficulties; and the development of functional skills tests in English, maths and ICT, as evidence that the relationship between policy-makers and assessment experts should be reviewed.
- States that the implication last year, through the launch of the Government’s National Challenge scheme, that schools at the bottom of national GCSE performance tables are underperforming is not supported by the evidence.
- Says that a £150 million policy called Assessment for Learning, which was developed by the government in England, shares little of the spirit of the term as it was developed by the Assessment Reform Group.

In relation to policy-making in *Scotland*, the commentary draws attention to the need to:

- ensure that the Scottish Government’s commitment to Assessment for Learning remains a priority at all levels in the system and is integral to curriculum, learning and teaching within Curriculum for Excellence;
- support teachers to develop their capacity to make sound judgements about progress and achievement and to share expectations and standards in and across schools
- ensure that all assessment retains a clear focus on learners and their learning
- continue to encourage approaches to accountability that give priority to self evaluation for improvement planning. Evidence should relate to all four Curriculum for Excellence capacities: successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens

- recognise that all accountability systems will impact in some way on learners and learning and take steps to avoid negative impact
- actively seek to deepen understanding about assessment, and how to think about and interpret assessment information and data, both within the profession and amongst the wider community
- ensure that the effective use of assessment to support learning remains a key priority for all partners in education working together.

In relation to policy-making in *Wales*, the commentary draws attention to the need to:

- ensure that the Welsh Assembly Government's programme to strengthen in-class assessment (Developing Thinking and Assessment for Learning) remains a priority at all levels in the system;
- keep in mind that each of the assessment policies announced in 2005 has been planned with a specific purpose in mind; for example, primary and secondary schools working together to agree standards as a baseline for progress into the secondary school;
- establish ways of ensuring that schools are accountable to the public that do not rely on test-based measures of only a few aspects of children's learning;
- continue to put in the resources and training necessary to support teachers in developing their ability to judge what their pupils are achieving and, through 'assessment for learning', to help each young person in school realise his or her full potential.

In relation to policy-making in *Northern Ireland*, the commentary draws attention to the need to:

- ensure that the Revised Curriculum programme continues to promote the use of assessment to support learning (e.g. Assessment for Learning, AfL) as a priority at all levels in the system;
- put in the resources and training necessary to support teachers in developing their ability to judge what their pupils are achieving and, through in-class assessment, to help each young person in school realise his or her full potential;
- ensure that the effective use of assessment to support learning in schools remains a key partnership priority for the whole community of schools, teachers, the Inspectorate, the advisory services and other educational professionals in Northern Ireland

- establish ways of ensuring that schools are accountable to the public that do not rely only on test-based measures but include the wide variety of pupils' learning and experiences.

The commentary also offers insights into the qualities that teachers should aim for in seeking to improve their assessment practice; discusses the differences and interaction between what have been termed *summative* and *formative* assessment; and includes many references to the extensive research findings which are available in this field.

The commentary was written by Warwick Mansell, a freelance education journalist; Professor Mary James of the University of Cambridge; and the Assessment Reform Group. It is the 13th in a series of commentaries from the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), the UK's largest investment in education research. Managed by the Economic and Social Research Council, the TLRP involves some 700 researchers in 90 specific projects.

Notes to editors:

The TLRP (www.tlrp.org) is the UK's largest-ever research programme on education at all phases of life and the biggest research programme managed by the Economic and Social Research Council. TLRP's budget is some £43 million from 2000 to 2012. Of this, half comes from HEFCE and the remainder from UK governments and research councils (further details of funders: <http://www.tlrp.org/manage/admin/fundingbodies.html>)