Editorial. Beware the Consequences of Assessment!

Assessment in Education has a new Editor—Dr Gordon Stobart of the Institute of Education in London. Gordon’s name will be familiar to many readers in the international world of assessment. He brings to the role a very considerable body of expertise that spans the full range of assessment issues from some of the complexities of providing high quality examinations through to issues in the development of assessment for learning. Gordon has worked in higher education, in Government and in the delivery of both academic and vocational examinations in a range of different countries. He is thus eminently qualified to take on this role.

This will therefore be my last Editorial. I leave the role of Editor with some sadness owing to the unique opportunity the role provides for sharing ideas with our international readership. However, the journal, now nearly ten years old, has achieved a firmly established place in promoting and disseminating scholarship and debate around the ‘principles, policy and practice’ of assessment.

We could hardly have known, only a few years ago, when the idea for such a journal first arose, how timely it would be in providing a forum for critical analysis of what has become one of the most significant educational fields of our age. Indeed, when the educational history of recent decades comes to be written, prominent in the account will be the rise and rise of educational assessment. Activities that were once largely the preserve of teachers and a small number of professional specialists have grown into one of the defining features of contemporary life. Not only students in schools and colleges, but public servants of all kinds, industrial workers, private carers and even self-employed people, all find themselves increasingly entangled in the penetrating tentacles of assessment. The requirement to give an account, to meet standards, to measure up well against performance targets and to be compared against others is now so pervasive that its presence in society is scarcely remarked. Part of the motivation behind all this activity is a laudable quest for more transparency, higher quality and greater accountability. However another element is the belief that the competition that it inevitably provokes, both in relation to the standard itself and in relation to the performance of others, is a valuable way of ‘driving up’ standards of ‘delivery’ and of ‘performance’—the vocabulary itself is rooted in models of industrial production.

In no aspect of public life have these pervasive assumptions had more impact than in the world of education. Assessment activity now shapes the goals, the organisation, the delivery and the evaluation of education. For children starting school, every aspect of their lives is likely to be framed and shaped by the demands of assessment, whether this is the assessment activities they themselves are subject
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to—such as weekly class tests, national testing sweeps at regular intervals, mandatory diagnostic testing, public examinations or entrance examinations—or the results of the assessments that their teachers and their school are subject to, the effects of which are likely to be felt in terms of curriculum priorities, teaching methods, homework policies, classroom organisation and so on.

Given the scale of the influence of assessment on education, it is somewhat surprising how little systematic attention appears to be being given to evaluating these effects or indeed to questioning the capacity of the tools being employed to deliver what is being sought. Is all this assessment activity really improving the quality of educational outcomes? Is it making young people better equipped to face the challenges of a new and very different century? Has the bridling of professional autonomy brought about the improvements in quality and transparency that users quite rightly seek and certainly deserve? Or are the enormous sums of money, the effort, the time and the expertise being directed towards these ends in fact achieving something very different: a deadening of learners’ natural creativity, the demoralisation of professionals and an enormous waste of precious educational resources?

The answer, of course, cannot be clear-cut. There are always pros and cons, most of which will not be able to be properly charted until the perspective of some historical distance becomes available. Nevertheless, the papers in this issue of Assessment in Education do begin to throw some light on these important questions and to raise some telling issues. The first paper, by Keith Morrison and Tang Fun Hei Joan, describes the testing obsessed schooling system of one small part of Asia—Macau—now, like Hong Kong, a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. The paper documents the way in which assessment controls every aspect of educational provision in this SAR such that students, teachers, administrators, politicians and parents are caught up in a self-perpetuating treadmill of assessment so self-reinforcing that it is hard to see how it can ever change. Although other neighbouring societies, such as Hong Kong, Singapore and China itself, appear to have been able to overcome rather similar educational cultures in order to begin to bring about a measure of change, at least at present the situation in Macau seems to be as intractable as it is unproductive.

The second paper, by Karen Moni, Christina van Kraayenoord and Carolyn Baker provides a different focus and a different context in looking specifically at classroom assessment in the state of Queensland, Australia, where there have long been no external examinations. Their research shows clearly the importance for both teachers and policy-makers of taking into account the very different ways in which students understand and engage with assessment tasks and results. If assessment is to have a positive impact on students’ learning, its purpose and results need to be understood by students in the way teachers intend. The evidence from this paper and other studies (see for example, Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003, forthcoming in this journal; Weeden et al., 2002) is that a great deal of assessment feedback is misunderstood, or simply not understood at all, as well as being demoralising and demotivating. As a result the energy and time that teachers put into it is often wasted or even counter-productive.

The third paper in this collection, by Alison Gilmore, however, sounds a more
encouraging note. Moving from Australia to neighbouring New Zealand, it describes how teachers’ assessment knowledge and practice have been significantly improved through involving them as testers and markers in the national monitoring activities which have been introduced in that country. By being exposed to well-designed external assessment tasks covering the full range of curriculum goals, teachers have found their awareness of what can be done and how information can be used to inform teaching and learning activities significantly enhanced. The important lesson here is that so much of what happens in the end does depend on teachers. This is borne out by the next paper in this issue in which Zipora Shechtman presents a rather unusual analysis of the development of a scale designed to measure teachers’ beliefs. Perhaps not surprisingly, the paper shows that the best teachers are also those that have the strongest beliefs in equality, freedom and justice; those teachers who are prepared to adjust their practice in an effort to meet the educational needs of all students. In an education system that is heavily constrained by external assessment pressures however, it is very hard for teachers to put such beliefs into practice. The pressure of high stakes tests is likely to push even the most democratic teachers inexorably towards a normalisation of their professional activities that is in keeping with prevailing definitions of what constitutes good practice and desirable learning outcomes.

That this is indeed so is documented over and over again in the volumes reviewed by Alison Wolf in her review essay of several recent American publications on assessment and testing. If, as Wolf suggests, ‘improving the nature of large-scale assessments and the way they affect teaching and learning is undoubtedly the major assessment issue of this decade’ (p. 386), her review makes depressing reading. In the United States at least, the standards movement has led to more testing and raised consequences. Yet, the studies being reviewed suggest that the technologies being used are inadequate even in their own terms. Test development is still insufficiently robust to cope with and adequately sustain the weight of responsibility it is being given—for students’ life chances, for teachers and schools, even for whole countries as they compare themselves to each other. Gérard Bonnet makes a similar point in his comprehensive review of the current PISA international survey of students’ achievements in terms of ‘Knowledge and Skills for Life’. Carefully designed as this study is, it still leads Bonnet to identify significant methodological flaws and to critique its over-emphasis on the socio-economic analysis of results such that the results bear witness as much to the historical and cultural context of countries as to their educational outcomes.

What then can we conclude from the powerful research evidence and critical commentary concerning the way we currently use our assessment tools which is contained in this issue? Firstly, that there can be no doubting the power of educational assessment. At every level of the education system from the interpersonal interaction of teacher and student at one extreme to large-scale international surveys of national patterns of student achievement at the other, assessment has the capacity to help or hinder; to delude or clarify; to constrain or empower. Secondly, that in terms of all these levels of assessment activity, the available technologies lag behind the aspirations we have for assessment. Research such as that reported in
successive issues of this journal shows clearly the many sources of inaccuracy and error that stand between the collection of evidence and the formation of a judgement. Assessment results need to be treated with caution. Thirdly, and more positively, we have both evidence that practice can change for the better and some indications concerning how this can be done. Teachers in the most unlikely systems have demonstrated their willingness and their capacity to change and develop in relation to assessment where they are provided with strong policy leadership and good opportunities for professional development.

Last but not least, perhaps the most important lesson of all is that we cannot assume that assessment—or indeed any other educational practice—will work in the way intended. Activities as deeply personal as education inevitably is must be recognised for the emotionally complex, culturally diverse and more or less unpredictable things they are. It is essential that as much effort be given to documenting the impact of assessment as has traditionally been given to its design. Otherwise we are not only wasting our time as a community of scholars and practitioners; we may also be in danger of unwittingly unleashing a Frankenstein’s monster. Indeed, we may already have done so.

REFERENCES


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