Striving for success: assessing the opportunities

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Abstract
This article discusses three important aspects of assessment within schools, namely, planning, testing and policy development. From the outset, emphasis is placed on the importance of planning for teaching and learning. It is argued that the development of assessment strategies at this stage is significant in terms of establishing clear learning outcomes for lessons taught. Some of the more widely used tests are also discussed in terms of how they might assist teachers to identify specific difficulties children may have with learning. The final section considers policy development in schools and suggests a possible framework for action. Throughout the article reference is made to recent research which supports the development of formative assessment strategies in the classroom context. It is concluded that planned assessment strategies have the potential for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning within the classroom.

Keywords
Assessment, Planning, Policy, Schools

Setting the scene
Over the last number of years standards in schools have become a major area of debate both in the political arena and in educational circles. Although the question of standards in schools has always been vigorously discussed over the decades, as is evidenced in The Bullock Report, A Language for Life (Bullock, 1975) and The Cockcroft Report, Mathematics Counts (Cockcroft, 1982), the present government’s recent drive to raise standards in literacy and numeracy has taken on an increased sense of urgency. Indeed, the Government has taken the unprecedented step of specifying the standards they expect pupils to achieve by setting national targets for literacy and numeracy. In England these targets are:

- for 80 per cent of 11 year olds, by 2002, to achieve the standards expected for their age in English, i.e. Level 4 in the National Curriculum tests; and
- for 75 per cent of 11 year olds, by 2002, to achieve the standards expected for their age in mathematics.

In Northern Ireland the provisional targets for literacy and numeracy for 2002 are:

- 80 per cent of pupils should be working at Level 4 or above in English and in mathematics; and
- 25 per cent of pupils should be working at Level 5 or above in English, and 35 per cent in mathematics.

Some would argue that specific targets, such as these, are far “removed” from what actually happens in classrooms. Children’s learning cannot be measured solely in terms of “percentage increases”. Moreover, the process of teaching and learning is much more complicated than mere statistics. It is not about percentage increases in production levels or upturns in sales rates, as is the case in industry. Teaching and learning is essentially about teachers and children. It is about what happens within the classroom between the teacher and the children, and much more. It is about teachers developing and extending teaching strategies in order to improve learning and it is about enhancing children’s self-confidence and self-esteem.

Over recent years, the procedures of assessment within schools have gained much bad press. Many teachers considered the “new” procedures to be unwieldy and bureaucratic in the context of the classroom. Clearly, much frustration was caused. However, even though over the years, assessment procedures have been modified and refined, in the light of experience, much work still needs to be done to ensure that assessment procedures are relevant and useful. The benefits and value of assessment for the teacher and for each child must be apparent and must continue to remain a priority. Alongside this must be placed the manageability of such procedures for the classroom teacher. All such considerations need to be sensibly and thoughtfully addressed.

In this article, I explore some important issues associated with assessment in schools, particularly in primary schools. My aim is to show that assessment is central to what takes place in schools and more specifically in classrooms. I argue that the various approaches used to assess children in schools enables teachers to become more fully aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each child within a particular class or year group. This, in turn, assists the teacher to plan and to develop an appropriate programme to develop and extend strengths and to address weaknesses. In this context, I will discuss three important areas of assessment in schools, namely, planning, testing and policy development.

From the outset, I will consider how assessment relates to planning for teaching and learning. It is at this stage teachers define clear learning objectives for the various areas of study which they will teach. Second, I will outline some of the tests more widely used by teachers in schools to diagnose specific difficulties children may have in acquiring literacy and numeracy skills. Third, I will discuss some of the key elements in the development of a school assessment policy.
Planning for teaching and learning

Most teachers would strongly argue that a lesson or a series of lessons are more likely to be successful for both teacher and for the child if they are well-planned. Well-planned lessons establish a framework for the teacher and encourage children to be more focused on what they have to do and what they have to achieve. They also enable the teacher to monitor more fully each child’s progress in terms of developing understanding and in acquiring specific skills. In this respect, it is useful for the teacher to consider, in the initial stages of planning, three basic questions:

1. What do I want the pupils to know, to do and to understand? These aspects are often referred to as learning outcomes or learning objectives.
2. How am I going to assess this knowledge, these skills and each pupil’s understanding?
3. What assessment information will I record and how will I record it?

By answering these questions it is possible and appropriate to develop a more elaborate planning framework. This framework might include:
- identifying learning outcomes/learning objectives
- deciding on lesson content/teaching and learning approaches
- setting down the resources that will be used
- making appropriate links with other curricular areas/educational themes including ICT (information and communications technology)
- identifying opportunities for assessment
- considering lesson/topic evaluation and forward planning.

The specific areas cited above are intended to give an appropriate framework and a useful structure to lesson or topic planning and to ensure that lessons have a clear focus. This enables teaching and learning to be more easily managed. Given the above considerations it is clear that planning for teaching and learning requires the teacher to be specific about what assessment needs to take place. Planning is thus seen as an integral part of the assessment process.

Assessing, recording and reporting

All teachers would agree that assessment within the classroom context is an ongoing, continuous process. Information about a pupil’s progress is gleaned from the many interactions between the teacher and the child. Black and Wiliam (1998) stress the importance of these interactions by pointing out that “the dialogue between pupils and a teacher should be thoughtful, reflective, focused to evoke and explore understanding, and conducted so that all pupils have an opportunity to think and to express their ideas” (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 12). This necessarily involves the teacher employing a range of approaches or strategies. These may include the teacher:
- observing children and interacting with children during lessons or activities;
- questioning and discussing with children, on a whole class and/or on an individual basis, the work they are carrying out or the work they have completed;
- marking work with children, both orally and through written comments.

More formal types of assessment may also include end of topic tests and oral and/or written testing of number facts and spelling. However, Patricia Murphy (1994) argues that teachers should employ “open-ended tasks” within their teaching “which allow all children to express their interests and understandings” (Murphy, 1994, p. 191). This approach necessitates interaction between the teacher and the children and is at the heart of teaching and learning in the classroom.

The above are examples of formative assessment and there is growing evidence that this type of assessment has a significant role to play in helping teachers to raise standards within the classroom. Black and Wiliam (1998) again argue that “for formative assessment to be productive, pupils should be trained in self-assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to do to achieve” (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 10). In this respect, children are encouraged to “assess” the work they have completed and to consider how it might be improved. This involves children taking responsibility for their own learning and developing independence.

Summative assessment has a different focus. It is used to establish the overall performance of a child. It is a summary of the child’s progress and achievements and it usually occurs at the end of a scheme of work or at the end of a Key Stage. Thus, the completion of Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) and/or Assessment Units (AUs) by pupils, which are now part of the statutory requirements, enables the teacher to make a judgement about the level a child has attained. In primary schools in England
The use of tests in assessment

There are many tests now available that can assist teachers in assessing the needs and performance of children in the classroom. In this section, I will outline some of the more widely used tests that are appropriate in this context. However, in order to select the most appropriate test it is useful to briefly consider the main types of test and to identify their specific function. These include, norm referenced, criterion referenced and diagnostic tests. I give a brief explanation about each of these in turn:

- **Norm referenced tests.** Norm referenced tests can be used for the purposes of formative and summative assessment. The information gleaned from such tests is useful for comparing the performance of each child with the national average. They also provide evidence for supporting teacher observations and judgement and can inform future planning.
- **Criterion referenced tests.** Criterion referenced tests measure what a child can do against a specified set of objectives and

SATs) and in Northern Ireland (AUs), a level is determined for each child in English and mathematics at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2. Schools also record a level for each Attainment Target (AT). So for example, in Northern Ireland, an overall level is recorded for English, along with a level for reading, writing and talking and listening. These are the three attainment targets that make up the English curriculum.

In Northern Ireland, the mathematics curriculum comprises five attainment targets, namely, processes, number, measures, shape and space, and handling data. The SATs and AUs used to determine children’s performance or attainment are examples of summative assessments. Both formative and summative assessments assist the teacher in developing a detailed profile of each child’s progress and achievement.

Of course, all observations and questioning sessions within a lesson or over a series of lessons will not be recorded. However, information that is recorded may take a variety of formats. These may include, an observation schedule, a record of children’s reading, comments on children’s workbooks that identify areas for improvement and the recording of results from standardised tests. This information provides a valuable resource for the teacher when considering and reporting each child’s progress. From a practical standpoint, the recording of assessment information must be manageable, useful and easily accessible.

From the records that are maintained, schools furnish parents with a report about the progress and achievement of individual children. These records also enable teachers to give examples of how a child has developed specific knowledge, skills and understanding in various areas of the curriculum, at parent interviews. Moreover, when reporting to other teachers such records also provide useful and relevant information. They help to clarify the progress a child has made and they identify areas that need to be addressed.

The following are some examples of assessment strategies used by teachers within the classroom:

- Observing children at work, individually, or in groups.
- Discussing with, listening to and questioning children, e.g. during a whole class lesson, during a group activity or individually.
- Listening to children “talk about”, explain or describe, for example, what they understand, what they have achieved, what they have read, what they have seen.
- Talking with a child about a piece of written work undertaken or completed, including, classwork, homework and tests.
- Children producing a piece using computer software.
- Setting children a specific task or assignment and encouraging each child to “think through” the various stages.
- Involving children in practical work, investigations and problem solving.
- Analysing children’s performance in standardised tests.
- Determining an attainment “level” for a child in SATs or AUs.

Most would argue that the main aim of assessment is to monitor each child’s progress and achievement as they proceed through school. The approaches cited above are some ways of doing this. Arguably, it is by employing a range of approaches to assessment that the teacher is in a better position to plan for teaching and for learning, is more able to develop a profile of each child and consequently can more readily evaluate how successful teaching strategies have been. Figure 1 shows an “assessment star”. Each point of the star represents a key element in the assessment process. It is a process with which all teachers will be familiar. The purpose is to show that the process is cyclical and continuous in nature and highlights how each element feeds into the next. It is also clear that the monitoring of each child’s progress and achievement underpins the whole assessment process.

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skills. Spelling tests, number facts or table tests and end of topic tests are relevant examples. These tests help the teacher to evaluate what has been learned by the child as a result of teaching and can also inform future planning.

- **Diagnostic tests.** Diagnostic tests are used to identify a child’s strengths and weaknesses in a particular area. They may be able to explain why a child is experiencing a specific learning difficulty and they can assist the teacher in evaluating the nature of the problem and how it might be addressed. Future teaching programmes or action plans can be developed from the information obtained from these tests.

As cited above, there is now an extensive range of tests available to teachers in schools. However, they need to be considered carefully with respect to their usefulness and appropriateness for children within particular year groups. The following is a list of the most widely used tests, including information about what skills the tests assess and for what age range they are most suitable:

- **EYES (Early Years Easy Screening)** NFER/Nelson 1991. Group administered in the first term of Primary 1 (Year 1). Age range 4-5 years. Assessment includes: pencil co-ordination, number skills, oral language skills, visual reading skills and auditory reading skills. Suggests follow-up activities to develop the skill identified.

- **The Bury Infant Check NFER/Nelson 1986.** Individually administered. Assessment includes: language skills, learning style, memory, number skills and perceptual motor skills.

- **MIST (Middle Infant Screening Test)** NFER/Nelson 1993. Group administered – Primary 2 or Primary 3 children (Year 2 and 3). Assessment includes: listening skills, letter/sound correspondence, written vocabulary, blending and sentence dictation. “Forward together” is a follow-up programme involving parents.

- **WRAPS (Word Recognition and Phonics Skills).** Hodder & Stoughton 1994. Group administered. Age range 5-8 years (may be used with older children). Assessment includes: word recognition, gives profile of child’s strengths and weaknesses in using phonics skills.

- **EMDK (Early Mathematics Diagnostic Kit) NFER/Nelson 1987.** Individually administered. Age range 4-8 years. Assessment includes: various areas of mathematics (number, shape, length, weight, money, time, capacity), memory, representation and foundation (object identification, one-to-one correspondence, perception of colour).

- **QUEST NFER/Nelson 1984.** Screening and diagnostic kit which is individually administered. Age range 7-10 years. Provides an appropriate remedial/support programme.

- **Neale Analysis NFER/Nelson 1988.** Screening and diagnostic test which is individually administered. Age range 6-13 years. Assessment includes: reading attainment (uses miscue analysis).

- **Group Reading Test 6-12 NFER/Nelson 1985.** Assesses word recognition and reading comprehension. No time limit (approximately 30 minutes).

- **Group Reading Test 9-14 NFER/Nelson 1990.** Choice of test format offered:
  - a 45-item multiple choice sentence
  - a 40-item multiple choice context comprehension test: missing words supplied for a series of four continuous prose passages. No time limit (approximately 30 minutes).

- **Mathematics 7-12 NFER/Nelson 1984.** Group administered (7 and 8 orally administered). No time limit (approximately 30 minutes).

- **Suffolk Reading Scale NFER/Nelson 1987.** Group administered. Age range 6-13 years. A multiple choice sentence completion test. Three levels/two parallel forms available. Timed (20 minutes).

- **Young Group Reading Test Hodder & Stoughton 1981.** Age range 6.5-8.10 years. Word recognition and sentence
analytic, as well as those relating to the number of tests and the times for the issue of reports and the policy will be reviewed and who will be involved.

- Reporting to other teachers – a yearly record might be used to record key aspects of each child’s progress and achievement. Samples of children’s work might also be retained. An important point, in this regard, is that whatever system is agreed (or already in place) must be informative, useful and above all manageable.

- Homework – many would agree that homework is an ongoing part of assessment. In most instances, it is used to reinforce the concepts and skills that have been introduced during class lessons. It is also a means of encouraging children to develop good work habits. This points, as well as others relating to the amount of time that should be spent on homework, at the various year group levels, should be included.

- Summative approaches to assessment – a brief outline of the school’s involvement in statutory assessment is useful and relevant.

- Pupil involvement in assessment – in many schools, children are now encouraged to think about their strengths and to consider the aspects of their learning with which they need assistance. Setting targets, establishing how the quality of their work can be improved, serves to show children that they have a responsibility for their own learning. This encourages pupil self-assessment and develops independence. Some targets might include:
  - improving the standard of handwriting in the next piece of written work produced,
  - reducing the number of spelling errors in a piece of writing,
  - reading a sentence/a paragraph/a chapter fluently from a novel,
  - presenting the results of a science experiment/or an investigation to others clearly.

Black and Wiliam (1998) maintain that “opportunities for pupils to express their understanding should be designed into any piece of teaching, for this will initiate the interaction whereby assessment aids learning” (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 11). In this respect, children are encouraged to think about what they have done and what they need to do to improve.

- Reviewing our procedures – all policies are subject to review. Therefore, it is helpful to include a brief comment about when the policy will be reviewed and who will be involved.

Of course, a policy should be a working document. It is of little use sitting on a shelf or stored in a drawer. Skelton and Playfoot

Developing an assessment policy

Most would agree that a common approach to assessment within a school is of benefit both to the child and to the teacher. A collective approach ensures that there is continuity and coherence, and in the long term, it may greatly enhance the confidence of all those involved. An agreed policy, which is concise yet comprehensive, is perhaps the best way to achieve a clear and consistent approach to assessment in the school context. Nonetheless, it should be stressed that there is no one, conclusive framework for such a policy. This will very much depend on the procedures already in place and on the philosophy and professional preference of the principal, the teachers and of course the Board of Governors within a school. However, the following key areas offer some guidance for developing an assessment policy. These areas include:

- Identifying the school’s aims and purposes for assessment, e.g. to monitor progress and achievement, to enhance the self-confidence and self-esteem of pupils, to inform pupils, parents and teachers about progress, to assist teachers with future planning? Four or five specific aims and purposes are more readily adhered to and achieved.

- Agreed approaches to assessment as identified for each year group, e.g. reading record maintained throughout the school, weekly spelling and number tests administered and recorded Year 3 to Year 7, standardised maths test administered and results maintained Year 3 to Year 7.

- Reporting to parents – an agreed format for reporting to parents should be put in place and the times for the issue of reports and for parent interviews should be included.

- Reporting to other teachers – a yearly record might be used to record key aspects of each child’s progress and achievement. Samples of children’s work might also be retained. An important point, in this regard, is that whatever system is agreed (or already in place) must be informative, useful and above all manageable.

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Well, for assessment to be effective within the classroom it is important to ensure that:

- Each child’s contribution is valued and seen as an integral part of the process of teaching and learning.
- Children are encouraged to be involved in self-assessment – how they might improve the quality of their work.
- Approaches to assessment are reviewed, with the aim of improving the quality of teaching and learning – encourages self-evaluation and self-reflection.

We can all strive for success, provided that we have a clear idea of where we are going, what we want to achieve and what we need to do to get there. Employing carefully planned assessment strategies in the classroom offers opportunities for us to improve the quality of teaching and learning for all children. It is our role to manage it effectively.

Concluding comments

This article discussed in detail three key areas that form an integral part of assessment in schools, specifically primary schools. The areas discussed related to planning, testing and policy development. The main aim was to identify some of the more important issues associated with assessment in schools and to offer some suggestions as to how they might be addressed.

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Well, for assessment to be effective within the classroom it is important to ensure that:

- The aims and purposes of assessment are clearly understood by all.
- Agreed approaches to assessment are established.
- Assessment is seen as an integral part of planning.
- Clear outcomes are established in terms of what we want the children to know, to do and to understand.
- Informative, relevant and manageable records are maintained.

References


Further reading


