

Assessment in
schools is integral
part of learning



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The principles of assessment outlined in Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) state that assessment in schools is an integral part of learning and teaching that should be continually implemented to ensure a clear understanding of an individual's achievement. This enables teachers and pupils to work together and create achievable and challenging goals that, in turn, will maximise the potential of each individual to succeed as effective contributors, confident individuals, successful learners and responsible citizens (LTS 2010).

Assessment has been one of the main topics of discussion in the educational sector for many years and has seen many changes in order to improve and reshape how children are assessed. With various pressures on teachers, pupils and schools to create positive results in national “ high stake” exams, testing has become a technique of which to measure pupil performance and hold schools accountable.

Assessment is for learning (AifL) was established in 2002 in order to alter and improve assessment in children aged 3-14, that would ensure that all main partners have an effective role to play by ensuring the new arrangements for assessment run smoothly. The programme approved three main strands in order to create the new system:

Good assessment to supports children's learning as part of classroom practice, so that parents, other staff and the children themselves can confidently rely on informed professional judgements about children's progress and achievements.

Sound quality assurance of teachers' assessments in schools and local authorities, so that all can share a common understanding of the outcomes and standards expected of children at different stages in their education.

Adopt a robust national monitoring system that provides accurate information about overall standards and trends in achievement, without over-burdening schools or distorting classroom practice.

(Scottish Executive Education Department Circular No. 2, June 2005)

AifL is being implemented in all Scottish schools and is an attempt to evolve and improve the secondary educational system. An AifL school is a place where every individual can learn, with the idea that assessment is an integral part of the learning and teaching (AifL information sheet, 2005).

With AifL now embedded into the ' Building the Curriculum 5' section in ' Curriculum for Excellence' it is at the centre of the revamp of the Scottish educational system that allows learners to engage in metacognitive processes that promote learning. Keeley (2005) defines metacognition as

“ Thinking about one's thinking, including knowledge about one's self as a processor of concepts and ideas”.

Learning through metacognitive processes allows students to widen their thought procedure and relate what they are learning to real events and support and maintain the pedagogical approach trying to be achieved in Scottish schools.

“ Learning is a consequence of thinking. Retention, understanding, and the active use of knowledge can be brought about by learning experiences in

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which learners think about and think with what they are learning...knowledge comes on the coattails of thinking.” (Perkins, 1992)

Assessment methods can be described as either summative or formative. Formative assessment is used as a continuous method which is incorporated into the daily teaching practice and is ultimately down to the teacher to implement. This type of assessment therefore provides the ideal opportunity for the teacher and learners to discuss the learning and identify areas of teaching/learning strategies that may require modification. Summative assessment can be used both internally and externally. Internal summative assessment may be an end of topic test and is used to keep a record of individuals' progress that can be shared with pupils, parents and other teachers. External bodies such as the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) produce summative assessment in the form of exams (coupled with internal assessment results) in order to award an individual with a certificate for a particular subject. These methods are continually used in schools and if used appropriately by teachers, will have a positive effect on the learners. It is the responsibility of the teacher to gather information from assessments in order to not only evaluate learning, but also evaluate their own personal teaching practice. Effective and appropriate assessment can help keep pupils focused on their learning and by providing them with achievable but challenging goals. Communicating with pupils and setting goals will increase their motivation and enthusiasm for learning as they will have a clearer understanding of what is expected of them in order to achieve their goals. Continuous assessment also supports the detection of where learners need assistance.

In respect of how assessment can effect teaching practice – continuous formative assessment will allow the teacher to observe whether specific learning outcomes and aims have been achieved, which in turn, can identify certain needs of particular learners (if appropriate learning outcomes are set). Initial reflection of the lesson will enable the teacher to identify strengths and weaknesses from the lesson, therefore constantly improving on assessment techniques and overall teaching practice.

It is widely accepted that both formative and summative assessment are essential in a learning and teaching environment. There has been much discussion however, as to the extent at which both can be used without one form compromising the effectiveness of the other. Some believe that the distinction between the two forms of assessment is not helpful and we should simply be striving for 'good assessment' (Harlen, 2005). It is believed that good formative assessment will support good judgement of teachers regarding performance and level of attainment (AifL information sheet, 2005) and effective summative assessment will ensure positive feedback regarding areas of strength and need for improvement.

Harlen (2005) states that feedback between pupil and teacher is a fundamental element of formative assessment. By discussing the pupil's next steps in learning, this will bring about the intended engagement in learning. It is through this feedback that the effective teacher will adjust teaching and resources available to enhance learning whilst continually clarifying the purpose and goals of the learning.

“ All progressive assessment necessarily involves feedback to the student about the quality of their performance. This can be expressed in terms of the students progress towards desired learning outcomes and suggested steps for further development and improvement...” (Maxwell 2004, page 2)

Formative assessment is regarded by a number of educational experts as the ideal technique in effective teaching. It is believed that formative assessment has always been around, occasionally being carried out instinctively by unknowing teachers. Formative assessment is not seen as a government initiative, it instead allows teachers to become action researchers and be able to further develop research principles in order to experiment with various approaches of putting them into action. Over the years teachers have been continually redefining these strategies and have allowed the use of formative assessment to develop and evolve over time in the Scottish education sector (Clarke, 2005).

“ Formative assessment is the process used by teachers and children to recognise and respond to pupil learning, in order to enhance that learning during the activity or task.” (Clarke, 2005)

For many years the idea of assessment has been somewhat false. Many believed that assessment is used to primarily measure pupil performance and perhaps can be misinterpreted as ongoing summative assessment. According to Clarke (2005), instead of assessment being primarily a measure of a pupil's performance in a test or exam, it should encourage and support learning with summative assessment 'measuring' attainment and formative assessment 'enabling' achievement.