

Policy and New Products

Research Report



Just Making Them Think: A tension between teaching and assessment in the high stakes stages

Executive Summary

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Background

This is a report of a study written by Louise Hayward, Brian Boyd, George McBride and Ernie Spencer of the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde, commissioned by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) in 2008.

The report was commissioned to explore how a group of teachers in one Education Authority, the Highland Council, were attempting to reconcile perceived tensions between learning/teaching and assessment in high stakes contexts. The study sought to understand what kinds of assessment for learning the teachers were implementing in the context of preparation for high stakes examinations and why they were adopting such approaches; and to record any differences they discerned in teaching and learning as a result.

The policy and research context

This study has taken place during one of the most interesting periods in recent Scottish educational history. Questions are being asked of both the nature of curriculum in Scotland and of the kinds of learning, teaching and assessment that might improve the life chances for all of Scotland's young people in the 21st century. Two major initiatives in Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) and Assessment is for Learning (AifL) are intended to take forward thinking and practice in learning, teaching and assessment in Scottish Education.

Whilst significant progress has been made in developing assessment practices, developing assessment for and as learning in some areas of school work seems more difficult, notably the one which is the focus of this research. Teachers report very real differences in learning activities where understanding of Assessment is for Learning principles has influenced practice in the 3-15 age range. However, there has been a reluctance to change existing practices when the assessment stakes are higher and young people are taking national examinations. Ironically, although teachers report improvements in children's attitudes and in their performance in AifL-infused classrooms, they speak of the risk of building such approaches into national assessment classes. The pressure of the examination syllabus is frequently offered as a reason why many teachers are reluctant to move away from traditional patterns of continuous summative assessment and examination rehearsal that could be said to have dominated the upper stages of secondary schools in Scotland for many years.

The Highland Council has been actively involved in the 'Assessment is for Learning' (AifL) programme since its inception in 2001. The 'Highland Journey' began in 2004, and in 2006 the Council secured funding from the Scottish Government for a Future Learning and Teaching (FLaT) project, 'Embedding Curriculum for Excellence in the Classroom'. The Highland model gives prominence to Assessment for Learning and clearly links research, policy and practice in a CPD Reflection Framework that is integral to the development. The Council refers to this as the 'Highland Journey'.

An important feature of the Council's strategy to take forward the FLAT project was the setting up of subject-based Associated Schools Groups (ASGs), additional to primary-secondary groups and stage groups in the primary sector. These secondary ASGs were in English, Mathematics, Modern Languages, Social Sciences and Science. They were a crucial means of ensuring supportive contexts in which teachers could work together with subject colleagues in local groups and across the Council's area. The Council also took advantage of additional funding offered by the 'Assessment is for Learning' (AifL) programme to investigate a new area of assessment for learning. The additional funding supported the work of five ASG subject groups (English, Mathematics, Science, Social Subjects and Modern Languages, approximately three dozen teachers) who produced reflection booklets containing individual case studies together with reflective commentaries. The booklets were crucial in that they were the product of the teachers effectively peer and self assessing one another in a way that mirrored what they were asking of their pupils.

Both the FLAT project and the work of the subject groups in the upper secondary were specifically set up to explore how robust the model was in helping pupils 'take greater responsibility for their own learning'.

The Nature of the Study

The focus of this study was an exploration of the work of teachers who had agreed to explore the potential of AifL approaches in their high stakes assessment classes in the later stages of the secondary school. SQA took a particular interest in this initiative because it is concerned to address the tensions between learning, teaching and assessment, in particular in the context of the preparation of young people to sit the examinations for which it is responsible.

The study was qualitative and small-scale. It was carried out between June and September, 2008. Teachers who were preparing pupils for NQ examinations (mostly but not exclusively Highers) in subjects within five curricular areas (English, Mathematics, Science, Modern Languages and Social Subjects) participated. These teachers had had taken part in CfE/AifL developments in Highland Council in recent years. They worked in six schools: in one school all five curricular areas were represented; in each of the other five, just one curricular area featured in the project.

In June 2008, each teacher was interviewed in depth and a group of S6 pupils was interviewed in the school where five of the teachers worked. In early September 2008, the teachers came together as a group to discuss with one of the principal investigators the attainment of the young people in the NQ examinations.

The study received ethical approval from the University of Glasgow and operated within the guidelines established by the British Educational Research Association.

Findings

The study found that all of the teachers had found ways to reconcile tensions in their use of assessment for formative and summative purposes within their high stakes assessment classes.

The project sought to understand what teachers who were trying to reconcile the tensions between assessment for learning and assessment of learning in NQ classes (mostly Higher) were doing in their classrooms; why they were adopting such approaches; and what, if any, differences they discerned in teaching and learning. The evidence related to each of these issues is presented below followed by recommendations for future action.

What were teachers who were trying to reconcile the tensions between assessment for learning and assessment of learning in NQ classes doing in their classrooms?

The most commonly stated aim of the innovative endeavour of the teachers was to give pupils more responsibility for their learning, to promote deep understanding, to enable pupils to apply principles to new situations, in fact, to empower pupils as learners.

The amount of time spent on assessment for summative purposes was disproportionate. Activities included past papers, NABs, prelims (two sets for Higher) and other related activities such as timed examination practice, homework exercises, etc.

The teachers had no consistent or clear idea of *why* they had to undertake some of these activities, whether the drivers were departmental, school or Council policy. Nor were they aware of exactly what requirements SQA had in this regard. Time was an issue for all of the teachers. However, they were entirely committed to pedagogical practices which promoted a variety of approaches in addition to peer and self assessment, which were, along with dialogue and thinking, the key aspects of the model that they were exploring.

The tension between assessment for formative and summative purposes, at least in terms of changes in pedagogy, was resolved, with one or two exceptions, by using tasks and associated materials originally designed for summative purposes in formative ways. Teachers were, in the main, using the demands of the external, high-stakes examinations as the means of promoting metacognition, giving pupils responsibility for their own learning and making the process explicit. Thus preparation for final examinations became a more formative experience for pupils. The teachers, in the main, accepted the importance of examinations and they used the examination 'rules' as the context for their formative assessment strategies. The final examination was still the target, the *raison d'être* of their day-to-day work. They made the most they could of the opportunities to use assessment formatively in preparing pupils for it.

The tension between assessment for formative and summative purposes was a real one. The fact that the teachers found ingenious ways of resolving it did not diminish the reality. While the teachers were pragmatic about the examinations, most advocated change.

Recommendations

- ◆ SQA and Local Authorities should ensure that schools clearly understand the nature and extent of pupils' work that would meet SQA's requirements for school evidence to support estimated grades. Schools should be asked to reflect on the relationship between this guidance and their current practice and, as appropriate, bring the two into closer alignment.
- ◆ A study should be undertaken to explore alternative ways in which schools might respond to guidance on evidence for estimated grades in ways that promote deeper learning and greater challenge and enjoyment.
- ◆ Almost 50 years ago, Jerome Bruner argued that "examinations can be allies in the battle to improve curriculum and teaching". With the advent of Curriculum for Excellence, it is time now to ask how such a concept might be made real in contemporary Scottish Education.

Why were teachers adopting more formative approaches?

Teachers in this project believed that there was a need for change. They perceived that there was too great a focus on assessment for summative purposes. They wished to develop the learning abilities associated with clear understanding of aims and criteria, the thinking and the dialogue associated with the peer and self assessment activities they introduced. They also welcomed the approach to the development adopted by the Council.

A significant amount of summative assessment took place throughout S4 to S6 – unit tests, timed pieces, past papers, formal homework, NABs (with pre-and practice-versions), prelims (sometimes 2 per year) as well as time spent "going over" the outcomes of these tests. The burden seems disproportionate and it is difficult to be clear how and why this position has developed in schools. No-one argued that the current position was desirable.

NABs, except in one subject, were not perceived to be helpful. They were universally regarded as compulsory elements of Higher courses.

Amidst this welter of assessment for summative purposes, assessment for formative purposes *could* flourish. The teachers had built into assessment designed for summative purposes opportunities for formative ones; eg, use of peer and self assessment when looking at the outcome of tests and exams; use of the SQA and other websites to clarify criteria; and use of assessment to enable pupils to reach an *understanding* of what was expected of them. There appeared to be potential for a shift in emphasis, so that the formative role of assessment could be enhanced and the frequency of assessment for summative purposes reduced.

The evidence-based, participative approach adopted by the Council was crucial in promoting teachers' motivation to engage in the project. Support from the Council, led by the Development Officer, was key to the development of the teachers' practice. It enabled networks to be established, mainly of subject specialists. These ASG groupings were not resource-intensive but they were hugely influential. The meetings took place after school and occasionally during the school day and were an important factor in the change process.

A supportive climate within one school allowed cross-curricular groupings to be formed. This led to reading, research, teacher-teacher dialogue and feeling part of a group of colleagues. Teachers regarded the opportunity to reflect on ideas collaboratively as important.

Recommendations

- ◆ A review should be undertaken nationally of the impact of summative assessment undertaken as part of preparation for National Qualifications in secondary schools in Scotland.
- ◆ Small scale case studies should be initiated to explore alternative approaches to summative assessment that would meet both the requirements of SQA and the aspirations of CfE.
- ◆ If practice and consistency in terms of learning and teaching are to be improved, then support structures and networks based around groups of schools – clusters, learning communities or ASGs – must be encouraged and sustained. This is a crucial part of the improvement process.

What, if any, differences did teachers discern in teaching and learning?

In addition to the differences teachers identified in their own pedagogy, described earlier in this section, teachers also identified changes in pupils' learning and in their performance.

- ◆ Teachers cited reflection, peer and self assessment, pupil autonomy and understanding as the main changes in pupils' learning. The key word was dialogue: pupil-pupil, pupil-teacher and teacher-teacher. Pupils were actively engaged in their learning.
- ◆ The teachers were highly committed professionals. They had confidence in both the innovative pedagogies they had used and their pupils' abilities. Yet, they were unsure whether the current examination system would recognise the pupils' development as learners during the year's work. Thus they were reluctant to predict whether the pupils would be successful in the final examinations.
- ◆ There was some evidence of actual improvements in pupils' performance in the examinations – achievement of higher grades than expected by pupils in Higher and Standard Grade classes. It is important, however, to recognise the small scale of this study.

Recommendations

- ◆ There should be explicit expectations of the kinds of learning S4, S5 and S6 pupils engage in. Derived from these, there should be a clear statement of how external examinations promote and assess these types of learning.
- ◆ The review of assessment in Scotland related to CfE should consider how the new examination system might reflect what is identified as important within CfE. This is likely to involve a reconsideration of the balance between external assessment by examination and teachers' moderated professional judgement of school work.
- ◆ The impact of assessment for formative purposes on examination results should be monitored over time. Its apparent positive impact is potentially an extremely important finding of this study.