

REVIEW: ASSESSING ASSESSMENT

Gordon Lawrie

Mary Simpson, **Policy and Practice in Education: Assessment**, Edinburgh, Dunedin Academic Press, 2005, 96pp, pb, £11.95, ISBN 1 903765 45 5.

This sharp little volume is the fourteenth from the excellent series **Policy and Practice in Education** published by Dunedin Press. In it, Mary Simpson, Professor of Classroom Learning at Edinburgh University (once known as Moray House College) surveys the recent history and current developments in testing in Scottish schools. Casual readers may be unaware of how many subtle but highly significant changes and experiments have been made to the monitoring of our children's progress in schools. In only 74 pages (plus a few appendices), Simpson's book lays out a clear path through all the fog that all too often descends on educational policy-making. Beware, though – concentration is needed.

From the outset, she correctly picks out three key factors which have driven assessment policy in Scotland. Firstly, Scottish governments have their own ideas of what they want from Scottish education, and assessment in particular; secondly, we keep changing our perception of how education works and therefore should be measured; and finally, politics, the national culture, the traditional valued practices and established traditions all collide from time to time, with results which are at times unpredictable. Briefly, Simpson also touches on the demands of employers although, perhaps, she fails to analyse these demands critically. One obvious example is that employers often complain about a lack of *mathematical* skills of school leavers when what they really mean is *arithmetical* skills. Mostly, they do not care if their employees cannot solve quadratic equations. They want them to be able to count.

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Review: Assessing Assessment

Simpson devotes a chapter to each of the three main assessment periods: the nine years from Primary 1 through to Secondary 2 – known as ‘5-14’; the Standard Grade period of S3 and S4; and finally S5 and S6, assessed by National Qualifications including the ‘gold standard’ Higher exams. Starting with the 5-14 period, she gives a good description of how the key protagonists somehow combined to develop a system which currently assesses pupils when they are ready to be tested, rather than at a set time, such as the end of an academic year. But a new problem emerged. Tests became ‘high-stake’, at least for teachers, because of the political pressure on them to raise standards, and as a result many teachers began teaching to the tests. This made them utterly unreliable as monitoring purposes, for example for international comparisons. And the teaching profession itself was split almost 50-50 between those who thought these tests should be more rigorously monitored, and those who felt that more intensive scrutiny of pupil performance would feed through as increased anxieties for the pupils themselves.

Turning to Standard Grade, Simpson gives a quite sketchy account of the coming of Standard Grade, especially given that a decade elapsed between the original Munn (curriculum) and Dunning (assessment) Reports of 1977 and their eventual introduction in the late 1980s. The original purpose of the **Assessment for All** Dunning Report had been just that – it was to introduce a more rigorous assessment procedure for all S4 pupils. Previously there had only been Ordinary Grade for more able pupils, and after the raising of the school leaving age in the early 1970s there was a clear need for something for the rest. Many schools had experimented with the English internally-assessed CSE examinations to fill the gap, but for all sorts of reasons this was far from satisfactory. Simpson’s view is clearly that more should have been done at the time to develop the type of assessment, moving from ‘normative assessment’ – the old-style terminal examination where candidates are ranked in performance order and pass marks arrived at thereafter – to ‘criterion-referencing’, in which all candidates who complete a set of agreed tasks are deemed to have passed. In fact, some attempt was made to do this, albeit limited as Simpson notes. But the eventual decision to introduce grades from 1 to 7, as opposed to simple Foundation, General and Credit passes, was taken by politicians who initially wanted to equate Grades 1 and 2 (upper and lower Credit) and Grade 3 (upper General) with the old A, B and C passes at Ordinary Grade. Simpson’s assertion that secondary schools and examination bodies were ‘too traditional and risk-averse’ to allow for radical change perhaps lays too much of the blame at the wrong doors, a mistake she makes more than once in this book.

Scottish Affairs

In her section on National Qualifications, Simpson then examines the debate surrounding the appropriateness or otherwise of post-compulsory education. She examines the debate surrounding the Howie proposals, and then goes on to look at the system which developed. In 1996, two contrasting approaches were already in use – the existing Scottish Examination Board’s Higher type of traditional examination, as well as the SCOTVEC system of modular courses which were internally assessed but criterion-referenced. In the end, of course, all the new examinations (Intermediate 1 and 2, Higher and Advanced Higher) emerged as a combination of the two: internally-assessed units alongside an external examination. For all sorts of reasons, the two systems did not blend well in their first year¹, but as the system has bedded in and to an extent been streamlined, Simpson acknowledges improvements have taken place.

After a short chapter looking at Scottish education standards in an international context, Simpson goes on to look at diagnostic and formative assessment. Those of a nervous disposition should look away now, because this can be heavy stuff at times. For the uninitiated, formative assessment stands the concept of assessment on its head: instead of teaching and then assessing what pupils have learned, the idea is that teachers find out what pupils do *not* understand and then tailor their teaching accordingly – hence the title of the latest initiative in this respect, **Assessment is for Learning**. Effectively that makes formative assessment a *teaching* technique more than a traditional measuring tool, a concept that may be hard for some bewildered readers to grasp. Formative assessment is not a new idea, but Simpson’s introduction suggests that the happy coincidence of having Jack McConnell, a former teacher, first as Education Minister and then as First Minister created a climate in which more innovative educational thinking could take place.

Simpson traces the early use of diagnostic assessment in the criterion-referencing Standard Grade exams, but points out that it was never clear what should happen if pupils failed criteria. Indeed, quite early on, she implicitly asks the question of how assessment can be used both as a diagnostic tool, to find out what pupils need, and at the same time used as a measure of what they have achieved. If assessment is to be an ongoing process, at what point – if at all – can we stop and say that the learner has attained or not attained anything?

¹ For a full account of the Scottish Qualification Authority’s 2000 exam fiasco, see Lindsay Paterson, *Crisis in the Classroom*, Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2000.

Review: Assessing Assessment

Particularly in 5-14 National Testing, teachers are actually part of the conundrum – are they the gatekeepers of quality control, or are they educators?

There is no doubt that the ideas underpinning formative assessment are sound educationally. They are based on some pretty simple ideas, and most of these ideas would be applauded by every teacher in Scotland. Moreover, several educators, notably Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam², have made a name for themselves by making formative assessment a little more accessible for ordinary teachers. A range of techniques, including more effective questioning in class, and self- and peer-assessment are all now being developed in Scottish schools. They may be informal, but they are forms of assessment all the same. In general this section on diagnostic and formative assessment is excellent and worth the price of the book alone. But you may need to read it twice to follow it.

This *is* a good book, no question of that. But Mary Simpson fails badly in one department, in that she fairly consistently undervalues the professional competence of classroom teachers whom she portrays at various points in this book as having negative ‘mindsets’, lacking competence in their own subject, and, in the final chapter, even hints that they are spoiled:

their pay and conditions of service are now extremely enhanced in comparison with those other professionals also charged with the care and education of young people – the early educators, childcare staff and social workers. (p.73)

It is disappointing that she finishes her book with such a needless cheap shot. If we are to make the advances in education, including assessment, which are necessary for a high-quality education service for the twenty-first century, then it will be necessary to have ordinary teachers completely on board. They need to be given the confidence and self belief to experiment without fear of failure or recrimination, or else nothing will be achieved. Because not only will we have to depend on teachers to implement assessment changes, teachers will also be in the front line when it comes to persuading parents and even pupils that new ways of assessment are worthwhile and valid. Parents still want to know ‘how well has my child done’, even in relation to the rest of the class sometimes. Pupils are even more desperate to receive quantifiable scores and

² *Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment, London: King’s College, 1998*

Scottish Affairs

positions in relation to their peers. Getting teachers to accept the current changes in assessment will be the easy part. The bigger question is whether wider society – parents, universities, employers – can be convinced as well.

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