

ASSESSMENT POLICY INCLUDING BENCHMARKING

Dr. Debbie Chetcuti

The session was opened by Ms. Mary Vella, Chairperson of the Working Group on Assessment and Benchmarking. Ms. Vella opened the discussion and indicated that after a brief introduction by Dr. Grace Grima the audience would be very welcome to make their comments and suggestions.

Dr. Grace Grima then went through the report prepared by the working group and highlighted the following points:

- The report starts with a rationale of educational assessment. It explains the principles of a new model of educational assessment giving practical examples.
- It then illustrates current practices of assessment in schools giving a general overview of what happens in State Schools, the Junior Lyceum and Common Entrance Exam and attainment in literacy.
- The report then goes on to outline the challenges which are being faced by schools regarding assessment. The report was not prepared in a vacuum but it took into consideration the views of teachers in schools and the concerns being expressed. The important thing however is not to lose sight of the vision because of the many challenges.
- As outlined in the report the challenges cannot be faced without constant support, training, structures and resources. All these needs are dealt with in the action plan presented in the same report.
- In fact the first response of the working group on Assessment and Benchmarking was to prepare a glossary of terms to explain the terms regarding assessment used in the National Minimum Curriculum.
- The report also gives a detailed analysis of a survey carried out in schools regarding assessment.
- Finally the report presents an action plan on how the new ideas regarding assessment can actually be implemented in schools. What is important in this action plan is that it is not authoritarian but involves teachers within a number of research projects. The action plan outlines a number of research projects to obtain information regarding a number of issues. Based on the outcomes of these research projects, pilot projects are initiated in schools and actual implementation started in phases. The action plan stresses the

importance of basing any policy decisions on research and collaboration with teachers.

- The report presented is however only a report in progress and it is open to discussion until a final report can be written.

After the summary of the report the discussion was open to the floor. In the discussion the following issues emerged:

1. The need to be clear about the terminology used

We need to be very clear about the terminology that is being used in the NMC regarding assessment, and especially clear about what we mean when we say "formative assessment". In the words of Dr. Mark Borg, formative assessment is an informal rather than a formal record. The teacher in the class should, through formative assessment, help each student to reach educational objectives and give feedback to students. The aim is for formative assessment to help students to learn. If formative assessment becomes an official record then it defeats the whole purpose.

In contrast summative assessment is formal in that it takes place at the end of instruction. It is used to assess students and to keep a record of their achievement. During each scholastic year we do a lot of summative assessments. That we look only at the end-of-year examination is an issue in itself.

Another form of assessment is continuous assessment which should in Dr. Borg's opinion not include the marks of formative assessment but marks for other things such as effort which help the students gain in their learning. This can also be related to teacher assessment where students can be rewarded for things like effort, industry, affective aspects and so on.

What we should aim for is a system of democratic assessment. This should be continuous and based on work carried out throughout the year. Multiple forms of assessment make the assessment more valid and these can then be used to reach a summative global mark. The purpose of summative assessment is to give certification. We need to reach this stage in a more democratic and fair way.

The tension between formative and summative assessment was discussed by other participants, especially the conflict between wanting to carry out formative assessment yet, at the same time, introducing SEC examinations for each new subject suggested in the curriculum. The examination in fact works against formative assessment because there is too much material to cover and this is done at the expense of the quality of learning and teaching.

The debate with regards to whether formative assessment should be in some way formalised was continued all throughout the discussion. While some

participants felt strongly that formative assessment should remain just a way of giving feedback to students to help them to improve their learning, other participants argued strongly that formative assessment should be formalised because otherwise it would not be given importance either by the teachers or by the students. What we need to do is find ways in which we can give students credit for work which is done in informal sessions such as practical work, group work and collaboration. However, we need to ensure that this crediting system does not then become a more fashionable form of the "examination".

One way in which this can be done was suggested, being the development of student Records of Achievement which could include both formative as well as summative records of the students' achievement throughout the years.

2. The importance of the involvement of teachers and training

The teachers present agreed that one of the important aspects of the NMC was their training. There were many new and innovative ideas in the NMC but now it is important that teachers be provided with the necessary training in order for the new ideas to be implemented. Some teachers questioned the feasibility of having all the training courses which would be necessary. However, it was concluded that the important thing is that training is given that the quality of the training is good, and that everyone finds the time and resources for training. Training could actually be carried out in the schools themselves, and it would not be necessary to have central training all the time.

With regards to training, one recommendation made was that computers in schools especially email be used in the in-house training of teachers.

Teachers in-house should come together and develop their own plans of action. This is more effective than having a top - down policy which everyone has to adhere to.

6. Collaborating with other bodies such as MATSEC regarding policy on assessment

It is recommended that there should be collaboration between the work being done in primary and secondary schools regarding assessment, and the work being done by MATSEC for the certification of students at the end of secondary school. Links need to be created with MATSEC so as to ensure continuity. The questions how profiling and portfolios could be credited, what kind of certification students would need at the end of their secondary schooling, whether profiles and portfolios would be considered for selection purposes and recognised by the MATSEC Board, need to be addressed.

Another recommendation made was that the final school leaving

examination at the end of Form V and the SEC examination should become a single examination.

4. The need to create a system which tells us what the students really know

We also need to create a system which shows us what the student really knows. We need to have both formative and summative modes of assessment and we need to have criteria which establish standards of learning. These will allow you to know where you want to arrive, whether you have arrived and what you need to do if you have not managed to get there.

We need to have a system which can inform students and parents regarding the standards which need to be reached. What is important however is not only the criteria or standards but how you get there.

Provision must be made for students of different abilities, students with special needs, and students with different talents. We need to create a system of assessment which celebrates these differences and shows students where they have succeeded and not where they have failed. As stated by Ms. Vella "the system tells you what you don't know and not what you know. I never heard students say I learnt this this year... what they say is I did badly here...this is one of the things we need to change".

We also need to have more support services for students and parents of students with specific problems such as "dyslexia". These students need more support and a system of assessment which takes their needs into consideration. There also needs to be a support system for parents so that they will be able to help their children more. We need to shift to multilevel learning and teaching which will help each individual achieve their best potential.

Once criteria and standards are set in place an auditing system should monitor all forms of assessment being used in schools.

5. The need to involve students themselves in the assessment process

Generally reports regarding the students are not written for the students themselves but for someone else, parents, prospective employers and so on. We need to collaborate more with students and encourage them to evaluate their own learning. More research will show us how this can be achieved.

6. The need for information to be disseminated to parents

One of the important things which emerged out of the discussion was that it is not only educators and students who need to be informed about such changes. Parents need to be continually informed and shown the new directions in assessment. One of the best places where this information can be disseminated is the school itself.

7. A re-thinking of the Junior Lyceum examination

A further recommendation made was that there should be a re-thinking regarding the Junior Lyceum examination. As stated by one teacher students gain confidence in Year III and Year IV, they are given a lot of encouragement and a lot of feedback but all of this is lost once they have to start to prepare for the Junior Lyceum examination.

In summary the major points which emerged out of the discussion in the workshop session were:

1. The need to be clear about the terminology used
2. The importance of the involvement of teachers and training
3. Collaborating with other bodies such as MATSEC regarding policy on assessment
4. The need to create a system that tells us what students really know
5. The need to involve students themselves in the assessment process
6. The need for information to be disseminated to parents
7. A re-thinking of the Junior Lyceum examination

These points have all been included in the document prepared by the Working Group on Assessment Policy Including Benchmarking. In fact the Action Plan presented by the group includes a number of research projects which will help to inform decision making and policy regarding Assessment and Benchmarking.

The points that emerged in the discussion during the Workshop session had in fact been already included in the action plan as follows:

Issue raised in the discussion Action Plan

1. Need to be clear about terminology used.

This is included in the short-term action plan where a glossary of terms regarding assessment was prepared by the Working Group.

It can also be included as part of Research Projects One to Four (refer to report) which include an evaluation of the assessment systems currently being used by schools and an exploration of a

number of alternative assessment practices being used.

2. The importance of the involvement of teachers and training.

Teacher involvement and training is included in all three phases of the Action Plan. The action plan also suggests that teachers should be involved in all the research projects initiated.

The first phase of training for teachers is envisaged to ensure that all teachers are aware of the new philosophy of educational assessment. The second phase of training in the short term deals with the development of summative assessment.

In the medium term teachers will be involved in training dealing with formative modes of assessment, group assessment, course work, profiling and portfolios. Networks will also be set up to co-ordinate the processing of summative assessment.

In the long term training will begin in monitoring of standard procedures as well as further training identified by ongoing research and evaluation projects.

3. Collaborating with other bodies such as MATSEC regarding policy on assessment.

Collaboration with MATSEC and seeing how profiling and portfolios can be used for certification are dealt with in Research Project Seven.

In this research project all stakeholders will be involved in an evaluation of the impact of the changes in assessment practices on entry into Tertiary education and employment.

4. The need to create a system which tells us what students really know.

This issue raised during the discussion forms the core of the whole report regarding "Assessment and Benchmarking". It incorporates the philosophy outlined in the document and forms the core of profiling and portfolio systems which are first piloted and evaluated in the medium term and then implemented in schools in the long term.

5. The need to involve the students themselves in the assessment process.

This is again one of the main ideas behind profiling and portfolios. The idea behind portfolios is that students learn to make choices and decisions about their work and eventually evaluate their own work.

As stated in the Action Plan, since profiling and portfolios form such an important part of the new philosophy on assessment they will be well researched and evaluated before actually being implemented. The idea is that the research groups first take a look at what is happening on an international as well as a national level regarding portfolios, then pilot profiles and portfolios through action research projects in schools. Finally they will be implemented in schools in phases.

6. The need for information to be disseminated to parents. *At all levels of the Action Plan there is an indication that information will be disseminated to teachers, parents and the general public. This information will include results of research projects and intended decisions and policies and how they will be implemented.*
7. A re-thinking of the Junior Lyceum examination. *This issue is to be considered in Research Project Six which aims to find alternatives to the Junior Lyceum/Common Entrance examination. A decision regarding this issue should be taken by July 2005.*

As stated by the critical friends in the final presentation, the main thing which was raised in the discussion and stressed in the report prepared by the Working Group on Assessment and Benchmarking is that the teachers are involved in the process of research, decision taking and implementation. Then the implementation of new assessment practices becomes a collaborative effort that can work to the benefit of all our students.