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Current Assessment Practices in Schools in Malta and Gozo – A Research Project

Research Project carried out by the Educational Assessment Focus Group (between April 2002 and March 2003)

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Abstract:

- As part of its action plan, the Educational Assessment Focus Group carried out a survey on current assessment practices in schools in Malta and Gozo. Two complementary research tools were used to collect the data for this project. All Heads of Schools were invited to be interviewed and fill in a questionnaire. In total, 62% of the schools (119 / 191) collaborated in the interview process and 52% (98 / 191) returned the completed questionnaire.

- In the year 2002, only 24.5% of the schools that participated in the survey (24 / 98) said that they have an assessment policy document in their school. The survey responses indicated that that several approaches have been used in formulating this document.

- The majority of schools that responded to the questionnaire, with the exception of three, answered the question on current assessment practices. Overall, the data show that the range of current assessment practices in schools is wide and varied. These practices are generally formative or summative and relate to ways of collecting information and ways of recording and reporting information to students and parents/guardians. Annual tests and examinations, half yearly tests and examinations, the correction of class and home work and classroom-based tests are the most common ways of collection information whereas the most common practices related to record keeping are recording information to pass on to parents/guardians, filling in the cumulative record cards and using merit cards and certificates of merit. Overall, record keeping is not popular in Maltese schools.

- The schools reported that a variety of modes are used to give students feedback about their progress. It is common practice for teachers in Malta to mark and/or correct student work, whether the work in question is class work, home work or tests. It is also common for teachers to write comments on the students' exercise books and test papers. This form of individualised feedback is sometimes used in conjunction with, replaces or is replaced by short interactions between the teacher and the student. Other common practices are class discussion once the work is returned to the students and sending reports home after the half yearly and annual tests and examinations. All school representatives reported that most of the feedback about children's progress is given to parents/guardians orally during Parents' Day/s. All schools hold at least one Parents' Day but it is quite common for schools to have two such days.

- The data relating to successful assessment practices indicated that current practices are still very much embedded within a traditional culture of examinations and testing and assessment is used for summative purposes. The majority of the participants felt that examinations and tests were still the most effective and reliable method of collecting information regarding student progress. Despite this emphasis on traditional assessment practices, however, most of the participants did agree that it was also important to make use of formative assessment in order to help and support the learning process.

- The schools' current concerns regarding assessment practices range from practical issues regarding time constraints, inadequate recording systems and the need for staff training to more philosophical concerns such as the impact of examinations on students and parents, to issues regarding the reliability and validity of our assessment practices and the pressing need for levels of achievement and assessment criteria to ensure fair and valid means of recording and reporting on student progress.

- The participants focused on a limited range of innovative practices that they intend to implement in their schools in the near future. All of the innovations form part of the new national minimum curriculum.

Current Assessment Practices in Schools in Malta and Gozo

As part of its action plan, the Educational Assessment Focus Group decided to carry out a survey on current assessment practices in schools in Malta and Gozo. The objectives of the survey were the following:

1. to find out how many schools have an assessment policy and to see how this was formulated.
2. to get an overview of the assessment practices that are currently in use in schools in Malta and Gozo.
3. to become aware of the successful practices that are developed and used in different schools.
4. to learn about the ways that schools collect and record information about learner progress.
5. to determine the modes in which schools give feedback on progress and achievement.
6. to study the problems that are associated with current practices in schools.
7. to see what assessment practices are envisaged to be introduced in schools in the near future.

Two complementary research tools were used to collect the data for this project.

1. All Heads of Schools were invited to be interviewed. They were given the option to be interviewed themselves or to send a representative from their school for this purpose. The group interviews were carried out by the members of the EAFG over three days between the 27th –29th May 2002 at the University Residence in Lija. In total, 62% of the schools (119 / 191) collaborated in the interview process.
2. Heads of all the schools in Malta and Gozo were also sent a questionnaire regarding current assessment practices that had to be returned by the 17th June 2002. The return rate of the completed questionnaires was 52% (98 / 191).

Table 1 indicates the numbers of schools, by sector, which participated in the study.

Table 1: Schools that participated in the study

Types of Schools	Participated in Interviews	Completed questionnaire
State Primary	55	51
State Secondary	25	17
State Junior Lyceum	9	8
Church Primary	9	8
Church Secondary	10	5
Church Primary & Secondary	5	7
Independent	6	2
Total	**119**	**98**

The data reduction processes of the interviews and the questionnaires were carried out separately. However, in the results section, both sets of data are presented in a complementary manner where possible.

Results

I: Assessment Policy Documents in Schools

Heads of Schools in Malta and Gozo were asked to indicate whether they have an assessment policy document in their school.

Table 2: Schools with an Assessment Policy Document

Types of Schools	N	%
State Primary	10	19.6
State Secondary	3	17.6
State Junior Lyceums	1	12.5
Church Primary	2	25.0
Church Secondary	3	0.6
Church Primary / Secondary	4	57.1
Independent	1	50.0
Total	24	24.5

Table 2 indicates that in the year 2002, only a small number of schools stated that they have an assessment policy. In effect, only 24.5% of the schools that participated in the survey (24 / 98) said that such a document exists in their school.

The schools were also asked to indicate how the assessment policy document had been formulated. It is evident from the survey responses that several approaches have been used. A number of schools said that the policy was formulated during SDP meetings. Other schools said that the document was presented during meetings with staff for discussion. In such cases, the document was said to have been drafted by the Head of School or by the Senior Management Team. The responses indicated that there were differences in the outcome of the discussions that were held. There was one school that said that:

> *The document which was drafted by the administration was briefly discussed with the teachers…although some objections were raised, very little change was made to the original document.*

There were other schools however, that talked about collegiality and further discussions. One of these schools commented that the members of the teaching staff made very valid contributions during such discussions.   In one school, the teachers were invited to research the area before such meetings took place.

> *Members of staff were encouraged to research the area. Then several meetings were held for discussion. A final draft was drawn. This was finalized after consultation with the staff.*

In another school, the guidelines were set up by the Board of Directors and then discussed and adapted by the teachers. There was only one other school that said that the assessment policy document was a collaborative process between the senior

management team, the teaching staff and the parents. Similarly, there was only one school that mentioned that experts were involved in this developmental process.

II: Overview of Current Assessment Practices used in Maltese Schools

The majority of schools that responded to the questionnaire, with the exception of three, answered the question on current assessment practices. Overall, the data show that current assessment practices in all the schools are generally formative or summative. The situation is described by one participant as follows:

> *Assessment practices which are currently in use in my school are two-fold:*
> *formative assessment used to help and support the learning process and*
> *summative assessment – formal testing and examinations which are used to*
> *review the achievement of pupils.*

The analysis of the questionnaire data also shows that the range of current assessment practices in schools is wide and varied. The different practices relate to ways of collecting information and ways of recording and reporting information to students and parents/guardians.

Ways of collecting information

Table 3 shows that when asked to talk about current assessment practices, the largest category or respondents mentioned annual tests and examinations (64%).   Other common practices are half yearly tests and examinations (59%); the correction of class and home work (57%) and classroom-based tests (50%).

Table 3: Current Assessment Practices: ways of collecting information

Ways of collecting information	Frequency (N = 98)	%
Annual Exams/Tests	63	64
Half Yearly Exams/Tests	58	59
Correction of Classwork/Homework	56	57
Classroom Based Tests	49	50
Projects/Scrap Books	18	18
Portfolios/Profiles	12	12
Oral Tests	8	8
Charts/exhibitions/displays	7	7
Practical Work	5	5
Coursework	4	4
Past papers/revision sheets	4	4
Class presentations	3	3
Quizzes	2	2
Observations by teachers	2	2
Observations by Heads	2	2
Field work	1	1
School magazine	1	1
Questioning	1	1
Class participation	1	1

The data were further analysed in order to see whether the overall picture is reflected in the different educational sectors. This analysis is tabulated below.

Table 4: Current Assessment Practices in the Different Sectors: ways of collecting information

Ways of collecting information	State Primary (51 schools)		State Secondary (17 schools)		State Junior Lyceum (8 schools)		Church Primary (8 schools)		Church Secondary (5 schools)		Church Primary/ Secondary (7 schools)		Independent (2 schools)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Annual Exams/Tests	30	59	13	76	4	50	4	50	4	80	6	86	2	100
Half Yearly Exams/Tests	30	59	12	71	4	50	4	50	4	80	2	29	2	100
Correction of Classwork/Homework	28	55	14	82	6	75	-	-	4	80	4	57	-	-
Classroom Based Tests	24	47	10	59	3	38	5	63	2	40	4	57	1	50
Projects/Scrap Books	5	10	4	24	3	38	1	13	2	40	3	43	-	-
Portfolios/Profiles	9	18	1	6	1	13	-	-	-	-	1	14	-	-
Oral Tests	4	8	1	6	1	13	1	13	-	-	1	14	-	-
Charts/exhibitions/displays	6	12	1	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Practical Work	-	-	1	6	2	25	-	-	1	20	1	14	-	-
Coursework	-	-	1	6	2	25	1	13	-	-	-	-	-	-
Past papers/revision sheets	4	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Class presentations	-	-	-	-	2	25	-	-	1	20	-	-	-	-
Quizzes	1	2	-	-	1	13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Observations by teachers	2	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Observations by Heads	3	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Field work	-	-	-	-	1	13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
School magazine	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Questioning	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Class participation	-	-	1	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 4 gives a breakdown of the practices that take place at the different levels in the different types of schools in Malta and Gozo. One general observation is that tests and examinations are very popular forms of assessment practices in both primary and secondary schools in the three educational sectors.

Table 5 below shows the three most popular choices in the different types of schools.

Table 5: Most popular assessment practices in the different types of schools

School	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice
State Primary	Annual & Half Yearly Exams	Correction of Class/Home Work	Classroom based Tests
State Secondary	Correction of Class/Home Work	Annual & Half Yearly Exams	Classroom based Tests
State Junior Lyceum	Correction of Class/Home Work	Annual & Half Yearly Exams	Classroom based Tests
Church Primary	Classroom based Tests	Annual & Half Yearly Exams	
Church Secondary	Annual & Half Yearly Exams	Correction of Class/Home Work	Classroom based Tests
Church Primary & Secondary	Annual & Half Yearly Exams	Correction of Class/Home Work	Classroom based Tests
Independent	Annual & Half Yearly Exams	Classroom based Tests	

It is evident from this table that the practices are very similar in the different types of schools, although the position of the practices varies slightly. Annual and half yearly examinations, the correction of classwork and homework and classroom based assessment are very popular assessment practices in Malta.

The interview data suggest that, in some schools, a combination of examination results and teacher assessment is used concurrently. In one Independent primary school, the weighting given to the examination increases from year to year. In Year 1, the weighting given is 20% to the examination and 80% to teacher assessment. In the Middle school, this changes to 100% for the examination and 100% for the teacher assessment. It is also important to point out that in State primary schools, it is common for examinations to begin in Year 4. Prior to that, assessment practices are based on teacher assessment.

Portfolios and profiles are not common at present. The questionnaire data suggest that compared to the 64% of participants who talked about annual and half yearly examinations and tests, only around 12% stated that they currently use portfolios: 14% of Church Primary/Secondary schools; 13% of State Junior Lyceums and 6% of State Area Secondary Schools. In a number of schools, it is suggested that work on portfolios had started but then had to be stopped because of union directives as explained by one of the respondents *"the Union objected to the extra work involved"*.

The most common form of profile or portfolio appears to be the record of achievement that can be passed on from one year to the next. This practice is described by two of the participants as follows:

Teachers will fill in the form (prepared by the School Management Team) throughout the year inserting all positive (and negative) records of the progress of each student. At the end of the scholastic year each student will have a progress record which can be passed over to the next year teacher. An extension to the above could be a folder containing examples of children's work inserted in a folder to initiate a portfolio system for each child. This portfolio will be carried forward by the child from one year to the next.

Every child has a file that is carried from year to year. In it one finds the assessment sheet and examples of children's work.

Table 4 shows that other popular forms of assessments used mainly in Primary schools are projects and scrap books, charts, exhibitions and displays, and the use of questioning and classroom observation. Other assessment practices that were mentioned are the use of quizzes, school magazines, and class participation. One of the participants explained the value of such activities:

Teachers use a formative assessment. It is informal and subtle. They use classwork, homework, observation and games to assess the children. This they do constantly to check progress of children and to assess their own teaching methods. As Head I am kept informed on the progress of each child and remedial action (even in Year 1) is taken if some children tend to fall behind. Where more help is needed, we refer to the support available.

The assessment practices that appear to be most predominant in secondary schools, apart from tests and examinations, are coursework, practical work and fieldwork. There is a direct relationship between these practices and the requirements of the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examinations

Ways of recording information.

Table 6 below summarises the current assessment practices relating to recording and reporting information to students and parents/guardians that the respondents wrote about in the questionnaires.

Table 6: Current Assessment Practices: ways of recording information

Ways of recording information	Frequency (N = 98)	%
Records of assessment given to parents/guardians	17	17
Cumulative cards	16	16
Certificates of merit, badges, stars	10	10
Record sheets/Broadsheets	9	9
Literacy skills tests	3	3
Facilitators' assessment sheets	1	1
CDAU records	1	1

This table shows that the most common practices are recording information to pass on to parents/guardians (17% of the respondents), filling in the cumulative record cards (16%) and using merit cards or certificates of merit (10%). The data in this table suggests that, overall, record keeping is not popular in Maltese schools.

Table 7: Current Assessment Practices: Ways of recording information

Ways of recording information	State Primary (51 schools)		State Secondary (17 schools)		State Junior Lyceum (8 schools)		Church Primary (8 schools)		Church Secondary (5 schools)		Church Primary/ Secondary (7 schools)		Independent (2 schools)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Assessment records given to parents/guardians	11	22	1	6	-	-	1	13	-	-	4	57	-	-
Cumulative record cards	16	31	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Certificates of merit, badges and stars	3	6	5	29	-	-	1	13	-	-	1	14	-	-
Record sheets/ Broadsheets	7	14	1	6	1	13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Literacy skills tests	3	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Facilitators' assessment sheets	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		-
CDAU records	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		-

Table 7 gives a breakdown of the practices that take place at the different levels in the different types of schools in Malta and Gozo. One observation is that the largest category of responses regarding record keeping came from State Primary Schools. Filling in cumulative record cards, records of assessment that are communicated to the parents, and broadsheets seem to be quite common practices in these schools. Similar practices also take place in the other types of schools, as can be seen in Table 8 below which highlights the three most popular choices in the different types of schools.

Table 8: Most common forms of recording information in the different schools

School	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice
State Primary	Cumulative cards	Records of work	Broadsheets
State Secondary	Certificates of Merit	Records of work	Broadsheets
State Junior Lyceum	Broadsheets		
Church Primary	Certificates of Merit	Records of work	
Church Secondary	-	-	-
Church Primary & Secondary	Records of work	Certificates of Merit	
Independent	-	-	-

The interview data suggest that generally speaking, records are kept of marks given by different teachers. This is explained by one participant from a State Secondary school in the following way:

> *Each individual teacher has to fill assessment sheets at the end of each term. The guidance teacher collects the assessment sheets and passes them to the Form teachers. The Form teacher copies the assessments…and at the end of the scholastic year the Form teacher works the averages for behaviour, class work and home work. The Form teacher has to fill all the other coloumns concerning exams. The total marks for the First Year (Form 1) should be filled in by the next Form teacher in Year 2 (Form 2).*

The interview data also suggest that it is common practice in the different types of schools for examination results to be sent home and then to discuss the students' performance during Parents' Day/s.

Another popular practice worth highlighting is the use of Merit Cards or certificates of merit which are used to give students credit for characteristics such as effort, participation, behaviour, neatness and efficiency. They are also given for participation in sports, art and music. This practice is considered important to increase the motivation of pupils.

III: Examples of Current Assessment Practices used in Maltese Schools

IIIA: Ways of collecting information

Half Yearly and Annual Examinations

Both the questionnaire and the interview data confirm that examinations are still a predominat assessment practice in Maltese schools. This is summarised by a Primary school participant in the following way:

   Assessment is still very much associated with exams and tests, even though up to Year 3 formal tests are not supposed to take place. Up to a certain extent exams are a necessary evil…

According to another participant, in Junior Lyceums and State Secondary schools, the setting of the examination papers is done in the following way:

> *Students get an assessment twice a year. They are given the half yearly examination which is set by the school and an annual examination which is set by the Education Division. A final grade is then determined.*

In Church and Independent schools, all the examinations are set by the school.

Purpose

The summative use of examinations:

The main functions of examinations are selection and classification of students into groups. They are used for the passage of students from one year group to another and for entry into specific schools. As stated by a number of the school representatives interviewed, promotion from one year to the next is based solely on raw marks obtained in the annual examinations (or the half yearly exams if the student is absent). The high stakes associated with examinations creates a lot of pressure on students and teachers. This feeling is expressed by a number of State Primary Heads of School:

> *…there is too much memory work related to our exams…Years 4, 5 and 6 are dominated by tests and exams. The Junior Lyceum entrance exam puts a lot of pressure on the teachers and students and introduces a lot of competition. There is not much time for extra curricular activities…*

However, in one State Junior Lyceum, the marks obtained in the annual examination in Form 2 are also used for the purposes of setting in Mathematics. This practice is described in the following way:

> *The final mark obtained in Form II is used by the administration to set students in Form III for Mathematics. This setting has been accepted as a success by both teachers and students since there has been an improvement in the performance of students…*

The formative use of examinations:

Although examinations generally fall under the umbrella of summative assessment, teachers in a number of schools are also using them in a formative manner. In one particular Church secondary school:

> *examination papers are given to the students who can see for themselves what they got right and wrong…hence the formative aspect of the examination.*

In another Church primary school, formative and continuous assessment are used in conjunction with examinations as explained by the Head of School:

> *Monthly assessment in the form of a mark is sent to parents. They are also given samples of their children's work. At the end of the scholastic year the children sit for informal examinations and the results are also reported to parents. The children are not told that they are going to sit for an examination. Instead they are told that they are going to work "a special paper.*

Classroom Based Tests

The interview data also show that in a number of schools, classroom based tests are carried out at intervals.   In most schools, the tests are given regularly, say on a

monthly basis, however, in one school, the tests are given at the end of a topic. Even in this school, however, the Head of school admitted that the teachers still prefer the system of monthly tests.

Purposes

As a tool for formative assessment:

The main purpose of these tests is more formative in nature and they are used *"to improve learning"*. Class tests are also seen as an important tool to give teachers feedback about the levels of understanding of the pupils. This purpose is explained by one school representative as follows: *"the teacher gives the pupils an informal test so that she or he will get an idea of the level of the pupils and what is happening."*

As a means of continuous assessment:

Classroom based tests also serve the purpose of having a tangible form of continuous assessment or record of the pupils' progress. The analysis of the data suggest that the participants had different definitions for continuous assessment. For some, continuous assessment meant the class tests were carried out in addition to the half yearly and annual examinations. For others, tests were considered in the same category as the annual examinations and continuous assessment meant the work done in class, projects and oral work. This difference suggests that when referring to classroom based tests, some school representatives were talking about a summative tool whereas others were talking about classroom tests as a formative tool as well as a form of continuous assessment.

Concerns

A number of Heads of Schools believe that classroom-based tests are very subjective in nature because they are developed and marked by the teachers. One participant explained that *"teachers tend to be too judgmental in assessment"*. For this reason, marks obtained from classroom based tests are not used summatively or given much weighting in making a judgement of the learners' overall achievement.

Class work and Home work

All the school representatives who participated in the interviews stressed the importance of work carried out in class and work given to students at home. They stressed that *"questions in class, class work and home work are forms of on-going assessment"* which are carried out regularly by the classroom teachers.

Purpose

To indicate the progress of students (a formative tool):

The participants explained that one of the main purposes of the home work is to see whether the students are making progress and to determine their level of participation and interest. As pointed out by a State Secondary Head of School:

> *...great importance is given to the quality of the homework that is presented by students. The Head and staff consider homework as a mirror of what students are getting from schooling. It is an indication of the students' motivation and participation…*

However, as argued by one Assistant Head of a Church secondary school, giving pupils homework and then giving them a mark for it is not enough. If the homework is to be used as a formative tool (although the word formative is not mentioned) then the teacher needs to give pupils comments which allow them to realize their strengths and weaknesses and help them to improve. In the words of this Assistant Head of School:

> *...a raw mark on its own is meaningless. So the importance of teachers' comments. The Head and the Assistant Head are meeting teachers individually to discuss with them how assessment is carried out. Teachers are being encouraged to make detailed comments re students' work. Pointing out strengths and weaknesses will surely help the student to improve.*

This participant emphasised that this form of feedback should be encouraged because students and parents appreciate these comments. Another State Primary described how *"sometimes a notebook is used where parents and teachers write comments for the benefit of the child"*. Although this practice is a useful form of feedback, most parents still want to see the raw mark, *"they still believe in the value of raw marks and they expect to be told where their child stands in relation to other students"*.

As a means of reporting back to parents:

Homework is also used as a tool for communication between teachers, students and parents. In many schools, homework is used to report back to parents/guardians regarding their children's progress. It is common practice to ask parents to sign the homework copybooks in order to confirm that they have read the teachers' comments.

In one State secondary school, homework marks become part of the students' final assessment mark. In this way, parents have a continuous record of the kind of work and progress which takes place throughout the year. A representative from a Gozo Primary school, however pointed out that children can get help in their home work. For this reason, their reporting system, is based only on *"their school work and on the way in which they answer back in class. It is not based on the home work as sometimes they get help on that"*.

In Malta, parents feel very strongly about the need for students to be given home work. Several school representatives pointed out the fact that there is a lot of pressure from parents. This is articulated by one participant as follows: *"when students are absent they insist on home work being sent and even when tests are given, they want their children to do them at home"*. In several schools however, home work is not sent home when the children are away sick.

As a means of evaluation for the teachers:

In one State Primary school, home work is also used to monitor the work being done by the teacher. The Head of this Primary school explained:

> *One thing which is done is that the Head of School or the Assistant Head monitors all the home work of a particular year group. If they see that there are any problems they discuss it with the teacher and then they also call the individual children to the office to enquire about the difficulties and help the pupils out. This is done mainly to ensure that homeworks are given regularly and in order to compare to the scheme of work. We also look at the corrections of the teachers and whether the pupils are doing the corrections. We also ask pupils to redo their work and improve. We ask them to redo all careless work.*

Concerns

A major issue for schools is deciding whether the school should adopt a whole school policy or whether different departments especially at Secondary level, should decide independently. Currently, there is evidence of the latter, as described by the Assistant Head of a State Junior Lyceum, *"...each subject department has its own policy regarding how much homework is given to students...".* This practice was confirmed by others. Those holding this viewpoint suggested that it is unwise to have a policy applicable to all subjects when each subject department has its own needs and demands.

Early Screening

All children who enter State kindergarten schools are screened by means of a medical check up carried out by a doctor and a nurse before they commence school. Whenever the need arises, referrals are made to the Education Division.

When children have specific learning difficulties, they work with SENT. SENT is a team made up of a doctor, a psychologist, a nurse, a speech therapist, a social worker, a Head of school and others. They are responsible for assessing children identified by teachers as having some kind of problem. This team of professional diagnose the type of problem and register the child for appropriate help. The parents' consent is required before SENT can become involved.

A number of school representatives reported that they have not been informed about the existence of SENT. They also pointed out that the specialized personnel are overworked and that the referral procedure is bureaucratic and takes too long until action is taken.

Profiles/Portfolios

A number of schools talked about student profiles. These are usually kept in a school file for each child and they remain with the child for the number of years that she or he remains in the school. The profiles are also sent home to parents so that they are informed about the progress of their child. Some schools also claim to have started to develop portfolios. However, from the descriptions given, such as the two below,

these portfolios are folders with a collection of work, or a profile including a description of a number of characteristics of each student:

> *The Year Threes have a portfolio. They have made it themselves out of 'kartoncin'. I offered to buy them folders but they preferred to do it themselves as they wanted to have something unique. The children decorate these portfolios and they are hung in the classroom. They put into them any pieces of work which they have completed. These portfolios are taken home at the end of the year.*

> *We also have a system of portfolios which is started in the kindergarten. This includes mainly drawings and we try to include evidence which shows that the child has reached a particular stage. We make encouraging remarks about the work but we do not include comments in the portfolio. Again they are passed on from one teacher to another…*

The distinction between profiles and portfolios is still unclear, and what exactly goes into a profile and a portfolio is determined by the interpretation of the individuals concerned. This haziness comes out in the words of one school representative from a Church secondary school who commented that, *"the school is gradually introducing portfolios and profiling in Form I, even though there isn't a clear cut distinction between these two forms of assessment".*

Purposes

<u>To show development:</u>

In some schools parents are sent a developmental profile. This profile includes all the various aspects of development and teachers are asked to tick the levels that they think the children have achieved. In one Church Primary school:

> *Every term the students receive a very formal and rather lengthy report on every aspect of development. This is not a tailor made report. Teachers are asked to tick those levels that the individual student has achieved in particular areas of development.*

In one State Primary school, the profile is supplemented by examples of students' work. As described by the Head of School:

> *The school has already introduced 'profiles' and 'portfolios'. They keep specimen work of pupils chosen by teachers. This work is kept at school and used to inform parents about their child's progress…*

In one Independent school, the information placed in a child's profile is not all shared with the parents. The Head of this school explained that:

> *The profiling system gives a good picture of each child from when they enter at two and a half to when they leave at sixteen. Some information is given to parents and some information is kept by the school to compare with national and international levels.*

<u>To show characteristics other than academic:</u>

In secondary schools it appears that profiles are used to report back on aspects of the formation of students which do not appear as part of their academic record. One Church secondary school uses profiles to report on *"attendance, behaviour, participation"* and this profile sheet is updated once every term.

In one Boys' State secondary school, the portfolio is used to motivate the weaker students and put emphasis on positive achievement. The students are awarded merit certificates on twelve different qualities and these are included in the portfolio. A certificate for involvement in school life is also given and is included in the portfolio. A class portfolio, including good reports and sanctions is built throughout the year.

Concerns

One major stumbling block in the introduction of profiles and portfolios is the Union directives. There were a number of schools that reported that they had initiated the introduction of portfolios and then had to discontinue the process. This reality is reported by one State Primary Head of School in the following way:

> *...we introduced a system of profiling starting with kinder classes. The teachers were rather apprehensive at first but later they became enthusiastic. The project had to stop because of MUT directives…*

IIB: Ways of Recording and Reporting Information

Recording assessment information

All the school representatives that participated in the interviews said that their respective schools kept records of students' assessments. The methods used varied, some schools kept records on a school level whereas in other schools the records were kept on an individual basis by the teachers. In some schools, the records were kept by the teachers in classrooms or staffrooms. In other schools a centralized system was used. Increasingly, this system is becoming computerised.

The interview data shows that there were some differences in the ways record keeping is viewed at the different levels of schooling. An overview is given below:

Kindergarten and Primary A

According to one Primary A Head of School, the official policy of the Education Division for the early school years is that no official records are kept:

> *This is the official policy of the Division for Primary A schools. No tests should be given and no records are formally kept. No records are kept of pupil progress and improvement.*

Other Primary A school representatives reported adhering to this policy. However in some schools, individual teachers kept records of homework given, out of their own initiative.

In one particular state Primary A school, the Head of School takes it upon herself to keep records of pupil progress from the time that they enter kindergarten. The main purpose for keeping these records is to record the progress and development of pupils as they acquire certain skills. They are also a useful document to encourage discussion with parents regarding the progress of their children. In this case, the records are used formatively. She describes this process as baseline assessment:

> *I have introduced something which I think our school is a pioneer in. We use a form of baseline assessment. After about three weeks the kindergarten assistant makes an assessment of the child together with the parent. They then fill in a sheet which is a simple flower which includes in the petals the skills a child should start to acquire. It can also take the form of a jigsaw. When a child acquires a particular skill, the kindergarten assistant simply fills in the petal or the jigsaw piece. They meet together with the parents about every four weeks to discuss the progress and development of the child. There is no indication on the sheet of the date at which the particular skill is acquired…The pupils have the same kindergarten assistant for two years so that they can really help the children to develop the skills and watch progress. In the first year they work on solitary play, group work, creating. In the second year they work on skills and concepts related to literacy. These sheets are given to the Year I teachers who know where each child stands. The parents also have access to the sheets.*

Primary B Schools

Primary B schools assess students using examinations, tests, homework, questions and observation. Records of marks obtained are usually kept by the individual class teachers. A number of schools have taken the initiative to develop systems for recording assessment information. The most common systems of recording information are record books kept by the teachers and writing marks and/or comments in the class registers.

In a number of schools, samples of pupil work are kept as records of their progress throughout the year. A participant from a State Primary school explained this process:

> *What we do is that any handouts and worksheets are kept in a file as a record of work throughout the year. The copy books are kept by the pupils. The file is then given to the pupils at the end of the year…Records are also kept in the cumulative cards which are filled in at the end of the year.*

One other State Primary school has developed an individual pupil observation record sheet where anything worth noting is recorded. This sheet is to be passed on from one class teacher to the next and includes information about several aspects of development. The Head of School explained:

> *In all the years we have an observation sheet. This sheet is available for each individual child and anything which is worth noting is recorded on this sheet. We describe the incident that happens and then we can also make a comment on it. This sheet is taken with the children from year to year. What we have found very useful as teachers is that the pupils come to us with this file and we can already have a good idea about the behaviour and achievement of the child. Not everyone agrees with this as the child can be labeled and the teacher influenced either in favour or against the child. What is more important is that the teacher uses the information with discretion and in a positive way. This means that the pupils are always given the opportunity to change what happened in the past. What is nice about this sheet is that anything can go into the sheet, it is not only the negative things but also the positive things that can be recorded. This sheet is good because it also indicates any social or medical problems for example cases of severe asthma attacks and these help the teacher to be prepared…The pupils also have a folder which includes sample of their work and these are taken home at the end of the year.*

Secondary Schools

Marks are a prominent feature in secondary schools. Students are given marks for schoolwork, homework, tests and examinations. Records of these marks are usually kept in the school and parents/guardians are informed about the progress of the students after examinations.

In some schools, the marks are supplemented or replaced by teacher comments. Participants from one Church school and one State Junior Lyceum explained that comments and remarks made by the teachers are given to the students together with comments from the Head of School. These comments take into consideration academic performance as well as other aspects such as behaviour, attendance, participation and personal appearance. Another Church school is trying to improve its methods of keeping records and is moving towards keeping records of *"students' knowledge and understanding, problem solving, practical abilities, etc.".* In some cases anecdotal record sheets which record incidents that happen in a week are also kept by class teachers.

A number of State secondary schools also make use of merit cards and awards which encourage student participation and achievement and can also be kept as a record of the successful achievements of students.

There are a number of views about the ways in which teachers make use of assessment records. The questionnaire data show that according to some Heads of Schools, these records are not useful:

> *…the records have very little use or none at all…teachers have little time to spend looking at results and grades obtained by pupils during the previous years. Moreover one can be influenced with regards to the performance or behaviour of particular pupils. A few minutes conversation with previous teachers regarding a particular child's strengths and weaknesses proves to be more useful to the present teacher than any written record…*

Others hold a completely different point of view. They feel that such records are very useful and help teachers to plan and prepare lessons and guide students towards particular levels of achievement:

> *…teachers use records as a self evaluation of the teaching process…they also use them to build programs to help children to achieve better, to stimulate improvement, to inform parents of the children's progress and to serve as a departing point for further work with children…*

V: Reporting Back and Giving Feedback

In the questionnaires, the schools were asked to list the ways in which learners were given feedback about their progress and achievement. The analysis of the data suggests that a wide variety of practices are being used for these purposes. These have been classified into two. Table 9 indicates the practices related to feedback on progress. Table 10 indicates the practices of feedback related to achievement and the celebration of achievement.

Table 9: Practices related to Feedback on Progress

Correction of homework, classwork and tests

Comments written on exercise books/ test papers

Short interactions between student and teacher

Class discussion following correction of work

Test results with comments forwarded to parents/guardians

Test results are signed by parents/guardians

Teachers show students their marked examination scripts
and discuss achievement with them

Filling in of Progress Reports / Report Books with remarks

Progress charts in class

Progress report is sent home periodically

End of term student profiles

Personal meetings or telephone calls with parents

Parents' Days

The data in the table above suggests that a variety of modes are used to give students feedback about their progress. It is common practice for teachers in Malta to mark and/or correct student work, whether the work in question is classwork, homework or

tests. It is also common for teachers to write comments on the students' exercise books and test papers. This form of individualised feedback is sometimes used in conjunction with, replaces or is replaced by short interactions between the teacher and the student. During the interviews, this point was further explained. In the Primary schools especially though not exculsively, teachers send work home with the children either once a week or every month. Parents are asked to sign this work in order to acknowledge that they have seen the work. In one particular State primary school this is done at the end of the year as well when all the work is sent home with comments about the child's progress and weaknesses. The Head of school explained that the comments given by the teachers are descriptive in nature and include things like *"well done"* or *" try harder"*.

The questionnaire data suggest that another common practice is class discussion once the work is returned to the students. In secondary schools especially, asking parents to sign test results is one strategy that is widely used to keep parents/guardians informed about their children's progress. Another common way of reporting the progress of students is by sending reports home after the half yearly and annual tests and examinations. During the interviews, the participants explained that although these reports always include the marks, in addition a number of schools have started to include teacher comments as well. In most schools these comments are still very general and based on the teachers' observations. It is important to point out that in a number of Church and Independent schools, the comments are tied to a list of objectives and skills that the child is expected to acquire in the learning process during that particular year.

Both the questionnaire and the interview data suggest that there seems to be an increased interest, especially in Church and Independent schools, in showing students their marked examination papers and discussing progress directly with them. This system is described by a Head of an Independent school as follows:

> *This system helps students to know where they stand. There are very few illusions about the ability of the students. It also helps to monitor the work done by the students and the teachers.*

This practice sometimes takes place during Parents' Days when parents/guardians are invited to the school to discuss their child's progress with their current teachers. It is not always the case however that parents/guardians are shown evidence of their children's progress during such meetings.

All school representatives reported that most of the feedback about children's progress is given to parents/guardians orally during Parents' Day/s. All schools hold at least one Parents' Day but it is quite common for schools to have two such days. Some Heads of Schools reported that up to 95% of the parents attend Parents' Day. In other schools parent attendance was 50% or less.

Although the purpose of Parents' Day is to report on student progress, a number of Heads of School explained that at times the conversation focuses mainly on behaviour and conduct of the students at school. In primary school, the parents/guardians meet the class teacher and any specialist teachers whereas in secondary school, they usually meet with the Form teacher and then go on to meet with the subject area teachers .

Several Heads of Primary school commented that the Mini Parents' Day that is supposed to be held in 90 minutes is quite impossible from a logistical point of view.

When the case arises that the school is concerned about the progress being made about a particular child, the parents/guardians are contacted and a meeting takes place as soon as possible. Apart from these common practices, it is evident from the table above that a number of other initiatives are being implemented in local schools in order to ensure that student progress is reported and recorded.

Table 10 below summarises the ways in which learners are given feedback related to their achievement. As expected, marks and grades on students' schoolwork, tests and examinations are a prominent feature in Maltese schools. These are kept in a variety of formats such as in test and examination reports, record cards and student profiles. It is interesting to observe the numerous ways in which achievement is celebrated in the different schools ranging from certificates and prizes, to award boards and achievement charts and even badges and trophies. Success is celebrated by displaying student work and/or by getting praised directly by the Head of School individually or publicly during school assembly.

Table 10: Practices related to Feedback about Achievement

Marks and grades on students' work
Test and examination reports
Record cards given to parents
End of term student profiles
Reward systems, certificates and prizes
Achievement charts
Award board
Badges and trophies systems
Motivation books and merit cards
Display of student work
Praise by Head of School
Celebrating success during assembly
Portfolios

The schools were also asked to indicate how often they communicate formally with parents/guardians on progress and achievement.

Table 11: Frequency of Formal Communication with Parents/Guardians in a Year

Types of Schools	Once	Three Times	> Three Times	Other
State Primary	2	9	8	15
State Secondary	2	3	5	6
State Junior Lyceums	1	1	0	6
Church Primary	2	0	4	1
Church Secondary	0	1	1	2
Church Primary / Secondary	0	3	3	1
Independent	0	0	0	2
Total	7	16	21	33

There were a considerable number of schools that did not give an indication of how often they communicate formally with parents/guardians on their children's progress and achievement. The largest category of those who did ticked "other". Many of these explained that formal communications with parents'guardians took place during Parents' Day/s and as often as necessary depending on the individual students. The analysis of the data among the given categories suggests that, in the majority of cases, schools formally communicate with parents/guardians about progress and achievement three times or more in any one academic year.

VI: Examples of Successful Assessment Practices

The participants were given the opportunity to describe what they consider to be successful assessment practices. Table 12 summarises the wide range of assessment practices mentioned.

The three most successful methods of assessment appear to be class tests, examinations and feedback given for classwork and homework. These reflect both formative and summative assessments. One Head of School explained the need for this combination as follows:

> *although formative assessment is more effective…summative types of assessment are also used because they appear to drive the children to study more".*

Table 12: Examples of successful assessment practices

Assessment Tools	Number of Schools (N = 98)
Class Tests	25
Half Yearly Tests	22
Annual Examinations	20
Daily Correction of CW	19
Consultation with parents	17
Home work	15
Projects	14
Merit cards	9
No answer	9
Formative assessment	7
Teacher/pupil interaction	7
Exhibitions	6
Report sheets	5
Input from Head of school	5
Oral tests and presentations	4
Early screening	3
Profiling	3
Course work	3
Portfolio assessment	3
Class participation	2
Assessment Sheets	2
Baseline Assessment	1
Revision handouts	1
Fieldwork	1
Mark scheme re exams	1
Marks for behaviour	1
Computerised system	1
Dictation	1

Class and Half Yearly Tests

In Malta, tests are considered to be good assessment tools by the Heads of Schools because they can be used in a formative manner and provide information for students, teachers and parents. One Head of School said that "*class tests are considered to be successful because they help the teacher to understand better how her pupils are getting on"*. Another Head of School explained that:

> *The half yearly exams are used as formative assessment by noticing the progress or regress of the child. Parents are then notified. The same is to be said of monthly tests given. This encourages children to study more and where needed and to emphasise their weak points.*

A number of respondents emphasized the importance of outlining the progress of students because this enables them *"to know their level of attainment throughout the year and they get guidance to do some uplifting and keep on working harder"*.

The participants also explained that tests are used as a evaluation tool for teachers in order to gauge how successful their teaching has been and how much the students have understood. This use was summarized by one Head of School as follows:

> *Monthly tests are the most successful. Children are assessed on specific topics. The teacher can get a clear idea of the academic attainment of the child for that topic. The result can be used by the teacher to find out how effective her/his method of teaching was and to what extent the pupils grasped the topic. Being a month's work, it is easy to find remedies for any shortcomings. Results can be a good indicator of the child's academic progress or regress.*

In the participants' views, tests are being used formatively because the results are used to provide feedback to students, teachers and parents and in most cases they are being used to improve the learning process.

One participant explained that the move towards formative assessment *"is more accurate, and beneficial…because it is integrated as part of the teaching and learning process and…reflects the rationale of the National Minimum Curriculum"*. Another Head of School explained that:

> *In our school we are trying our best to develop an assessment system that tells us what our students know rather than what they don't know. We also try to highlight success and improvement in all students and not only those who perform well academically.*

Examinations

The feeling that Heads of School value examinations is reflected in both the questionnaire and interview data. When talking about examinations, one respondent explained that: *"although exams create a certain amount of stress, yet they remain the fairest form of assessment…"*. Another Head of School said *"exams are the most reliable since at present there is a lack of standardization and common criteria in alternative assessment"*. Another reason is the belief that examinations are valid and objective means of finding out what the students know because teachers can be ascertained that the work that is produced reflects the level of students.

The participants also explained that examinations motivate students *"to study more"*. This view is echoed by a number of participants:

> *…the students are motivated to make greater efforts. For example when subjects are not examinable such as Art, Music and Literature students do not take them very seriously…*

> *…although we give a lot of importance to course work we feel that students work harder for exams…*

Another reality is that students and parents are not always interested in feedback or seeing where improvement can take place. They are mainly interested in *"the*

results". In some schools however, the practice of allowing students to review their own examination papers is adding a formative element to the process. Two Heads of Church schools explained the benefits of doing this:

> *The chance given to students to review their own examination papers is considered a great success…*

> *Apart from the feedback given to students, this practice also guarantees a high level of reliability in the scoring of the papers…*

Class work and Home work

The use of class work and home work is considered to be a successful tool to assess the progress of students. The reasons given are summarised by one respondent: "*…home work and class work especially the latter enable day-to-day assessment of each child. This gives immediate feedback. It also encourages constant revision…*".

A major concern with homework in particular, is the authenticity of the work presented. It is common practice for parents to help children with their homework. The practice of copying work from others and of plagiarism are also known to take place. One particular independent school has overcome this problem by clearly pointing out to students that any work which is not their own will not be given any credit:

> *Class work is very effective. The school insists that project work and home work has to be the student's work not the parent's work. If students present work which has clearly not been done by them they are given no marks. This has helped to make students understand that they have to present their own work in order for them to receive marks.*

In another Independent school, the work done at school and at home is used in a formative manner. The system is described as 'Target Shot'. In this system:

> *…the teacher directs each individual student to a particular skill suited to him and assigns tasks related to that skill. In this way each child is led to focus on a different task based on his personal skills, and the teacher will be able to check and record whether a specific objective has been reached by that child…*

The view that comments given to parents regarding children's progress need to relate to particular skills or levels is increasing in importance. This idea which was explained by a number of Heads of Schools is captured in the words of one of the participants:

> *…the value of the comments given to parents is important…for example it is good to tell them…your child is able to count up to twenty. Such practical comments present a realistic picture of what your child is able to do and what are the next steps that have to be followed…this brings about progress…*

Projects and Presentations

The interview data also showed the importance that is given in schools to raise student self esteem and celebrate their success. This is done mainly through the use of projects and class presentations. One participant explains: *"I think that project work is really successful in motivating students, interesting them in the subject and even helping them to get better marks".* Other examples of such successful practices include:

> *Each class gives a presentation on any topic every five weeks. This topic is common for the same year group. This reflects the grade the students have achieved. More practice always improves their performance. They have a school magazine for each term. This includes all types of work, like students' work, and teachers' information about science, music and craft.*

Student projects and presentations are frequently put on display especially in Primary Schools:

> *When there is no pressure of examinations, students are more relaxed and they give their best when creating projects and charts with a thematic approach. Weekly work is displayed on boards and parents visit the school very often to participate in the students' activities.*

In another State primary school, they have celebration days which encourage the achievement of students:

> *Students have celebrations to boost their egos. Every Thursday they celebrate English Day: everyone speaks in English throughout the day and one hour is dedicated to literacy. They even have a Newsletter in which the students' work is presented. Questionnaires are also filled in to be constantly aware of the students' and parents' wishes. The latter's co-operation is evident. Display boards are found throughout the school premises and each class is in charge of one of them.*

VII: Problems Associated with Current Assessment Practices

The schools that responded to the questionnaire listed a variety of problems relating to current assessment practices. These are tabulated below:

Table 13: Problems associated with current assessment practices

Assessment Tool	Number of Schools (N = 98)
Time constraints	18
Exams cause student anxiety and stress	15
Assessment is not uniform	12
Assessment is too subjective	9
No benchmarks, criteria or levels	7
Parents want marks	6
Students' and parents' lack of interest	6
Parents not informed enough	5
Need for staff training	5
MUT directives	5
Cumulative cards are vague	4
Recording systems are inadequate	4
Lack of differentiation	4
Labeling of students	3
Assessment system too summative	2
No assessment policy documents	1
Large amount of clerical work	1
Portfolio systems not started	1

One general observation regarding the data in Table 13 is that the concerns are very realistic. They range from practical issues regarding time constraints, inadequate recording systems and the need for staff training to more philosophical concerns such as the impact of examinations on students and parents, to issues regarding the reliability and validity of our assessment practices and the pressing need for levels of achievement and assessment criteria to ensure fair and valid means of recording and reporting on student progress. An overview of the comments made regarding these concerns is given below.

Time Constraints

A number of respondents indicated that time constraints are one of the factors that hinder better assessment practices in schools. The time factor is mainly associated with the time needed for record keeping *"some teachers take a long time to fill the documents at the end of each term"*. Because of this reason, report writing is done minimally. In fact one school admits: *"...we used to send two assessment reports during the scholastic year but we had to reduce these to one"*. According to a number of Heads of Schools, the syllabi are very vast and there is hardly enough time to cover the material, give homework and feedback, without also having to sit down and record all of this information.

Time related problems were also echoed in the interview data and are reflected in the following quotations:

> *time constraint is the most important factor*.

> *Schools want to give much more importance to assessment but they have to face the time constraint, vast syllabuses and, in Primary B, the Junior Lyceum*

examination which is undermining the chance to introduce practices that are of great educational value.

While in the questionnaires the emphasis was placed on lack of time for recording assessment information, in the interviews the Heads also suggested that there is a time problem when it comes to correcting student work and individualized teaching.

> *Teachers do not have enough time for correction particularly because of the large numbers in each class…More time is required particularly for those teachers who see classes once a week and have to report on a big number of students…*

There is also the issue of allowing teachers time to set tests and examinations and to ensure that these cover the respective syllabi:

> *The major difficulties are the time factor for both pupils and teachers. The syllabus is getting vaster and teachers cannot afford to test all units appropriately. Most tests are still written, and this is very time consuming in view of the presence of so many traditional subjects and the new NMC proposals…*

Lack of time is also a problem when it comes to teacher meetings and opportunities to discuss assessment practices and policies. It is apparent that the participants expect this to happen during the normal school day:

> *More time should be available in all schools for teachers to discuss policies, etc. In primary schools the teachers do not have time for meetings.*

Student stress and anxiety

Another major concern is the amount of pressure, student stress and anxiety caused by examinations and the consequent labeling of students who feel that they are failures. In her questionnaire, one Head of School explained as follows:

> *Summative assessment practices create a great deal of anxiety and tension and lower the self esteem of several pupils since the latter are compared with one another. Testing encourages rote and superficial learning and methods of evaluation are not always shared among teachers…*

Similar concerns were voiced during the interviews. Heads of Primary School especially felt very strongly about this:

> *Summative assessment is being given exaggerated importance. This is working against the self esteem of the children particularly those who do not do so well in examinations…*

> *Exams are branding children as failures. Too much drilling for exams is inevitable as results hold teachers accountable. Some children cannot read the exam paper and consequently their self esteem is lowered further…*

The Heads of Schools agreed that especially at Primary level, *"exams are extremely stressed on all parts concerned. There is too much work to assimilate, considering the young age of primary school children"*. The students might also be too frightened to give their very best performance. As described by a respondent to the questionnaire, *"stress levels are great on children. Some are potentially not at their best during exams due to stress and fright.."*.   This therefore does not present a true picture of all that a child knows, understands and can do because as stated by another Head of school, *"these do not necessarily provide a true picture of a child's progress e.g. fear, anxiety can trigger off things like asthma which cause havoc in a child's life"*.

Lack of uniformity, reliability and subjectivity and authenticity

Another major problem associated with current assessment practices is the lack of uniformity resulting in a lack of reliability and standardisation. Lack of uniformity is found within the same school and among different schools. These views are summarised below:

> *As there is no school policy for assessment in our school there is no uniformity. Sometimes marks are not recorded. There are no benchmarks and only the teacher involved uses the results. There is no continuity…and it is too subjective…*

> *The major problem faced by the school with regards to the assessment practices is the lack of standardized and uniform criteria. I feel that at times the assessment of learners is based upon the individual teacher's attitude towards education and is therefore at times lacking in transparency…*

During the interviews, a number of school representatives explained that currently there are no formal criteria or levels to ensure that teachers are assessing in the same ways:

> *There are no standards between schools. For example if I compare (School A) with (School B), the standards might not be the same. A pupil who is very good in (School A) might be average in (School B). There need to be some form of standards in order to be able to compare.*

A lack of reliability is a major problem when it comes to the coursework that is being marked by teachers and used for certification such as is the case of the projects presented for SEC examinations.   Some school representatives pointed out that teachers find it difficult to mark these projects:

> *…there is a problem with reliability in the scoring of projects for the SEC course work…the teachers find it difficult to be objective while correcting the work of their own students. After all as they put it…the mark they give is a reflection on their own performance as teachers…*

A related concern is the authenticity of the work presented by students. Some school representatives felt that *"home works and projects are not always reliable pieces of work to assess as they are not always the students' work"*. Another serious concern is school-based examinations. The reason for this concern is given below:

a number of teachers work out the examination exercises with their classes before the actual examination takes place. If this happens, the examination would be more or less invalid.

In conclusion, in order to ensure that standards are maintained between schools and to ensure that teachers are all assessing the same levels of achievement, is clear from both the questionnaire and the interview data that some form of criteria, bench marks and levels of achievement are needed. As stated by one Head of school during the group interviews:

> *There is the need for a common set of criteria for assessment in every subject; this will eliminate or reduce teacher bias. Paper work must be kept at a minimum to avoid over burdening teachers.*

Training for teachers

The interview data also indicated that the teachers' lack of confidence in carrying out effective assessment practices is in part the result of lack of training. One Head of School explained that:

> *Teachers feel that they are on their own and isolated. Teachers want more visits from Eos and SCs to support and help them in standardizing assessment particularly in the correction of essays and other pieces of work which cannot be scored in an objective way.*

The Heads of school also felt that teachers needed training in how to prepare professional examination papers. Some Heads of school expressed doubts as to whether the staff were sufficiently competent in this area of education:

> *Teachers need training in paper setting as well as in scoring examination papers. There is also the problem of reliability, standardization and bench marking. No levels of achievement are as yet available and schools therefore feel that they are not being professional enough.*

VIII: Assessment Practices to be Implemented in Maltese Schools in the Near Future

In the questionnaire, the schools were asked to list any assessment practices that they intended to implement in their schools in the near future. They were also asked to indicate the reasons for implementation and the measures that needed to take place in order to implement these innovations.

Table 14 gives an overview of the assessment practices that schools suggested that they intend to implement in the near future. Although a list of practices was not given, the participants focused on a limited range of innovative practices. It is interesting to observe that all of the innovations form part of the new national minimum curriculum.

Table 14: Assessment Practices to be implemented in Schools in the Near Future

Types of Schools	Baseline Assess-ment	Portfolios / Profiles	Progress / Achievement Forms, Cards, Reports	School-based Assess-ment*	Formative Assess-ment	Assessment Criteria
State Primary	2	11	8	3	6	0
State Secondary	-	4	-	2	-	1
State Junior Lyceums	-	2	1	2	1	-
Church Primary	1	2	-	1	-	-
Church Secondary	-	1	1	*1	-	-
Church Primary / Secondary	-	3	-	1	3	-
Independent	-	-	-	-	1	-
Total	3	23	10	10	11	1

* skills-based assessment for computer literacy

The innovation which the largest category of schools mentioned is the introduction of portfolios and/or profiles. A number of reasons are given. These are reflected in the quotations listed below:

> *A portfolio provides a more accurate and personal record of work that moves up with the child from year to year.*

> *Having a portfolio…having a clear picture of the pupil's achievement.*

> *It is a more personal record that reflects the child's whole progress.*

> *…to inform parents about pupils' progress*

> *(Portfolio assessment) introduces a fairer system of assessment that motivates students and increases their self-confidence.*

> *Students will put in more effort to bring out the best in their work*

The comments that were made in relation to profiling pointed out two benefits of the system: constant monitoring of the child's progress and keeping a detailed record of the student's holistic progress.

In terms of the measures that need to be in place for this innovation to take place, the following points were made:

➢ Time for planning and implementation is essential.
➢ Teachers need to be trained on how to develop portfolios.
➢ Assessment criteria need to be developed beforehand.
➢ Teachers, students and parents need to be involved in the process.
➢ Support needs to be given from the Education Division.
➢ There needs to be less subject matter in syllabi and fewer students per class.

Three other innovations that were mentioned equally frequently were school-based assessment, formative assessment and progress/achievement forms, cards and reports. The comments made in relation to the first two suggest that these forms of assessment need to become more formalized in the schools. A number of schools even gave an indication of the percentages that they would like these to have in relation to summative assessments that have traditionally been reported on.

The participants gave the following reasons for introducing school-based assessment:

It is a fairer system for students.

It is more consonant with our types of students.

The school will be able to inform parents more often.

In order to make this innovation possible, the following suggestions were made:

There needs to be:
- ➢ More dialogue between teachers and students, more active listening and classroom participation.
- ➢ A necessary distinction between academic achievement and effort.
- ➢ Assessments that are standardized.

*The participant who talked about skills-based assessment for computer literacy suggested that a different setup is needed whereby students will be able to send their answers electronically.

The participants who gave reasons for the introduction of formative assessment, suggested that with this form of assessment they can:

Give realistic feedback to all stakeholders.

Identify and stretch students' potential and meet their needs.

Decrease stress and a competing environment in their classrooms.

Decrease the weighting of summative assessment.

Have a broader view…not focus exclusively on examinations.

In order for this innovation to take place, the following measures are considered necessary:

- ➢ Determination.
- ➢ Time for meetings.
- ➢ Common assessment criteria.

A number of schools suggested that they wanted to introduce progress / achievement forms, cards and reports for the following reasons:

To establish better links between learning and assessment.

To introduce a culture of ongoing reflection.

To keep better records of children's progress.

To give feedback to parents and pupils and to feedforward to the next teacher.

In order to help the implementation of this innovation, the participants suggested that the following measures needed to be in place:

➢ The process needed to be explained continuously and adjustments made when necessary.
➢ Teachers needed to be trained on how to compile the report.

One participant pointed out the need of professional guidance in the interpretation of the results.

Other innovations that were mentioned in this section of the survey were baseline assessment and assessment criteria. The reasons for introducing baseline assessment were the following:

Present assessment practices are too subjective.

It is a way which helps identify individual needs.

They suggested that in order for this innovation to take place:

➢ Teachers need to be less resistant to new assessment measures.
➢ Specific tests need to be available and personnel need to be trained to use them.

The participant who talked about assessment criteria suggested that there is a need for standardization of assessment practices in school. Professional help and guidance is needed in the implementation of this innovation.

Commentary

The main purpose of the study was to get an overview of the current assessment practices in schools in Malta and Gozo. The data collected by means of the questionnaires and the interviews succeeded in giving some understanding of the practices currently taking place in different types of school. This report has attempted to give a description of the characteristics of current practice, celebrate successful practice and outline the problems being encountered by teachers and administrators. However, when reading the report one must keep in mind that what is reported are the views of those who participated in the study and what they have shared with the Educational Assessment Focus Group.

Assessment Policies

Evidence from this study suggests that at present only very few schools have developed an assessment policy to guide assessment practice in the schools. In fact only one fourth of the schools that participated in the study indicated that such a policy exists in their school. It is recommended that all schools develop an assessment policy.

In the schools that do have an assessment policy it is not always clear that the policies were developed collaboratively by teachers and the senior management team in the school. Only three schools out of ninety eight indicated that the teachers were actively involved in the development of the assessment policy. In most schools, the policy was developed by the Head of school or the senior management team and then discussed with teachers.

These examples suggest that there is a need for more discussion among teachers and administrators in schools and for the teachers themselves to be actively involved in policy making decisions being taken about assessment practices. This is essential because for any assessment practices to be successful at the classroom level the teachers need to believe in what they are doing and have ownership of the assessment policy. This is stressed by Gipps (1994) who argues that:

> any assessment model, policy or program will only be as good as the teachers who use it…It is the teachers who teach the concepts and skills, prepare pupils for the assessments, give feedback to pupils and parents and move learners in the appropriate direction…To limit the role of teachers in assessment would be the ultimate misconstrual of the process of teaching and learning. To embrace educational assessment, with the professional involvement of well trained teachers, will be to harness a powerful tool for learning (p. 176).

Current Assessment Practices

The examples of current assessment practices shared by Heads of school and their representatives both in the group interviews as well as in the questionnaire response show that in schools in Malta and Gozo there is a rich and varied culture of ways of collecting information about students' progress.

One observation that emerges from the data, is that current practices are still very much embedded within a traditional culture of examinations and testing and assessment is used for summative purposes. This reflects what Sultana (1996) describes as a large preoccupation in Malta and Gozo with measuring, predicting performance, selecting and channeling children and certification based on ability. The majority of the participants felt that examinations and tests were still the most effective and reliable method of collecting information regarding student progress.

Despite this emphasis on traditional assessment practices, however, most of the participants did agree that it was also important to make use of formative assessment in order to help and support the learning process. The conflict which appeared to emerge out of the views of the participants in this study was between doing the right things for students and adhering to the rules set by the Education Division (which in

most cases asks for examination results).   There is also a strong conflict between trying to be innovative and introduce alternative modes of assessment such as portfolios and adhering to MUT directives.

The examples of assessment practices shared by the participants show that a large number of schools are trying to introduce assessment practices which are more formative in nature. This is in line with the recommendations made by the National Minimum Curriculum which states that:

> An education which recognizes diversity regards formative assessment as indispensable for the carrying out of a democratic agenda. This mode of assessment focuses on the individual student in a manner that is beneficial to her or to him (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 37).

Most of the participants were especially interested in formative assessment because of the great benefits which this form of assessment has on the students and the learning process.   Some schools are even making use of assessment tools such as the examination papers in a formative manner. This is clear in the examples described by a number of schools that are allowing students to review their examination papers and to discuss them with teachers.

Another observation that also emerges out of the data is that although the terminology "summative" and "formative" seems to be very common among the participants of the study at times the terms are used to mean different things.   At times formative assessment is used interchangeably with continuous assessment.   A number of participants have described the use of monthly tests and examinations, per se as formative even when no feedback is being given or when only marks are recorded.

Some participants reported examples of exemplary practice taking place in their school.   These practices are to be lauded and can be used as a background for discussion in other schools. What was clear from the examples of success shared is that the most successful practices take place on the initiative of individual schools that provide the necessary infrastructure and networks to support the innovative practices and see that they are carried through successfully in their school.

One innovative practice which is repeatedly mentioned by participants is the use of portfolios and profiles. Again this is in line with the National Minimum Curriculum which suggests that "the formative and summative assessments, together with examples of the children's work, will be kept in a portfolio" (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 78). Again the introduction of portfolios is still seen as a school venture based on individual initiative. Moreover, the examples given by the participants in the study indicate that most of the portfolios being kept in schools at present are collections of the students' work, marks and result sheets. There is no indication by any of the participants that the teachers and students are involved in active conferencing regarding the material placed in the portfolio or active reflection by the students themselves. There is no evidence in the data collected that portfolios are being used as described by Chetcuti and Grima (2001) to help students think and reflect critically about their work, as a tool for dialogue between student and teacher and as a means of developing targets for future learning.

Recording and reporting information

While the examples given by participants on the ways in which they collect information regarding the progress of students are very rich and varied, the examples given regarding the ways in which the information is recorded and reported are very limited. Very few participants talked about the ways in which they record and report information. The few examples given of recording and reporting information were very limited in nature and scope.

In this section the data suggest that there are some differences in recording and reporting information in the different school sectors. In the State primary schools, recording of information appears to be carried out using cumulative record cards provided by the Education Division which are filled in by class teachers and mainly used for administrative purposes. In the State secondary schools recording and reporting is generally carried out by the individual teachers on broadsheets or registers. Some attempts are made however, in secondary schools to celebrate the success of students by making use of merit cards or merit certificates. In Church and Independent schools recording and reporting back appears to be more frequent and detailed and is usually in the form of developmental or academic profiles and linked to specific skills or objective which students should have acquired.

Although a number of participants reported that students are given feedback on home works and class works, there is little indication about the way in which this is being done. The examples given indicate that comments given to students are very general and there are no direct targets against which to match performance. Feedback given to students is important because as indicated by Johnson, Barry and Tunstall (1992) feedback provides the teacher with an opportunity to:

- Reinforce a sense of achievement across a range of activities and interests.
- Establish students' needs and give the sense that these needs are understood and supported in the ways they can recognize and understand.
- Develop in students a more confident sense of themselves as learners and increase their control of the learning process.
- Focus their attention on the next steps in their learning by agreeing and setting targets.
- Ensure formative assessment.

If appropriate feedback is given to students then the different methods of collecting information about students progress such as tests, exams, class and home work can all be used in a formative manner. They can also be used as tools to assess higher order thinking skills other than simply factual knowledge.

Feedback to parents usually takes place during Parents' Days meetings which are held in schools. In the views shared by the participants there are no specific targets or objectives set for Parents' Days. The Parents' Day is another potential formative tool if the focus of the feedback remains the students' progress and their holistic development.

Constraints

The experiences and examples included in this study indicate that there is agreement among the participants that assessment practices need to be used in ways that support students and the teaching and learning process. Many of the examples shared are in fact a celebration of success and are ways of bringing out the best in students. Even though in most cases the preferred modes of assessment are still testing and examinations, there is a move towards making use of these tools in a formative manner.

At the same time, there are a number of constraints as indicated by the participants of the study that hinder good practice and do not allow innovative practices to become a success. The major difficulty that hinders the introduction and successful implementation of alternative assessment practices is time. All teaching and learning and all assessment are seen to take place during the school day. Since non-contact time is very limited, there is very little room for discussions, developments and evaluations to take place.

A second concern expressed by the participants in the study is the great emphasis which is placed on summative assessment especially the high stakes examinations for entry into particular schools. The participants stressed that there is tension in trying to introduce innovative practices in the schools and the need for students to sit for a high stakes examination for entry into secondary school and important decisions to continue to be based on summative assessment.

A third problem associated with current assessment practices is the lack of uniformity resulting in a lack of reliability and standardization. As described by a number of participants in the study at present there are no criteria or levels which describe what students at particular levels should be capable of doing. This lack of criteria then drives teachers to use assessment practices which they are familiar with and which may lack validity but not reliability. This points to the need for further discussion on a national level and the development of common assessment criteria.

Finally all the participants of the study agreed that any new initiatives in assessment cannot take place without the constant support and training which teachers need in order to be able to implement the policies and innovations suggested. Such initiatives need to be approved and supported by the MUT.

Endnote

This report has given an overview of the assessment practices that are currently in use in Maltese schools and has looked as several issues related to them. With reference to the demands made by the national minimum curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999), it is apparent that Heads of Schools have a general understanding of the demands that are being laid down and are in favour of the necessary changes. There is also good will on their part. At this point of time, training about policy and strategies has been directed at the schools' senior management teams and the personnel at the Education Division. It is recommended that teachers are involved directly and collaboratively in the training and ensuing policy and implementation changes that need to occur. This report suggests that initiatives at the school level have a good chance of succeeding if they are nurtured in an appropriate environment and are given

the necessary support, including Union support. At the same time, there is a need of a general assessment framework to be in place so that schools have tangible points of reference. In addition, high on the priority list is the need for the assessment criteria to be improved and developed where they do no exist, for achievement levels to be in place with exemplars of students' work and for an improved system of reporting on students' progress and achievement at all levels of schooling. There is also a pressing need to study alternatives to the Junior Lyceum and Common Entrance examinations that so far permeate the entire primary school experience and have repercussions on the students' secondary schooling and their life chances. Since the changes that are envisaged benefit the students directly, it is hoped that the necessary structures and support systems are put in place soon for our students' sake in particular and our educational system in general.

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