

EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT AND THE 'S.E.C.' EXAMINATION

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“To what extent are our assessment practices helping children become more motivated to learn?”



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As an educator, my main interest in systems of assessment is to consider the way these succeed - or fail - to facilitate the process of teaching and learning. That is not to say that there are not other (often dubious) uses of assessment - many, for instance, value it since it helps to sort out students into different 'ability' groupings, while others think - often wrongly - that credentials and certificates signal competence to employers, and who are thus better placed to choose appropriate personnel for specific occupational tasks. In my view, the main question to ask when considering assessment is: What range of evaluation techniques can we use to find out whether our students have made progress in learning, and to discover what it is that they have failed to grasp? Of course, the result of such an inquiry is to be in a better position to design teaching strategies that help students move forwards. It also goes without saying that techniques and strategies used must be positive for all students, and do not contradict the essential goals of education by, for instance, engaging pupils in excessive competition, or by extinguishing their motivation to learn.

A rather brave effort has been made in Malta to establish an indigenous examination system that promotes assessment practices which coincide with a progressive educational philosophy, since they privilege achievement over selection, and since they cater for a wider range of students than did, for example, the exclusive General Certificate Examination. It is a brave attempt because the sheer amount of organization that is needed to set up a structure of national examinations to cater for all students finishing their secondary education is overwhelming, particularly for a small state with a limited pool of human resources. Indeed, to my knowledge Malta is the only small state in the world that has gone this way - other countries have either set up regional examination boards, pooling their resources in order to manage the situation better (e.g. the *Caribbean Examinations Council* or the *South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment*), or have, to a greater or lesser extent, remained attached to metropole countries such as the U.K.

The new Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examinations for students completing their fifth year of secondary schooling have now been in place since 1992. In this short article I will outline the effect that these examinations have had (and are likely to have) on educational practice in Malta.

It must be made clear from the very outset that there has been, to date, no full-scale evaluation of the impact of the new examinations on the educational system as a whole. The SEC is too new to allow research to explore the extent to which students - especially those from the low-ability range - are in fact profiting from the opportunity to get useful credentials. Neither are we in the position to know whether standards have been maintained or improved, and whether teachers are adopting different pedagogical strategies anywhere near the extent to which it has been hoped they would. In this context I will therefore report impressions obtained from personnel involved in running the SEC examinations, as well as general feedback that teachers, parents and students provided through letters they wrote to the press. I will also hypothesize on the probable impact that the new examinations have had and will have in the near future given my familiarity with the educational culture prevailing on the islands.

SEC examinations seem to have encouraged teachers to place more importance and attention on course-work as a legitimate component in the continuous assessment of students. More value seems to have been given to project and practical and applied work in a system which is best described as being 'magisterial' in style, with lecturing and note-taking being the most common form of pedagogy. Interviews with different members of the MATSEC Board indicated that, given the strength of the examination culture in Malta, where teachers teach - and are expected by students and parents to teach - with exams in mind, then a change in the mode of assessment has an important 'backwash' effect and influences teaching methodologies. To give two examples, the SEC stress on practical laboratory work has led to the establishment or better resourcing of laboratories in a number of local schools, given that log books detailing experiments make up part of the total assess-

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ment in science. Similarly, language teachers have had to give more importance to oral and aural work, with some schools introducing 'spoken English' as a discrete slot on their timetables. Pedagogical experiments in one area, such as language teaching, have influenced the teaching styles adopted in other subjects, and the fact that the course-work contributes to the final assessment of students has placed teaching methodology at the centre of the debate on education. There is the hope that teachers will now be induced to privilege modern and interactive methodologies in the classroom, though of course one cannot tell the extent to which this shift has taken place before full scale evaluative research has been carried out.

Since syllabuses are set locally, educationalists have been able to include elements of Maltese and Mediterranean culture and realities across most if not all subjects, and in some areas, such as environmental studies, social studies and history, the subject matter revolves almost totally around Maltese concerns. This is crucially important not only for political and ideological reasons, but for educational ones as well. Students can more easily relate to the curriculum if this resonates with themes and concerns they encounter in their everyday life, and learning is more likely to happen when there is a connection between schooling and students' frameworks of relevance.

The wider range of assess-

ment techniques - including short-answer questions, structured questions, essays, practical tasks, an aural/oral component, and an internally school-based component - ensures that different skills are, in fact, given importance. In addition, the internally assessed school-based component encourages 'the setting of relevant tasks, allows the candidate to choose the best from his or her work, allows more direct guidance from the teacher, and enables the teacher to contribute to the process of assessment' (SEC Brochure, p.10). The new examinations have therefore presented teachers with a unique opportunity to fulfill one aspect of a professional role which has long been denied them.

An important regulation which represents a break from the past refers to the fact that 'only candidates who complete their studies in Form V or who have reached the age of 16 years by 31st December [of the year in which s/he sits the examination session] will be allowed to register for the Secondary Education Certificate Examination' (Regulation 6.1). One of the advantages of a locally-controlled examination system has been the identification of strategies to counter educationally debilitating practices, such as the spacing out of examinations, starting from Form 4 and occasionally from Form 3, in order to ensure passes. As the editorial of one of the newspapers remarked, greeting positively the new regulation in an article captioned 'Examination Mania':

'The major preoccupation of many of our secondary school students on being promoted to Form IV is how many...examinations they are able to 'get out of the way' in order to have their year in Form V as plain-sailing as possible. They home in on five or six subjects, priming themselves up with extra doses of private lessons (in some cases from their own teachers at school), aided and abetted by their parents who are willing to pay what is necessary for their offspring to collect as many...passes, and at the highest marks possible, to ensure entry into the Sixth Form, and eventually to University, or to the labour market...The change in rules should bring back some sanity to secondary schools, both State and private, where teachers and students in the upper two forms - completely unmotivated because the passes have been obtained anyway - face serious disruption and are in effect under-utilizing, or rather wasting, the educational system's resources' (*The Sunday Times*, February 26, 1995, p.14).

Another positive effect of the SEC examination has been the extension of the range of curriculum subjects offered to students. In principle, the MATSEC Board has to react to curricular initiatives in schools, so that if a new course of studies is offered to students in a particular school, then the latter can ask the examining Board to prepare an SEC paper in that subject. Previously, schools based their

curricula and syllabuses, not to mention teaching strategies, with an eye on GCE requirements. With the new system, schools can be much more proactive in the development of curricula, syllabuses and pedagogy.

While there is still a definite reliance on the U.K. for textbooks, there has been a new phenomenon in the past few years which saw local educational authors and publishing entrepreneurs investing in the production of high quality texts in a large number of curricular areas. Since these texts are tailor-made to SEC and Matriculation specifications and requirements, they prove to be a valuable resource for teachers and students alike, and more of them are being published from year to year.

In short, therefore, the new examinations have given Maltese policy-makers the opportunity to be more autonomous in establishing an organic and holistic vision for educational practice on the islands; they have encouraged the development of curricula and textbooks that take local culture and realities into account; they have expanded the professional roles of teachers, who are partners in the assessment of their own students; and they are likely to modify the traditional and deeply engrained pedagogical culture of magisterial lesson delivery. They have effectively put a stop to a massive annual hemorrhage of foreign currency that Malta could ill-afford to service, and have, moreover, achieved credibility among parents, teachers, students and employers, and are exchangeable on the world market of credentials.

This is no mean achievement for a micro-island with limited human and material resources. The next challenge that now needs to be faced is the monitoring and improvement of current practice through systematic evaluative research, as well as the professional development of staff and personnel involved. We need to be in a position to know, for instance, whether there have been changes in the pedagogical styles adopted in the classroom, and what is facilitating such changes as well as what is obstructing them. We need to evaluate the extent to which more effective teaching is taking place, and how new forms of assessment are impacting on the learning process. Are new teaching styles being used to cater for the different learning styles and needs of different pupils? We also need to ask the extent to which teachers are being supported in the new roles that the SEC examinations demand of them. What in-service training do they need? How can we best deliver that? How is curriculum construction and development dove-tailing with new assessment strategies? To what extent are our assessment practices helping children become more motivated to learn? These and several other questions need not only to be asked, but also to be answered if one's interest in assessment practices is motivated by a genuine commitment to the educational commitment of students.

