

Pupil Profiling

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Both locally and abroad the system of streaming is considered universally to be a very unjust system of selecting pupils on the basis of end-of-year exams. However, locally there has not been much discussion of what could be the possible alternatives to this undesirable system. In this brief article we present the system of 'profiling' as a more just alternative for the assessment of pupils' achievement in school. At this stage where a number of pupil profile systems may be piloted at the various levels of the Maltese educational system these systems need to be promoted as being complementary to the existing assessment procedures rather than as outright substitutes.

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Whilst it is generally accepted that subject-based external examinations are a major means of ensuring quality control amongst educational systems, there is now a groundswell of opinion amongst both educationists and, to some extent, parents and pupils who feel that there is a need for a more comprehensive and curriculum-integrated approach to assessment. There is also an increasingly explicit concern that schooling is not bringing about the outcomes it sets for its students.

The Criticisms of Public Examinations

The criticisms of public examinations are long-standing and well-known. Examinations are frequently inaccurate (as a result, for example, of marker fatigue or markers' subjective preferences) and they may not be a valid measure of what a pupil can really do (he or she has had an off day or has bad handwriting, for example). They can only measure a small sample of educational achievements; they encourage intrinsic motivation rather than the desire to learn for its own sake. They encourage and are deeply associated with an educational process which discourages co-operation between students and emphasises individual competition. Maltese teachers, like their counterparts in other countries, complain frequently that the existence of such external examinations narrows what they can offer to students in curriculum and pedagogy. Worst of all, the aggregate examination grade may conceal vital differences between different kinds of competencies that a pupil may have acquired.

The Impediment to Change

Why then do we persist in relying heavily on formal examinations in the face of such strong arguments against them? There is the question of legitimacy in the selection process, and the

need for objectivity to militate against bias and injustice in the allocation of life chances. There is an important need for face validity in the procedures used, and for reliable identification of what has been achieved and of specific inadequacies. There is also the selection function, which requires some basis for discrimination between candidates, a high degree of reliability, some measure of predictive validity and legitimacy which makes the whole process acceptable by the larger society. It is because external examinations are the best means so far devised of meeting the criteria of comparability, reliability and legitimacy that they have enjoyed such continuing popularity. Despite their negative effects on the learning process and their inefficiency in providing the information employers really want to know we have come to 'over-depend' on examinations. Exams haunt the lives of the large majority of our children and their parents..

The Objectives of Schooling

The objectives of schooling are frequently conceptualised in terms of, for example, the acquisition of self-knowledge; the development of inter-personal skills; the development of maturity; emotional and moral awareness; the development of academic skills; an enthusiasm for learning; a respect for society, human rights, etc. All too often, however, people do not develop self-awareness and they see no connection between education and life. Their self-image and self-confidence is steadily eroded by the repeated experience of failure and condemnation, and they are encouraged to rely on teachers to teach them rather than on themselves as learners. Entering school as enthusiastic and active enquirers, all too often they become passive and apathetic, uninterested and lacking in initiative and self-discipline. There is widespread dissatisfaction with the instrumental, extrinsic orientation induced by qualification inflation and excessive competition.

The Need for Change

Our educational system has been for many years dominated by external-exam certification procedures. Although over the years there have been repeated attempts to introduce more comprehensive and relevant assessment procedures, these have had little impact on the examination monopoly. Previous failed attempts to do away with examination procedures, public concern about educational standards and professional inertia have militated against change. More recently, however, major structural changes in the economy and related policy developments have

stimulated interest in assessment procedures for accountability and efficiency. The range of approaches currently being explored are not mutually exclusive.

Changing the bases for assessment

The traditional methods of exams are too crude and global and mask individual differences. By making fuller, more detailed use of the information about performance in subjects that we already have, we can give more recognition to the fact that, at all levels of ability, different students are developing in different ways. Any educational institution must increasingly be able to demonstrate that it is fulfilling

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the aims that it has set for itself. The major purposes that assessment procedures have to fulfil need to meet the needs of pupils, teachers and 'consumers'.

Alternative forms of assessment

The structural changes in the economy of this country are now making possible a genuine alternative approach to assessment which is capable of improving both the curriculum and communication functions of assessment. The principles on which this innovation is based may be summarised in terms of:

- *reinforcement* of the learning process
- *respect* for learners,
- *relevance* for action.

Under reinforcement are subsumed the curriculum functions of a new kind of assessment philosophy, which emphasises diagnosis of a student's strengths and weaknesses, conceptualises learning as an interactive process that emphasises mastery and achievement rather than norm-referencing and failure. These principles together make up what is now receiving increasing attention as the formative function of assessment.

Under respect comes a concern for open and collaborative relations between teachers and pupils, in which it is recognised that only by engaging with pupils will they come to a personal commitment and respect for their own learning. This mutual respect is taken to be the best basis for motivating both teachers and pupils.

The relevance dimension relates more to the communication function of assessment, and the provision of information about skill, aptitudes and capabilities which will be useful for pupils, their teachers and their families, and for potential consumers of such records. Thus we are talking about an approach to assessment which is novel, both in content and procedure, and is both formative and summative.

Profiles and Records of Achievement

Such an assessment procedure has become known as 'profiling' - an approach to recording which results in the production of a 'profile' record. A 'profile' is not in itself a form of assessment. Nevertheless, the production of a profile depends upon the provision of appropriate assessment information and in practice the two stages are often inseparable. A profile is essentially derived from a separation of the whole of an assessment into its main parts or components. It is often used synonymously with the term 'record of achievement', although this is normally used in a narrower sense to describe school leavers' documents which may include the results of a variety of examinations, graded tests and other assessments and information about a student, compiled by teachers and/or students and covering the total educational progress of the student.

The arguments for this profiling initiative are expressed in terms of the mutual benefit that would accrue to both students and their future employers from better means of school reporting, and also the impact that such a process would have on pupils' motivation during their passage through schooling itself. In other European countries, profiles and records of achievement have been used with immense success at all levels of the educational system and in different areas; e.g. technology education, and in as diverse settings as the training branches of police forces and airline companies.

A Word of Warning

It is profiles and records of achievement which are the most significant in threatening to break down the barrier between the cognitive and the affective domains in both curriculum and assessment terms. It is their very challenge that also makes profiles and records of achievement the most high risk initiative. Careful monitoring will be required to ensure that the rationale for the new procedure is indeed drawn out of its practice. It demands careful scrutiny and presents a most fertile ground for change. Public acceptability can no longer serve as a sufficient criterion for the acceptability of assessment procedures. The elevation of educational concerns to a position of prime consideration is long overdue.

