

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED ASSESSMENT?

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In 1976, A F Chalmers first published a book intriguingly titled 'What is this thing called Science'. In that book, he attempted to introduce to readers modern views about the nature of science. As Chalmers explained aspects of scientific thinking such as experimentation, falsification, Kuhn's paradigm and the Bayesian approach, it became evident very quickly that the nature of enquiry into "scientific" knowledge is, if anything, singularly complex. We find ourselves in quite the same boat when we begin to unpack this thing called "Assessment" – singularly complex and often reduced to a singular notion.

What is assessment in education? It can be simply defined as a process of making a judgement about an individual or an educational programme through careful examination of evidence. Assessments are important as evaluation tools because they can help answer fundamental questions about educational processes and their outcomes – what are we teaching in classrooms, how are students engaging with learning materials, what knowledge is transacted in school settings, how do students internalize and apply these learnings, how are students developing as concerned and informed citizens of the world? Assessments can be formative evaluations, the continuous on-going part of day-to-day teaching where teachers modify their activities with students; they can be summative evaluations helping teachers identify and evaluate what a student has learnt at the end of the year; and they can also be authentic in that they seek to evaluate how students apply learning over time. Seen from that perspective, assessments are a

continuous process of evaluating educational processes holistically.

The formative, summative and authentic aspects of assessment hint both at its holistic nature as well as the complexity of the evaluation space within education. Unfortunately, the development of large formal systems of education, along with the institutional and organisational settings in which schooling occurs, have served to simplify assessments to a much more narrow and instrumental notion of student learning.

As countries around the world began to spend more on public school systems, greater calls for accountability for that expenditure began to emerge. This call for accountability was particularly loud under notions of 'new public management' (Ferlie Ashburner, Fitzgerald and Peetigrew, 1996) that demanded schools be accountable for student performance. This led to education boards seeking to control (Rowan, 1990) the process of schooling through standardisation - standard curriculum, standardised teacher training programs, standard text books, and even standard teaching-learning materials. The central notion of this control strategy was that through standardisation of inputs, standardised outputs or outcomes would emerge – in this case, evidence of student performance and learning in schools.

The standardisation of these input measures helped policy makers, education boards and curriculum developers also develop standardised tests at various levels of the schooling process – for particular subjects, in particular classes or

grades, thereby enabling evaluation of teaching and learning to happen at both individual and collective levels. For example, an individual student in the fifth standard would sit for the standardised test in mathematics with all the other students in her class and with students in the fifth standard across the state and the country. Not only could her individual performance in the subject be evaluated against curriculum guidelines set for the fifth standard in mathematics, her performance could also be evaluated against her other classmates, with students across the country sitting for the same class five test and internationally with students in other countries in the same class. Consequently, poor performing students, poor performing classes, poor performing schools and poor performing nations could all be evaluated simultaneously. Therefore, teachers could be made accountable for poor performing classes, principals and school boards could be made accountable for poor performing schools, district boards/education departments could be made accountable for poor performing districts and states and finally national educational bodies could be made accountable for poor performing nations. The appeal of the standardisation and control strategies were clear and logical. With such pressures for accountability, quality education would emerge.

The impact of such measures is of course quite contrary to such expectations and starkly evident to us today. The standardisation drive has resulted in a lack of teacher autonomy in the classroom and has made the individual learner invisible in the education system. It has led to the inability of students to follow their own pace of learning and to the introduction of de-contextualised curriculum that have little meaning to the lived experiences of the student. This has also resulted in an almost singular focus on completing the curriculum and teaching to

tests, often purely summative assessments, resulting in rote learning and students living under constant stress of examinations. The result has been students feeling increasingly alienated at and from schools. Further, private institutions focusing on “tutoring” students for excellence in examinations have also edged out the non-school space and time of the child leaving her as little more than a body moving from one institution to the other in the quest to perform well in tests and examinations. For all its much touted attempts at bringing about accountability to the public system of education, the control strategy has yielded nothing more than a dysfunctional system, with poorly motivated and trained teachers, contextually irrelevant curricula and deeply disinterested and burdened students.

So where does that leave us with the notion of assessments? Perhaps a reconceptualising of assessment becomes essential –as a way of evaluating fundamental questions about education and as a means of evaluating those educational processes that either enable or hinder students from participating in meaningful learning. Let me explain this further. At the heart of assessments should be the relentless probing of the most fundamental outcome of any educational system – the opportunity for students to engage in meaningful learning. Assessments should evaluate the structure and functioning of all the processes that go into either enabling or inhibiting students from engaging in such learning. For example, a student’s ability to access a school needs to be assessed. But access here needs to move beyond the availability of a school within proximity of habitations. Assessment of access should include evaluating a child’s home life and the opportunity and encouragement that the child has to go to school, the availability of transport to reach school, the ability of the child/parent to pay for public transport to reach school, the ability of the family to send children to school – all of these have to be evaluated.

Once access to school is evaluated, access to schooling needs to be assessed. Assessments should include evaluation of school climate, the physical environment of the school, the socio-emotional space created in schools for meaningful learning, the availability of contextually relevant and meaningful curriculum in a language accessible to students, the motivation and commitment levels of teachers and the autonomy of teachers to work with students individually, the ability of students to participate in self-paced learning, the level of community and parental participation, and the opportunity that students have to apply their learning outside of school. Meaningful assessment of these factors helps identify those processes that foster a healthy learning environment in schools and those that act as barriers for effective learning leading to authentic assessment of children (Puckett and Black, 1994).

How can such changes in the concept of assessment occur? First, policy measures that bring about examination reform are essential. Such policy measures are necessary if assessment and teaching need to move beyond 'teaching to tests' and continuous evaluation of student learning is to occur. We could take a leaf from other countries such as the Nordic nations who have for years restrained from testing students class after class. Instead, they have focused on teacher professional development and child centered teaching in classrooms and the evaluation of these practices. Despite refraining from class room based testing of students, children from Finland perform exceptionally well in international tests such as PISA. Policy measures that focus on the continuous professional development of teachers need to be introduced in our country to help strengthen core processes of teaching

and learning in schools. Second, institutions that provide academic support to schools in our country should be strengthened and they should help schools assess factors most important to the delivery of quality education. Third, we need a social change in the concept of education – to move it beyond rote learning and performance in tests to an acceptance of education as building the core capabilities of human beings. Fourth, we need appropriate tools to evaluate schools holistically and effort would need to be made to develop, test, evaluate and implement these tools across the country.

Evaluation mechanisms are necessary to judge quality of education. However, the singular focus of assessment as learning outcomes judged through tests and exams have led policy makers to neglect an assessment of the holistic purpose and meaning of education and the processes that make this possible. What is this thing called assessment can be answered when we ask three fundamental questions: what is assessment for, who is it for and what does it measure? If we are able to clearly and coherently link answers to these questions with the aims and purposes of education, assessment becomes meaningful. Else it remains nothing more than a supervisory regulation of children's performance in tests as proxy measures for quality education.

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