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## VALUES, USES AND PROBLEMS OF ASSESSMENT

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This paper is intended to raise questions and identify some of the problems posed by assessment within an educational setting. The principal aim is to offer a springboard for discussion, rather than to propose a specific plan of action.

It is also worth stressing that assessment designates more than just examinations (public or otherwise). As teachers and educators, we are constantly making assessments of our students, passing official, unofficial, conscious and unconscious judgements. These are judgements which inevitably influence our attitudes to our jobs, our performance and our teaching or administrative styles. They also have wide-ranging repercussions on the attitudes, performances and future of our students. They are judgements based on a complex series of assumptions which we habitually make about, for instance, what education involves, the nature of schooling, school structures and their aims, the learning process as it relates to human development.

What follows is largely inspired by a desire to identify and scrutinize some of the most recurrent of these assumptions.

## VALUES AND USES OF ASSESSMENT

Educationists frequently distinguish between assessment which is diagnostic (or formative) and that which is summative.<sup>1</sup> Summative assessment is primarily meant to satisfy the needs of society, and usually takes the form of examinations, generally public or geared towards providing certification. Diagnostic assessment, on the other hand, is intended to help in both teaching and student learning. It is a two-way process designed to provide feedback to teachers and learners, by allowing the former to ascertain whether learning has taken place and by indicating to the latter whether their constructions of meaning are parallel to those intended. In this sense, diagnostic assessment provides a measure of where a student stands on his/her path in learning. It has an important function in allowing teachers to match what they teach with what pupils can understand.

The virtues of diagnostic assessment are frequently undercut when it is made subservient to the requirements of summative assessment - that is, when the learning process itself is conceptualized as no more than a preparation for certification. Thus, when teachers have to prepare their students for public examinations which are based on competition, there is inevitable pressure placed on the types of diagnoses which can be undertaken, on the way in which mistakes and failure are looked upon, and on the pace at which learning can take place. There is, as many have pointed out, an assumption of finality and failure built into a learning process the logic of which is primarily that of certification and of satisfying so-called 'societal needs' of weeding out, selection and compartmentalization. Diagnostic assessment, therefore, needs to be considered in relation to the orientations of the schooling system of which it happens to form part.

There are many historical and logical arguments which have been forwarded to assert the virtues and necessity of summative assessment, particularly when this takes the form of public

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<sup>1</sup> BLACK, H., 'The Forms and Functions of Assessment', in BURGESS, T. and ADAMS, E., (eds), *Outcomes of Education*, (Macmillan, London 1980).

examinations at the end (or at the end of a stage) of the educational process. These arguments are well synthesized in a Black Paper forwarded by Cox and Boyson in 1975<sup>2</sup> and intended to rebut criticism of public examinations. These writers concede that examinations may force students to confine attention to too narrow a field, or may be used too rigidly for selection purposes. They insist, however that examinations are an essential part of an educational system and of the needs of social reality. To back this assertion, they pose seven questions which they invite opponents to answer. Since these questions are rhetorical in tone, I propose to first list them and then set counter-questions which will hopefully help to place them in perspective.

**First Question: If there are no public examinations, what happens when a student applies for a job?**

The emphasis here is on convenience and on the practicalities of the job market. Thus, a reference from teachers is considered to be unreliable because teachers (presumably unlike public examiners) are inconsistent; and the alternative of having firms set their own examinations is viewed as involving more work for industry and as placing impossible demands on students who would have to sit for a series of examinations rather than one.

Counter-questions which can be posed here are: How consistent and reliable are public examinations - particularly as an indication that skills for a specific job have been mastered? What happens when jobs are not available, and what about those who do not make it? In a society where possibility of unemployment is widespread, what does an educational system latched to public examinations have to offer those who will end up without a job or without the job of their dreams?

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<sup>2</sup> COX, C.B. and BOYSON, R., *The Fight for Education: A Black Paper*, (Dent, London 1975), pp. 33-4.

**Second Question: If there are no public examinations, will not this reduce the chances of a working-class boy or girl, and shift us back to the abuses of the old-boy network?**

The logic behind this question is only partly egalitarian. It asserts that young people from underprivileged backgrounds will have a chance of being on an equal footing with more privileged competitors for a job when they have certificates to show.

A counter-question which can be asked here is: Do not examinations tend to favour those with access to financial and other social backing? This does not apply only in terms of accessibility of expensive tuition and facilities. Middle-class parents have traditionally tended to push their 'slower' children with more conviction and determination than their working-class counterparts. The latter tend to accept the assessments of teachers about their children's limitations with resignation and fatalistic finality.

**Third Question: If there are no public examinations, how will parents find out about schools with low standards?**

Examinations are here asserted to provide a test of the efficiency of teachers and the teaching system in specific schools, thus allowing parents to have a measure of how the schooling which their children are receiving compares with that of other schools. The question also assumes that there should be a more or less absolute set of standards against which performance can be compared.

One possible counter-question here relates to the educational validity of the standards and hierarchies encouraged by a public examination system which places higher value on more traditionally academic subjects and pursuits, and which assumes the social benefits of tested mastery of such subjects to be of over-riding importance. Are standards always related to the individual requirements of children?

**Fourth Question: Without examinations, what guarantee is there for the public that a doctor or architect or accountant or teacher is competent?**

Here again, the focus is on social requirements. These requirements are implicitly asserted to demand evidence of selection and competition.

One can counter this question by asking whether the guarantees provided by public examinations are always accurate or reliable. Does the fact that there are incompetent professionals (presumably those who managed to play the system so as to get certification) invalidate the logic behind this question?

**Fifth Question: Without public examinations, what control is left over the subjects taught in schools?**

The argument here is inspired (as in the third question) by a desire to check the performance and orientations of teachers. It also assumes that there is a consensus of what children should or should not be taught, and that public examinations provide a guarantee that this is actually taking place, whatever individual teachers might feel about the validity or use of such content.

**Counter Question: Will not the orientations of teachers influence their teaching styles in any case, and does not a public examination system inspired by considerations like those underlying the question limit the scope of teachers in catering for the specific needs and levels of children in their care?**

**Sixth Question: If examinations are replaced by continuous assessment, will this not damage the proper relationship between teacher and student?**

The assertion here is that continuous assessment sours personal relationships, in that teachers can never be sure if a student is covering up weaknesses, currying favour or simply conforming to their ideas. Mutual trust and co-operation are thus asserted to be in jeopardy when it is the teacher who assesses rather than a faceless external examiner. This consideration is also asserted to

counterbalance the fact that external examiners do not have the time to scrutinize piles of essays and projects or to compare schools.

Counter-question: Can student-teacher relations not also be soured by the setting of impossible aims, threats about examinations, labelling failures?

**Seventh Question: Is there any evidence that the average adolescent will work hard at school at difficult subjects without incentive of examinations?**

This raises the issue of motivation, emphasising the virtues of extrinsic motivation. I shall be considering this issue in greater detail below. At this stage, I shall limit myself to posing these counter questions: What about intrinsic motivation, and the virtues of developing an interest in a subject and in learning for their own sake? In what ways do examinations encourage curiosity and the drive to achieve competence?

The questions listed and countered above underline a recurrent educational problem - that is, that schooling has to find a balance between social demands and individual requirements. Such a balance clearly depends on the competence and orientations of teachers. What we perhaps need to ask ourselves is whether the system of public examinations in which teachers work, helps or hinders them in the achievement of this balance. The virtues of diagnostic assessment do not appear to be in question. If however, they are undercut by the demands and constraints of our examination system, then we need to ask whether the virtues of that system are in fact over-riding. We also need to question whether the evidence for those virtues is in fact as unassailable as many assume.

## EXAMINATION PROBLEMS

One criticism which is often levelled against schooling systems which revolve around public examinations requirements is that such systems fail in precisely that area which is supposed to justify their existence most forcefully: the satisfaction of social needs. Public examinations are meant to provide a measure of

competence and ability. By implication, they should therefore also provide a prediction of students' future performance at work or in academic pursuits. There are, however, many research findings which suggest that terminal examinations at schools and university are poor predictors of future success - and this does not simply apply to those students who do badly in traditionally academic subjects and then flourish in, say, running a family business or at a job the requirements of which might appear to be removed from the orientations suggested by the content of many school curricula. Academic success itself appears to be poorly predicted by public examinations, so that studies conducted in a variety of countries indicate that there is little correlation between school-leaving marks and future success in academic life.<sup>3</sup>

These findings suggest that the power invested in examinations because they are believed to be in some way 'objective' may in fact be illegitimate. On the basis of a comprehensive survey of European research on educational assessment (and particularly on whether there is a correlation between performance in terminal examinations and academic success), Ingenkamp has asserted that:

It is perfectly possible that we are selecting our students by means of procedures that have no predictive value for academic success and that an examination is being used to determine academic success that has no predictive value for professional success ... We have not yet been able to produce research findings to refute the suspicion that we are continually selecting the wrong people with the wrong methods.<sup>4</sup>

Doubts have thus also been expressed about the extent to which examinations can be said to reflect general ability or identify the 'more able'. Examinations which purport to relate to the specific

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<sup>3</sup> Reports of these studies include: INGENKAMP, K., *Educational Assessment*, (NFER, Slough 1977); ENTWISTLE, N., NISBET, J., ENTWISTLE, P. and COWELL, M., 'The Academic Performance of Students', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 41 (1971) pp. 258-78; BARNETT, V.D. and LEWIS, T., 'A Study of the Relationship Between GCE and Degree Results', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A (General)*, vol. 126, (1963) pp.187-226; POWELL, J.L., *Selection for University in Scotland*, (The Scottish Council for Research in Education, Edinburgh, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> INGENKAMP, *ibid.* Also cited in BROADFOOT, P., 'How Exams Cheat our Children', *New Society*, vol. 52, June, (1980).

objectives of a subject are not the best ways of providing measures of general intelligence, and in this sense are inaccurate sources of information for employers requiring information about 'general ability', work-related skills and adaptability.

There are also problems raised by public examinations which relate more directly to the educational process itself. Most teachers are aware of the difficulties generated by the fact that external examinations tend to dominate the curriculum. I have already pointed to the pressures such examinations place on the extent to which other (formative or diagnostic) forms of assessment can be profitably exercised. This is not a problem which can be solved by changing the content or style of public examinations. It has structural implications which bear directly on how teachers and students view their tasks and responsibilities at school. If success at public examinations is the primary objective of schooling, then those who have to work and succeed within this system will inevitably attend to whatever can be construed as the best way of 'making it'. In many cases, this means that teachers and pupils concentrate on finding ways of playing the system - spotting questions, focusing on examinable areas to the exclusion of others, rote learning, etc. It is also worth noting that this problem cannot be resolved by the introduction of continuous assessment unless the wider orientations of certificates are re-examined. If continuous assessment is seen as no more than a tool towards public certification, it will again tend to undercut the very purpose of diagnostic assessment and come to be seen as a *staccato* form of summative assessment - an end of term examination in small sections taken throughout the year.

Public examinations are frequently argued (as we saw above) to be powerful incentives to work. It is worth remembering, however, that basing motivation on success in competition with others not only raises questions of an ideological and ethical nature,<sup>5</sup> but also creates a situation in which the label and stigma

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<sup>5</sup> Cross-cultural studies show that ideological values are built into schooling systems and teaching styles. In BROFENBRENNER, U., *The Two Worlds of Childhood: USA and USSR*, (Allen & Unwin, London 1971), Brofenbrenner points to the contrast between the emphasis on individual achievement and success in competition which prevails in Western cultures, and the emphasis on co-operation and the collective which in the USSR is also reflected in the types of games and learning activities used in nursery schools and kindergartens.



of failure become institutionalized and necessary conditions for the prospect of 'success' to be an effective motivating force. Motivation on this level depends heavily on the fear and avoidance of those states which would accompany failure. There is a positive side to this picture, of course. Setbacks (or fear of them) can act as an incentive to do well and better. The occasional experience of low marks and of failure which is seen to be temporary and remediable can increase determination. This form of incentive has at least some of its driving force in fear and anxiety, so that some anxious people seem to go through their education driven more by a fear of failure than by a hope of success. The institutionalization of this 'motivating' sediment of failure (particularly when public examinations make this failure final) is one of the heaviest prices which have to be paid so that the 'successful' minority can enjoy the exhilaration and rewards of doing well and of having something to show for it. The attraction of that exhilaration and its attendant passports to success are indeed powerful incentives to those who can make it - but the foundations of fear and failure on which those incentives are built raise worrying questions about the ethical and ideological assumptions which underlie our schooling system.

If the avoidance of failure is rewarding and motivating for a number of students, for many others it is frequently a self-defeating exercise which leads to the learning of helplessness, frustration and rebellion against academic pursuits. In this sense, success and failure at public examinations can be said to form part of a complex and insidious process of self-fulfilling prophecies. Tied to this process are the cruelly powerful forms of demotivation which are built up by the repeated experience of failure and humiliation, of being given the consistent and institutionalized message that one is incompetent, and of seeing no achievable or satisfying goal to learning. Not all teachers, unfortunately, react to the supposedly 'objective' evaluations of public examinations and other forms of external tests in the manner of the teacher (cited by Carew and Lightfoot) who had the courage to trust the evidence of her personal knowledge of pupils:

Discussing the results of an IQ test administered to her class, Ms. Allen disputed two-thirds of the scores. In almost every case she claimed that the child in question was considerably brighter than his score indicated, his poor performance being attributable to the group setting, to

inexperience with test procedures, to poor motor control, to perfectionist standards, and so on. For Ms. Allen none of the children in her class (was) intellectually inefficient ... (Tests and evaluation of that sort) ... she felt were insidious ways of labelling children as inferior and often served to bring about the kind of negative self-fulfilling prophecy that she sought to eliminate from her own relationships with children.<sup>6</sup>

Linked to this is the argument that undue emphasis on examinations and certifiable forms of assessment can lead to a system of schooling which paradoxically undercuts the learning process itself. For one thing, assessment of this kind encourages the student to assume a passive role in learning. Thus, the teacher inevitably tests and marks, while the student is tested and graded. The student's potential as an assessor of his own progress (with the teacher providing a means of verification) is undervalued. Further, much of the research into the learning and developmental processes conducted by psychologists over the past thirty years or so insists that learning which is not simply parrot-like involves the active involvement of the learner. In this sense, the learner is the builder of his own knowledge, basing his/her understanding of the new on what is already known, and simultaneously adjusting the known so as to accommodate newly assimilated knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Learning from this perspective is seen as an act of discovery, often involving the taking of risks and the reaching of conclusions through trial and error. It involves developing an ability to ask the right questions, to make connections and make sense by creating meaning. Knowledge can thus only be achieved by the learner through a process of appropriation (that is, making one's own) and interpretation (that is, making sense on the basis of past experience). This process of developing the potential for learning through an endless series of assimilations and accommodations presupposes the necessity of

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<sup>6</sup> CAREW, J. and LIGHTFOOT, S.L., *Beyond Bias: Perspectives on Classrooms*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1979), p.239.

<sup>7</sup> The most influential exponent of this perspective is, of course, Jean Piaget. The concept of learning as an act of discovery has also been eloquently developed by Jerome Bruner in a cross section of his writing, and most accessibly in BRUNER, J., *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1962), and in BRUNER, J., *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, (Harvard University Press, 1986).

the possibility of correctable failure. It is through failure that we learn that a particular hypothesis or approach to a problem are inappropriate or only partly appropriate. The ability to take risks of discovery without fearing the consequences of failure is thus an important component of learning. Examination systems which make no concession for this, and which stigmatize failure by equating mistakes with incompetence can thus be argued to undercut the learning process itself.

As educators we should be more concerned than we are with the quality of learning. As the arguments outlined above suggest, much of our current teaching and assessment seems to induce a passive, reproductive form of learning which is contrary to the type of learning which makes educational sense and which is most likely to benefit society as well as the individual. This type of significant learning is only possible when the individual has self-confidence in his ability to learn - when he feels that the experience of learning will be personally rewarding and meaningful. One of the most forceful exponents of this approach to the learning experience, Carl Rogers, insists that knowledge should be made subsidiary to the process of learning how to learn, since today's new ideas are tomorrow's outdated information. In Roger's view, the learner should be set free from the type of experiences which crush curiosity and self-confidence, because

the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal relationship between facilitator and the learner.<sup>8</sup>

Most teachers will probably agree with this view of their work as that of facilitating learning. The problem is that though most of us would claim that this is what we are attempting to do in our work with students, the facts suggest otherwise. There have been many studies (conducted particularly among students in higher education) which point to a contrast between what teachers claim that they are doing and what they actually do.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the formal

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<sup>8</sup> ROGERS, C.R., *Freedom to Learn*, (Merrill, Columbus, Ohio 1969), p.106.

<sup>9</sup> See ENTWISTLE, N., 'Contrasting Perspectives on Learning', in MARTON, F., HOUNSELL, D. and ENTWISTLE, N.(eds), *The Experience of Learning*, (Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh 1984).

curriculum as defined by teachers often demands originality, problem-solving, independence of thought, and analytic skills. This in fact, fits in very neatly with the concept of learning as a meaning-making process. In contrast to this, the hidden curriculum (that is, the message received implicitly but strongly by students) depends on the teaching methods and assessment procedures. Research conducted by Snyder,<sup>10</sup> for instance, suggests that the latter frequently encourages question-spotting and rote-memorization of facts and theories considered important by the teachers. Why teachers consider these important will vary of course, but the desire for examination successes (which are usually also seen to reflect the teacher's level of competence) is one important consideration.

How we assess and what we expect from our students (our hidden curricula) also become important determinants in students' attempts to construct meaning and make sense of reality. There is thus another implication of the examination system we practice which is of a more ethical orientation. If the consequences of summative assessment listed above are in fact realities, then a further backwash effect of examinations is that they create an artificial confusion of values. 'Correct', is in this system equated with 'good'; 'incorrect' or 'wrong' with 'bad'. It is a simplified Garden of Eden type of reality which is suggested by a system of schooling which projects the student as a passive receiver and repeater of the knowledge passed on by its guardians (teachers, books, examiners).<sup>11</sup> If this is the impression of, and preparation for, the adult world which we are (possibly unconsciously) projecting to our students, then we are doing them a serious disservice.

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<sup>10</sup> SNYDER, B.R., *The Hidden Curriculum*, (Knopf, New York 1971).

<sup>11</sup> The implications of the fact that cognitive, ethical and emotional development proceed together and involve complex meaning-making processes and consequences has been systematically analysed (in relation to the post-secondary years) by PERRY, W.G. Jr., *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in College Years: A Scheme*, (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1970); and PERRY, W.G. Jr., 'Cognitive and Ethical Growth: The Making of Meaning', in CHIKERING, A.W. (ed.), *The Modern American College*, (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, USA 1981).

Having elaborated on questions, problems and assumptions, I propose to conclude this rather generalized examination of examinations by posing three further (hopefully summative and diagnostic) questions:

1. Do the merits of the examination system currently in use in Malta outweigh the problems it generates?
2. Is it possible to develop a system of assessment and certification which will enable us to avoid at least the most serious of the problems posed by the present system?
3. Can the process of learning to learn be adequately assessed? Should we be attempting to assess it at all, and if so, how?