

School Assessments

5 May 2007

The National Association of Head Teachers has produced a report, authored by Sue Palmer a former primary head, which says that the testing regime in schools has reduced students to 'widgets'. Also at the NAHT conference Professor Alan Smithers said "Schools have been reduced almost to factories for producing test and exam scores" and said that the government had done "quite a lot of harm".

Both parties said that one result of this was more pupils becoming 'disaffected'. They both stated a direct link between the testing regime and attendance problems.

We should also remember that the UN rapporteur on the right to education, Katarina Tomasevski, criticised the government in 2003 for being in breach of the UN convention on children's rights by running a testing regime in schools that had nothing to do with education and was rather to do with fulfilling government objectives.

Her criticisms would appear to be sustained by the 'Department for Education and Skills' whose spokesperson stated yesterday "they [Key Stage tests] provide valuable objective evidence in the core subjects, helping inform further improvements to teaching and learning"

In pedagogy assessment of students is divided into two parts: formative assessment, which is supposed to be beneficial to learning, and summative, which is supposed to 'sum up' what a student has learned. perhaps at the end of a course, so as to provide a grade for external consumption.

The Key Stage tests are summative. Yet it is completely unnecessary to subject every child in the country to a test which is designed to form national education policy. A snapshot would suffice.

This is being recognised and a new testing approach is being discussed which would be based around moving children up the levels at each Key Stage. But this too is a kind of insanity. The Key Stage curriculum is already a microcosm of useful knowledge. To make children subject to tests which focus on moving them up completely artificial levels within this already restricted academic curriculum is as an educational policy completely missing the point about education. It is still focussing entirely on measuring a child's capacity to endure absorbing a set body of 'knowledge' deemed essential to modern life by a faceless committee. There is nothing in this about fostering the child's inquisitive mind and tendency towards self-development. The tragedy of this approach to education is it is based on what can be measured. Can a child's sense of achievement after achieving a personal goal be measured? There is no faith in this approach; the government cannot give public money to schools and let them teach. It must see 'objective' results; measurable results, for its spend. But this shapes everything that happens in schools; since only measurable results count. What is measurable is of course the ability of a child to regurgitate a set body of knowledge. Children have to perform increasingly absurd tricks for the benefit of government.

The tests are designed in advance and are based on the National Curriculum. Schools, their teachers and students, are (and this is a comment from the NAHT conference) then subject to 'ritual humiliation' in 'league tables'. Because the tests are designed in this way they cannot possibly measure, even if that were possible, individual learning goals. To take a very simple example; a child may be interested in the Plains Indians of America; this topic may really fire his imagination; but if this topic is not in the curriculum (this year or at this Key Stage) he won't be able to study it. By the time he has studied the set subjects and done his homework on them he will probably be too too tired to study the subject which excited him, in his own time. Thus children become 'disaffected'.

The Set curriculms are purported to be based on pedagogical principals, presenting material in such a way and in a certain sequence so as to teach certain skills and knowledge. But this is of course complete nonsense. Children learn best when they are motivated. (All teachers know this). If a child looks at a topic which requires one type of critical skill before he practises another, in reality it really doesn't matter.

'Personalised learning' is a term bandied about these days. But if this means no more than delivering the National Curriculum focussed on individuals rather than classes it is, far from being more sensitive to the individual, is, rather, an approach designed not to let a single individual escape by hiding in the anonymity of the class. Actual personalised learning would take its cue about what is to be taught from the student. And it would involve the student completely in designing the learning programme. That would make confident learners.

Assessment has a place in education; every student knows that taking a test can help them 'assess' their

own knowledge and as they notice gaps in it so they learn. The point isn't so much that 'assessment' in itself is wrong, but that, the current assessment regime is focussed on nationally set measurable outputs into which all children have to fit, to which they have to adapt. The reality is that the current National Curriculum as it is might be an ideal course of study for one child.

'Personalised learning' if it meant anything should mean a curriculum for each child or small community of children in the country. Such an approach is in fact completely consistent with teaching all the critical skills required by the National Curriculum.

The winners in the current system are perhaps the ones who can stay the course and endure learning things they are not interested in for years on end. Is the purpose of this kind of education; to kill off childrens' imaginations because they are an obstacle to acceptance of modern life?

Addendum

The war criminal Blair - who is leaving soon – is reported as saying “There is only one government since 1945 that can say all of the following: more jobs, fewer unemployed, better health and education results, lower crime and economic growth in every quarter.”

Better education results. But is this the same as better education? If you bring in a testing scheme it is practically inevitable that you will see results improve. By setting schools up in competition with league tables inevitably teachers will start teaching to the tests and inevitably the overall scores will be improved. Thus Mr Blair can claim 'education results have improved'. That's why we had the tests. Children have been dancing through hoops so Mr Blair can claim 'results'. It has nothing to do with education. Education results means more fulfilled, happier children. Not tested to death like guinea pigs.

Links

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6639945.stm – BBC News – Blair sums up his achievements

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6626277.stm> - BBC News - Tests 'reduce pupils to widgets'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6611083.stm> - BBC News - Schools are now 'exam factories'

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/sats/story/0,,997786,00.html> - Guardian Online - School tests breach UN convention, envoy claims

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6486767.stm> - BBC News - Changes in school tests

See <http://www.youth-rights-uk.org>