



Towards an agenda for professional development in assessment

Michael O'Leary

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RESEARCH NOTE

Towards an agenda for professional development in assessment

Michael O’Leary*

St Patrick’s College, Ireland

Introduction

Assessment as integral to good teaching and learning has come to be accepted as a core principle underlying curricula in many educational systems around the world. Indeed, the evidence that high quality assessment can make a big difference to pupil achievement, especially the low achievers, is mounting up (see, for example, Black & Wiliam, 1998) and provides a strong justification for those who promote assessment in schools. However, it seems that many teachers’ assessment skills (what we may call teachers’ assessment literacy) need to be improved. I will begin this paper by examining some of the international evidence for the last assertion and then proceed to outline an agenda for professional development in assessment that acknowledges the place of both classroom assessment and official assessment in supporting teaching and learning.

Assessment literacy

According to Black and Wiliam (1998), ‘there is a wealth of research evidence that the everyday practice of assessment in classroom is beset with problems and shortcomings ...’ (p. 5). Among the problems they found in reports from countries such as Belgium, Canada, England and France were marking that failed to offer guidance for improvement, poorly defined criteria to support judgements, tests that encourage rote learning, quantity and presentation of work rather than quality in relation to learning, use of approaches where pupils are compared to one another, a focus on filling records rather than analysing pupils’ work, a lack of attention to the assessment records or practices of other teachers in the same school, little engagement in critique of what is assessed or the methods used. They also found evidence of lip service being paid to classroom assessment and a belief that it was unrealistic in present educational contexts (Canada). The work of the Assessment Reform Group over the past six years suggests that the assessment literacy is still firmly on the agenda in the UK (see, for

*St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, Dublin, Ireland. Email: michael.oleary@spd.dcu.ie

example, Black *et al.* 2003). Concerns about assessment practice also lie at the heart of the *Assessment Is for Learning* initiative in Scotland (Hutchinson & Hayward, 2005; Simpson, 2006).

The situation in the Republic of Ireland is no better. Ten years ago the Irish National Teachers' Organisation called for a comprehensive programme of in-career development in assessment (INTO, 1997). A number of recent evaluations of a new primary school curriculum introduced into primary schools in 1999 highlight assessment as an area requiring 'significant attention and improvement' (DES Inspectorate, 2005a, p. 51). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) *Primary curriculum review* noted that teachers themselves indicated 'a need to increase their knowledge of and competencies in assessment of student progress' and that they 'requested greater advice on the use of different assessment tools and resources' (NCCA, 2005a, p. 248). Problems with respect to assessment practice are also discussed in two reports on literacy in disadvantaged schools (Eivers *et al.*, 2004; DES Inspectorate, 2005b).

Given the high profile of testing and assessment in the US it is somewhat surprising to discover that teachers there are no more skilled in classroom assessment than their counterparts elsewhere. The assessment literacy of teachers has been an ongoing issue in that country for many years (see, for example, Popham, 2004) with many states not requiring competence in assessment as part of teacher certification standards (Stiggins, 1999). Indeed, classroom assessment has been described as the 'stepchild of the measurement community' in the US—the argument being that measurement expertise is devoted to developing sophisticated paper-and-pencil tests rather than to teacher professional development in assessment (Stiggins, 2000).

An agenda for professional development

We know there are problems with respect to many teachers' assessment literacy. Therefore, a prerequisite for having a sound assessment practices system operating in our schools is that we put in place a plan to ensure all teachers become highly skilled in classroom assessment. Below I provide a list of topics that I feel should be part of a comprehensive programme of professional development in assessment. When compiling this list I drew on some of the key international literature on assessment (Schaeffer, 1991; Stiggins, 1995, 1997, 1999; Gipps, 1996; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Campbell Hill *et al.*, 1998; Clarke, 1998; Cowie & Bell, 1999; Tombari & Borich, 1999; Shepard, 2000; McMillan, 2001; ARG, 2002; Black *et al.*, 2003; Hall & Burke, 2003; Nitko, 2004; Wiliam *et al.*, 2004; Airasian, 2005). While I also used a number of documents relevant to the Irish primary schooling (NCCA 1990, 1993, 2002, 2004, 2005a,b; INTO, 1997; Hall, 2000; Working Group on Primary Preservice Teacher Education, 2002), my aim was to develop an agenda that might also be relevant beyond the Irish context. Moreover, no assumption is being made that classroom teachers are the only ones in need of professional development in assessment. The list of topics might also serve as a useful guide for other educational professionals wishing to up-skill in this area.

The task of improving assessment literacy is a formidable one, as the number of topics in Table 1 suggests. Indeed, one of the key planning decisions that would have to be made is how these topics could be prioritised and how a balance can be struck between the assessment needs of teachers at the pre-service, induction and in-career stages of their professional lives. In Ireland and in the UK the work of the NCCA (2005b) and the King's Medway/Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project (Black

Table 1. A menu of topics for professional development programmes in assessment

Topic	Focus
Assessment terminology and concepts	The terminology, concepts and key principles teachers, inspectors, in-service providers and teacher educator should understand.
The role of assessment in learning and teaching	The implications of the phrase <i>assessment is integral to teaching and learning</i> for classroom practice. Distinguishing between assessment of learning and assessment for learning.
Sizing up assessment	The nature and long lasting effects of assessments teachers carry out in the first two weeks of the school year.
Planning assessments	The importance of identifying key learning outcomes across the different subject areas and matching them to assessment methods/tools.
Assessment during the teaching and learning process	The nature, potential and conduct of formative assessment including provision for appropriate feedback. Assessment approaches that can be integrated with ongoing teaching and learning to improve achievement.
Observation as an assessment tool	The nature of informal observation in classrooms. Planning for and conducting systematic observations.
Paper-and-pencil assessments of achievement	The role of teacher made tests and external assessments of achievement in teaching and learning. Planning, constructing and administering tests; using test data.
Performance assessments	Using hands-on tasks to assess and improve learning processes.
The assessment of pupil dispositions	Approaches to assessing student attitudes. Using assessment to motivate pupils and to develop positive attitudes and interests.
Assessing cross-curricular skills	Approaches to assessing problem-solving, critical thinking, and reasoning proficiency.
Standardised testing of academic achievement	Interpreting standardised test results. The role of standardised testing in teaching and learning.
Pupil self-assessment	Using portfolios, rubrics, self-report instruments, peer assessment and pupil involved parent/teacher meetings to develop self-assessment skills.
Interpreting assessment information	Making judgements about the quality of pupil work across the curriculum. Identifying standards of work at different achievement levels.
Assessment and differentiation	How assessment can be used to help cater for the range of pupil achievements.
Assessment and digital technology	How technology can be used to gather, record and report assessment information.
Recording assessment information	The advantages and disadvantages of the recording choices available to teachers and schools.

Table 1. (Continued)

Topic	Focus
Assessment in the early years context	Identifying key learning targets in the early years. Using assessment for the early identification of learning difficulties. Assessment methods for the early years.
Grading	Issues and challenges when grading, making grading procedures explicit, report card writing.
Communicating assessment information	The challenge of communicating about achievement with pupils, other teachers, parents, educational psychologists, the inspectorate, etc.
Ethical and legal issues	Misuses of assessment. Equity issues. Implications of government legislation for assessment in schools.

et al., 2003) provide valuable clues about possible assessment priorities. Five assessment strategies in particular seem to provide good opportunities for successful professional development: sharing learning intentions and success criteria, comment only feedback, questioning, the formative use of summative tests and student peer and self-assessment.

We know from the educational change literature that the content of assessment change as sketched out in Table 1 must not be confused from the process of assessment change (e.g. Fullan, 1991). One of the key developments in terms of the latter has been a move towards teacher learning communities (also called professional learning teams). Deriving from research that indicates teacher professional development is more effective when it is school embedded, cooperative and sustained over time, these communities of teachers are organised within and/or across schools and focus on improving practice over time through the sharing of knowledge, experience and expertise. A growing literature on the practice and impact of these communities is becoming available (see, for example, Richardson, 2001; Hutchinson & Hayward, 2005; NCCA, 2005b; Lyon *et al.*, 2006; Thompson & Goe, 2006; Wiliam & Thompson, 2006).

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to outline a programme of work for professional development in assessment. This programme is now offered as a model for debate and discussion. There is no doubt that addressing the assessment needs of teachers will involve considerable financial costs. For example, Wiliam *et al.* (2004) report that the one-off cost of providing in-depth professional development in assessment for learning in the UK amounted to approximately £2000. So while we might agree on what needs to be done in the general sense, the specifics of what can be done in a practical sense may well be decided using financial criteria rather than educational ones. That said, if scarce resources are to be used, we must encourage our educational leaders to target assessments that will raise the achievement of all our students. We have never

before been so conscious of the importance of assessment to good teaching and learning in the classroom. It is now up to us all to do something positive about it.

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