

## **FOCUS**

### ASSESSMENT IN LITERACY: A COMPARATIVE REPORT

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This sabbatical allowed me the opportunity to view overseas schools assessment systems: formative assessment in action as well as the style and results of summative assessment.

I had prepared a brief of my study to email to schools in Scotland to obtain their approval to visit. I wanted a variety of schools large and small from cities, towns and villages in different Local Education Authorities to see if there were differences in district operation. It proved to be more difficult than I anticipated getting schools to respond to my initial request. Some schools I visited were “cold calls” without an appointment but I was never turned away.

The schools I visited were very welcoming and forthcoming with information that I “maun ken” (must know) while being inquisitive about New Zealand schools. At times when responding to their questions about our schools I felt as if I was on a recruiting drive for teachers to come to New Zealand.

My Board had approved me taking my principal’s laptop which was invaluable for storage purposes but not much use for emailing back to school as their systems were not as advanced as I had been led to believe.

At times during the visits the schools were reassuringly similar and in other ways, such as the physical set up, completely different to Tairua Primary School. Their similar teaching style was plainly illustrated when I observed a 20 minute lesson taken completely in Gaelic. Even though the teacher and students only spoke Gaelic I could easily follow the lesson because of familiar teaching styles and learning intentions.

Scotland has a great sense of history with its castles, battles in the glens and kinship. The older Scots I talked to outside of school maintain that Scottish education has and is continuing to go downhill. Most educators believe they are on the path of improvement to success by focussed formative assessment. Time will tell who is right.

## **PURPOSE**

I set out to investigate what current trends in assessment could affect New Zealand schools in the future. My key question was

In what ways can the educational outcomes of students in New Zealand be improved by comparing the literacy assessment and evaluation systems of New Zealand primary schools with those of primary schools in Scotland?

To undertake this study I travelled to Scotland and visited 11 primary schools and 1 Literacy Adviser over a 10 week period from April to July 2007.

## **Information Gathering Questions**

When visiting schools I used the following questions.

1. What diagnostic data is collected in assessment of literacy?
  - Summative – nationally standardised
  - Summative – exemplar based
  - Formative – class made
  - Other
2. How is data
  - Collected?
  - Stored?
  - Evaluated?
  - Used by local authorities and government agencies?
3. How does the process inform staff about or affect teaching and learning?
4. How is this information used in the learning and teaching cycle?

## **BACKGROUND**

Assessment is aimed at improving the learning and attainment of students. Scotland, as in New Zealand, wants to improve its international standing in student achievement. Most Scots were quick to tell me that they used to have the best education system in the world but don't have any more. A Scottish Executive Education Department newsletter of spring 2007 says that "A Curriculum for Excellence *provides the framework to make Scotland the best in the world in education.*" What can New Zealand learn from this?

A further quote about Scottish educational aspirations makes interesting reading when looking at when it was written.

*"Although it can no longer be claimed that Scottish education is renowned and the level of educational attainment by ordinary Scots incomparably greater than in other European countries, the Scottish Nationalist Party believes that Scotland can regain her position as a pace setter in education. It welcomes the development of comprehensive education as an evolution of traditional Scottish practice"*  
SNP Manifesto 1979

Similar statements have been made in the past few years about New Zealand educational attainment and we have seen since 1989 a series of sweeping changes to education to improve our position internationally and this continues at present with more changes to the NZ Curriculum. From current educational studies and research New Zealand's position in attainment compared to other countries has changed very little. Warwick Elley's article in Set 1 2006 "How Well Do Our Students Achieve" looks at our achievement internationally over the past 35 years. New Zealand's reading literacy is "*repeatedly strong*" mathematics shows "*little sign of improvement over time*" and in science we are "*consistently placed...slightly above the international average (usually between 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>) but well below several Asian countries*".

The above quote from the Scottish Nationalist Party Manifesto was written in 1979 but similar statements were being made by political parties in Scotland in 2007 in the lead up to Scottish Parliament elections which occurred while I was in Scotland. If the same political statements are being made over 25 years apart I am left wondering just what has been happening to Scottish Education.

So on a broad scale Scottish and New Zealand education is in a similar place: looking to improve, looking to be the best in the world.

I only looked at a small slice of the education pie, literacy assessment, but I found that the two countries are particularly similar in what they do, far more similarities than differences in fact.

As I stated above New Zealand's first set of major educational changes began in 1989 with a new curriculum for Years 1 – 10 of schooling introduced into schools from 1990. On the other side of the world in Scotland they introduced a new 5years -14 years Curriculum in 1991 to cover pupils from Primary 1 to Secondary 2. Over the following 10 years we tinkered with our 1990 NZ Curriculum and Scotland tinkered with its. National Testing was introduced in Scotland in this period and New Zealand, especially the National Party, considered the same.

Scotland is in the process of introducing and consolidating its new Curriculum for Excellence which incorporates the initiative of the Assessment is For Learning Programme.

New Zealand began introducing a new curriculum in 2006 with the publishing of our Draft Curriculum which is due to be introduced to schools in NZ in September 2007.

The two countries have similar timelines for curriculum change and development driven and guided by similar philosophies.

### **ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN**

Over a seven week period I visited a variety of primary schools in Scotland to discuss with Head Teachers and teachers how they assessed literacy in their school. The variety of schools was based on the

- Size of the school. Some were large city schools with rolls of over 400 and some were rural schools with a roll as low as 11.
- Local Education Authority controlling the school (7 LEAs visited).
- Type of school: state run, catholic, private.
- Economic level of the surrounding community.
- Language used for instruction: English or Gaelic.

I used a set of information gathering interview questions to initiate discussion which was followed by classroom visits. All schools were very happy to share the information they had and to enquire about practices teachers use in New Zealand.

In support of the visits, readings of various publications and websites were undertaken as part of the information gathering process prior to writing this report.

### **FINDINGS**

Generally speaking Scottish Primary Schools assessment of literacy is similar in many ways to that in New Zealand.

In all the schools I visited there was a clear understanding by Head Teachers of the purposes of assessment

- To support learning: for pupils and their class teachers

- For review, transfer and certification: for parents and other teachers
  - For informing school improvement and public accountability: for managers, HMIS, policy makers
- \* Assessment for Learning: Mark Less to Achieve More*

Some classroom teachers were not as clear in their understanding of the third purpose as Head Teachers were. This is confirmed in research evaluation carried out by the University of Strathclyde who found that *“there was evidence of perceived conflict between formative and the summative approaches of National Assessments and other tests and examinations”*(2005)

## ***Supporting Learning***

### **Learning Intentions**

Schools had well defined and consistent systems for supporting the learning of pupils using formative assessment practices. Teachers were aiming to improve learning by constructing with their class clear learning intentions that made the learning relevant. With the end outcome being the same, teachers used WALTs (we are learning to) or OLIs (our learning intention) to focus the pupils thinking. The learning intention is shared with the class orally and visually at the beginning of the lesson and reviewed at the end. The teacher sets the learning intention according to the 5-14 Curriculum Guidelines. Teachers keep note in a variety of ways of how well pupils understand and grasp the learning intention. Teachers use their professional judgement as well as keeping samples of work for reference. Some schools had individual assessment folders with comments on pupils. Others had class criteria sheets where a date and tick off was recorded for each pupil.

### **Success Criteria**

Linked to the WALT the teachers share the success criteria so the pupil will know to what extent they have been successful. This is expressed as a WILF (what I am looking for) by the teacher with pupils being involved in identifying the success criteria which engages them in the learning. This has meant that the pupil has greater ownership of the learning and is not just teacher directed. For this to happen, teachers were using a cross curricula approach.

Most schools used a simple visual system that allows the pupil to let the teacher know where they are at with their learning: thumbs up indicates they understand clearly, thumbs sideways indicates they are not sure and need some additional help or time and thumbs down indicates they did not understand and needs the teacher to intervene and re-teach. During the lesson and at the end the teacher feeds back to the child and identifies an appropriate next step in learning. The focus of the feedback is on the task not on the pupil which helps maintain motivation. So the feedback relates to the learning intention using the success as the guideline. At times during a lesson teachers gave pupils time to check on their own learning and understandings by discussing with a partner or small group any questions they have. Discussing with others gave the pupils a chance to organise their own thoughts so they could explain to a “buddy”.

The aim of the learning intention and success criteria approach is to lead to targets and goals that encourage the pupil to think about the skills and knowledge they are learning and why they are learning. This develops relevance for learning where the pupil can see learning as progressive and not just a set of teacher set tasks that may not be related to the pupils needs.

### **Marking Work**

This teaching approach has meant that teachers have changed some of the ways they work. Most marking of work has moved from an out of class task carried out away from the pupil concerned to writing and speaking

comments to a pupil about their work. Marking is no longer seen as concentrating on giving a grade or marks, it is concerned with helping students know what they have been successful with.

To achieve this most schools used a two stars and a wish approach. From the established criteria the teacher identifies two aspects (“stars”) the pupil has had success with and suggests one improvement that could be made (“wish”). Teachers also used a system called traffic lights, small coloured circles indicating how well the success criteria have been met. This often linked with the self evaluation system the pupil used with the “thumbs” approach.

### **Personal Learning Plans**

The Curriculum for Excellence and Assessment for Learning Programme established by the Scottish Executive Education Department is aiming for this above approach to lead to personal learning logs or journals. An evaluation of this carried out by the Quality in Education Centre, University of Strathclyde identifies that this development has been slow as there were different opinions by educationalists as to their purpose.

### **Assessment Practices**

In New Zealand running records of children reading are commonly taken on most students if not all. This provides the teacher with an ongoing benchmark and areas for future learning. In the Scottish schools I went to running records were only used as an assessment tool for special needs pupils and not undertaken by the classroom teacher.

Earlier I mentioned that teachers set the learning intentions from the 5-14 Curriculum. Schools have worked in small clusters to develop shared learning intentions that individual schools have made into plans of work for teachers to follow. Writing criteria development was more advanced than those for reading or speaking and listening. There has been a move away from teaching to a set resource text to identifying pupils’ needs and teaching to those. Some Head Teachers expressed the concern that not all teachers are happy with this approach as they have to move outside their easier comfort zone. However extensive professional development has been undertaken by teachers and this will continue in the future.

### *Review, Transfer and Certification*

### **Reporting to Parents**

Part of the purpose for assessment is to use the information to let parents know how their child is progressing and what they are attaining. As in New Zealand this is an area where we experience difficulties in overcoming public perception that education and children’s performance is not as good as it used to be. But this idea can be deceiving as the following quote shows.

*“There are still to be found persons who give vent to the assertion that education has deteriorated in recent years, that boys and girls do not spell or count nearly as well as their predecessors of thirty, fifty, sixty or a hundred years ago. The indefiniteness of the earlier period with which comparison is made is symptomatic of the looseness of thinking concerned.”* ( from CW Thomson’s “Scottish School Humour”)

He wrote this in 1936 and I still hear the same comparisons today. Either we have made little progress in education or...?

Most schools I visited provided written reports to parents twice a year; an interim report at mid-year and an end of year report. Parent interviews were conducted in November with the interim report used as the agenda and again in April or May. Some have moved their second time of parent interviews earlier so that the interview becomes a target and goal setting meeting. This took the form of a personal learning plan for the pupil that is agreed to by the teacher, pupil and parents. In some schools this may contain a levels assessment against

national expectations. Schools indicated a high level of parent turn out at interviews although Head Teachers agreed that the limited time available for each interview was a limiting factor when asking if they were successful. At Tairua School we have faced the same limiting factor so have adjusted to make interviews more relevant.

One school was beginning to develop a pupil portfolio of work to show parents in place of a mark and comments based report sheet. These were very similar to the portfolios we have been using at Tairua School over the past 4 years in conjunction with our written report.

Some schools were reporting to parents through a weekly reading log as to what reading learning intention the pupil was currently working on. These had spaces for teacher comment as well as parent and pupil comment.

Her Majesty Inspectors of Schools have reported in the past “*Inspectors frequently judged that schools needed to provide better information to parents about their children’s attainment and next steps in learning, and better advice on supporting their children’s learning.*” This sounds very much like ERO comments in New Zealand School Reports. Scottish schools are continuing to develop their procedures for reporting to parents.

### **National Assessment**

Students are assessed against a set of levelled criteria that form part of the 5-14 National Curriculum. These are written in strands for the English language curriculum and stated as minimum competencies or attainment targets at five broad levels of development through primary and early secondary education. The attainment targets are:

- Level A should be attainable in the course of P1-P3 by almost all students (P1 or Primary 1 is the New Zealand equivalent of Year 1 and P3 New Zealand’s Year 3 )
- Level B should be attainable in the course of P3 or even earlier, but most certainly by most in P4
- Level C should be attainable in the course of P4-P6 by most pupils
- Level D should be attainable by some pupils in P5-P6 or even earlier, but most certainly by most in P7
- Level E should be attainable by some pupils in P7/S1, but certainly by most in S2
- Level F has been added in for P7 – S3

Teachers collect work samples and make formative assessments of a pupil’s levels that they can justify. In most schools this assessment data was collected by the Head Teacher analysed then discussed with the teacher regarding pupils’ progress and targets. The teacher’s professional judgement of a pupil’s level is confirmed by them undertaking a national assessment test at a particular level. These tests are down loaded from the Scottish Executive Education Department website. In the past teachers could order national assessments covering particular contexts but now the downloaded version gives random contexts which some teachers find difficult to accept.

Initially these national assessments were administered by schools in June as the end of the school year assessment. But thinking has changed over the past few years and all schools now use them to confirm a pupil’s level at any stage during the year when the teacher feels the pupil is ready for the assessment. The test is a pencil and paper test which usually takes a pupil about 30-40 minutes to complete. Unlike New Zealand Progress an Achievement Tests there is no set time limit for their assessment. Most schools were waiting until the end of P2 before using any of these assessments.

Sitting of these “tests” is still seen by most schools as the main assessment of pupils.

This assessment information on what nationally referenced level the pupil is working at is handed onto the next teacher or secondary school. Like in New Zealand, schools in Scotland expressed some dissatisfaction with what information the secondary schools want and how they use it. Research and anecdotal information shows

that secondary schools have been slower to accept the 5-14 Curriculum than primary schools. It has been said that in Scotland secondary teachers frequently lack confidence in primary teachers' judgements and are reluctant to use the information. As a NZ Principal handing on assessment information to secondary schools, is this part of the difficulties I have faced with New Zealand secondary schools information exchange?

### *School Improvement and Accountability*

In this area assessment is used to provide information as a basis for monitoring and evaluating provision and attainment at, school, education authority, and national level and is mostly used by and the concern of managers and policy makers. This is seen as the area of summative assessment.

The University of Strathclyde's 2005 evaluation of The Assessment is for Learning Programme "*found there was evidence of perceived conflict between formative assessment and the summative approaches of National Assessments and other tests and examinations*". Later the report states as an issue for consideration in relation to ongoing development that "*...understanding of how classroom assessment can serve both formative and summative purposes remains patchy, particularly with regard to how they relate to externally set and designed assessment. There is a polarisation of the two purposes which is not helpful in understanding, for example, how external assessment might contribute to formative assessment within the classroom.*"

It is this area that education in New Zealand could benefit from Scottish experience.

In the past the British system of education had the 11 plus examination as its final primary school summative assessment. From this result a pupil's secondary schooling option was decided. This was changed in the early seventies.

In 1989-90 further change occurred in Scottish education when national testing was introduced and this continued as the main form of summative assessment until 2004. In 2002 the Scottish Executive Education Department actioned a programme in response to earlier research from Black & William and a 1999 Her Majesty Inspectors of Schools report indicating that formative assessment was most likely to raise attainment and achievement. In New Zealand we were experiencing similar winds of change at a similar time. Scotland's action was to introduce the 5-14 Curriculum for Excellence which contained the Assessment is for Learning Programme.

In 2004 National Testing was replaced with the National Assessments Levels A-E described above (with Level F added later). These assessments were in reading, writing and mathematics where teachers chose from a catalogue the assessments they were going to use. The current approach of assessments is confirmatory, where a teacher collects 9 samples of a pupil's work before using the assessment test to confirm their judgement. The results of these assessments are sent, usually electronically, to the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) and to a school's Local Education Authority (LEA). These groups use the information to respond to questions about how a school is getting on in relation to others.

The SEED collates the results and identifies the percentage of students and the various levels looking at the 32 Local Education Authority results comparatively. LEAs use the information to compare students in similar classes in a big school (e.g. three classes of P5 pupils), to compare with similar schools in their own authority to ascertain why some schools perform well and others don't as well as comparing schools of similar demographic make-up nationally to identify factors of top performing schools. They use 4 years of data to make judgements on the quality of education being delivered.

Schools use the data internally to analyse the performance of students especially underachievers and high achievers to see what more can be done for them. They will publish for parents their school attainment levels against their stated targets.

The English system publishes school results as a “league table” so that parents can choose the best education for their child. The Scottish system does not publish the information they collect for the general public. But schools can access the information to compare their school results against those of similar size and demographics. Education Authorities want information about the value added during a pupils’ time at school and need accurate data from schools for monitoring of standards. There is talk now that with the development of the Assessment is for Learning Programme national assessments may well be replaced.

Some schools are involved in other forms of summative assessment. One school I visited in June was involved with the 2007 Scottish Survey of Achievement covering science, science literacy and core skills in 2007. The curriculum area survey varies from year to year. Schools involved in this are chosen at random and within a school pupils are chosen at random to take part. The school I visited had the following pupils involved:

- P3 – 21 pupils assessed at levels A/B
- P5 - 28 pupils assessed at levels B/C/D
- P7 - 25 pupils assessed at levels C/D/E

Schools are provided with printed pencil and paper tests and questionnaires. These tests were administered by the Head Teacher to obtain consistency of delivery. The papers are then sent to the Scottish Executive Education Department for marking, analysing and reporting. The papers are not marked by the school involved, they are marked independently. An additional part of the survey involves facilitators coming to school to get a sub-sample of pupils to take part in practical assessments. Two other pieces of information are also collected as part of the survey; teacher judgements of attainment levels in the selected area and class-based writing in a science context. An example of this is a pupil writing on the topic of “*If organic food is so good for us should the cost be subsidised?*” or “*Should pupils be forced to eat healthy meals at school?*” The survey of achievement is designed to report on the attainment of pupils nationally and also at local level. There is no reporting at the level of individual schools or pupils.

This style of assessment is similar to New Zealand’s National Education Monitoring Programme (NEMP) run by Otago University although NEMP is not levels based as such. The use of the information collected by both countries seems similar.

Two schools I visited chose to use other nationally referenced assessment tests. These assessments are designed by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). Schools administer these assessments at a time of their choosing and they provide data and analyses similar to New Zealand’s revised PAT in Mathematics. The school was able to access data on students that was age related, score scaled, standardised mark and a stanine. They are used by schools to support other assessment information collected that will help to identify learning needs of pupils. Schools using these tests handed on the information to the secondary school their pupils will be attending. Evidently the secondary schools use this information to their own advantage. Assessments are undertaken in reading and mathematics.

Some schools are also selected to participate in international assessments such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) which takes place every four years but I did not observe this in any schools I visited. New Zealand Schools also take part in the same study.

Two of the schools I visited had instruction in Gaelic running in their school, one as a full time Gaelic unit pupils could opt into and one with Gaelic integrated into the daily programme. All assessment tests are available to schools in Gaelic if schools so choose.

### *How Schools Store Data*

In the schools I visited teachers were generally recording level achievements on prepared class lists. Most teachers did not indicate that they kept this information on computer but Head Teachers had it on computer. Schools in different Local Education Authorities varied on computer data recording. Some had no double entry of data and could electronically send their school data directly to their LEA while others had entered data on at least two different data bases. Like in New Zealand there is no consistent nationwide data system to use to record and interpret data.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Over the past 4 years Scottish education has been developing a clearer understanding of assessment involving changes to classroom practice and more varied approaches to using assessment as a tool. Part of this means improved feedback to pupils and more meaningful discussion with pupils about their learning. The University of Strathclyde Evaluation of the Assessment is for Learning Programme found that *“the greatest challenges to introducing change were time and engaging all staff.”* Schools have put a lot more emphasis on formative assessment to improve the learning of pupils. There has been a shift away from just using summative assessment, a move which has been facilitated by Local Education Authority Advisers. They have assisted teachers to change their practices.

### **National Testing**

One major implication for New Zealand education lies in the area of summative assessment for school improvement and accountability. Scotland over a number of years has had national testing as an integral part of its education system, presumably to improve learning. New Zealand has not followed this trend. Education authorities in Scotland have realised that national testing in itself does not improve pupils learning. This has been based on recent research. Currently in the news there has been a call from educational groups in England to move away from the exam oriented curriculum they currently use. They are testing pupils at ages 7, 11 and 14 with pupils facing up to 70 tests in their time at school up to the age of 14. School results are published as a league table for all to see. The Government is unlikely to change its policy as they say it gives parents information to base decisions about their child’s future education on.

International Education Studies such as the last Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) show that

New Zealand is 13<sup>th</sup> in reading achievement  
Scotland is 14<sup>th</sup>  
England is 3<sup>rd</sup>

Similar results are reported for achievement on reading for literacy purposes and for informational purposes.

Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) show that at year 5 level (grade 4)

New Zealand is 17<sup>th</sup> in reaching international benchmarks in mathematics  
Scotland is 18<sup>th</sup>  
England is 5<sup>th</sup>

It would appear from the Scottish TIMSS figures that national testing for them has not had the desired effect of raising achievement internationally. England ranks significantly higher than New Zealand and Scotland so the decision on the value of national testing is still not conclusive.

### **Leading Change**

A further implication for education generally in New Zealand based on the changes to assessment and teaching practice is to ascertain who is following and who is leading in these changes. New Zealand's timeline of educational changes over the past 16 years is very similar to that of Scotland's. Are we following Scotland's lead, are they following us or are we both following someone else? In the past New Zealand has led some educational changes and pioneered changes to teaching practice. We must continue to do this in the future.

### **Formative Assessment**

Much of what I observed happening in Scottish classrooms is happening in New Zealand classrooms. Teachers are focussing on developing clear learning intentions with identified success criteria that are constantly in front of the student. This focuses the students on learning. An implication for Tairua School from my study is to encourage teachers to continue what they are doing in this area.

Along with this Tairua school will strengthen its formative assessment systems and subsequently put a lesser emphasis on summative assessment. Our formative assessment will be mainly about improvement and looking forward. It will continue to be part of the ongoing learning process leading to future learning. We will lessen the amount of summative assessment as it tends to be about looking backwards and at the end of a process. If we overused summative assessment it can have a negative impact on learning. My first step in this will be to identify why we use a summative assessment and see if we can get similar information in a different way.

### **Learning Intentions**

At Tairua School, in conjunction with the introduction of our revised NZ Curriculum, we could write our learning intentions for the English Curriculum more clearly and specifically for each level of learning. These would be based on the national objectives and would be used to strengthen our formative assessment systems.

### **Feedback to Learners**

To improve the quality of our feedback to students in writing, at Tairua School we will introduce the process of teachers recording "two stars and a wish" when marking a student's work. "Two stars" are comments on two areas of the identified success criteria that the student has achieved and "the wish" is the next step the learner can take to improve their writing.

To go beyond instruction and use different classroom strategies of assessment, teachers at Tairua School will introduce the technique that during a lesson or as part of the review process at the end students will use their "thumbs" to indicate their understanding of the learning intention (thumbs up – understand, thumbs down – don't understand, thumbs across – not sure).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Scotland is in the process of a project "*as part of a rationalisation of the entire system of formative and summative assessment.*" (Ian Smith "Assessment for Learning: Mark Less to Achieve More"). New Zealand is also in the process of reviewing and changing its National Curriculum.

Tairua School does not need to make major changes to its assessment systems to incorporate the philosophies and principles of the changing New Zealand National Curriculum. My study has shown that New Zealand and Scottish school systems are similar in many ways. Even the difference of using national testing is changing: Scotland is beginning to put less emphasis on national testing and more on formative assessment. New Zealand has not used national testing as a means of showing accountability or attainment in education.

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