

ACCOUNTABILITY VERSUS CREATIVITY

Getting the balance right in schools



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IT'S THAT TIME of year again when schools administer their final exams, but for teachers this can be a particularly daunting time with anxiety levels running high. No matter how skilled or experienced the teacher, or how strong their teaching history, speak to them and you will discover that every teacher worries that their students will underperform on test day and somehow they will be exposed as an impostor.

On the one hand, it is fair to say teachers play a very important role and have a big influence on the lives of many children and *should* therefore be held to account. But on the other hand, such a strong focus on academic learning (that can be measured and reported) can detract from developing a child's curiosity, creativity and problem-solving, which are likely to be increasingly important in the future. Getting the balance right then—between teaching, learning, assessment and reporting—is clearly something that is not easy.

The truth is teaching is more of an art than a science, and tests don't reveal everything a child has learned during their time spent with a teacher. Moreover, there will always be some pupils who underperform on test day, and this can happen for many reasons.

For schools that want to send their pupils to the best universities, regular, formal testing is appropriate, however, for those that aspire to develop well-rounded students; their approach *could* and should be very different when it comes to what and how they assess. Therefore, are assessment weeks really necessary at all? What purpose do they truly serve? These are questions schools need to be very clear about.

Understandably, key stakeholders, such as parents and school governors, have a right to know whether students, teachers and the school as a whole

are performing to a high level; and so, rightly or wrongly, teachers live in a world of accountability. Would schools provide richer education without the burden of testing? Perhaps, but it's a topic for another article.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Historically, the main purpose of testing has been to compare students and to report to stakeholders. For learners, testing tends to simply confirm what they already think about themselves.

But what's to say that testing can't also be used to help improve learning? If the data are collated and used well, it's my opinion testing can, in fact, have a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning in subsequent weeks and months.

I say this because the most successful schools and teachers look very carefully at the performance of each child over time and adapt their teaching accordingly. Within math for example, it is not uncommon for a child to be a strong mathematician overall but repeatedly struggle when it comes to one particular area, such as fractions. But without careful analysis, this problem may never be spotted or dealt with.

Also, why spend the recommended 12 days teaching fractions next term if it is already a strength within the class? Why not reduce that time and allocate it more wisely? These are the type of decisions the best schools and teachers make, so while some parents will sometimes ask for a copy of the textbook their child is working through so they can help at home, very few teachers teach this way. The truth is—learning is not as simple and straightforward as these textbooks might suggest. Learning is a very individual process and a one-size-fits-

all approach simply doesn't work.

Yes, every child needs to develop the necessary knowledge, skills and understanding in reading, writing and math, but the 'unwritten' side of the school curriculum is equally, if not more, important.

But while it may be easy to measure progress in math, how do you judge growth and/or progress in a child's social, emotional and attitudinal development? The accuracy of these judgements is very subjective and often relies not only the skill of the assessor but also how well they know the individual.

Testing, therefore, is not the be all and end all, but rather one of many pieces of evidence which should be taken into account when evaluating a student's progress and growth.

Consequently, when reporting to parents at the end of each year, schools need to be very thoughtful about what and how they report. Parents, too, need to be very clear about what they want for their child. Is it for their child to be the best mathematician in the class, or is it to be a *good* mathematician who enjoys school and is developing positive attitudes to learning, such as a resilient mindset and an enquiring mind? Being clear about this could drastically affect how you evaluate your child's report.

The teacher's comments are often the best way to gauge your child's personal, social and emotional growth. This is the qualitative part of the report where facts and figures simply do not and cannot describe.

So, regardless of your child's current development level, what's most important is that they have a love of learning that will stay with them until they enter adulthood. This is something that can be so easily lost or damaged and so, for me, it is these students who are the most successful products of a school. ■