

Testing primary children to the limit, and beyond

David Carless reveals a stressful life dominated by homework and tutorial school

Primary and secondary school children in Hong Kong are currently in the midst of mid-term exams. Tests and exams often provoke polarised reactions: they can motivate and stimulate, or lead to anxiety and, sometimes, demoralisation.

Exams are necessary to identify students' progress. They are also needed at certain points in the educational cycle to determine selection to the next stage, such as university entrance.

But how tests can best be used in the early years is more open to debate because early experiences deeply affect how children approach education. The kind of assessment for six- or seven-year-olds should be different from that for 17-year-olds preparing for tertiary education. The risks of demoralisation from negative experiences are a particular concern in the early years, as damage can be difficult to rectify later.

My recent research has focused on the response of young children to testing. We collected data from a wide variety of primary schools and the dominant messages were that negative perceptions of tests outweighed the positive ones. A painful life involving a diet of homework, tutorial schools and tests was evident.

Some eight-year-olds reported studying until midnight before a test. Memorising work for Chinese and English dictation tests was highlighted as particularly challenging.

Parents were identified as

central to the children's experience of assessment. Some were said to be encouraging and supportive, but the majority exerted pressure and stress on their children. One student described her mother as "like a policewoman, watching over me".

Another theme was marks and grades. It was evident that getting a high mark was a primary aim of schooling, irrespective of whether students actually learned anything useful. Memorising for a test, regurgitating answers, then forgetting them, was a common phenomenon.

One teacher in our study explained some of the pressures teachers experience, outlining how they need to help students to get high test scores, or risk being challenged by the principal or parents.

The system puts pressure on teachers and students to manufacture good results to protect themselves from such challenges. Excessive drilling of test content is a common means of maximising scores.

Another teacher pointed out that her students could get good results in an English dictation test but were unable to use the words they had memorised.

So, what would be good assessment practice in the early years of primary schooling? It might appear that a straightforward measure would be to reduce the number of tests.

For example, it is hard to see why six-year-olds need to be tested and graded so frequently. Might they

instead receive feedback on non-graded tasks? Could they be encouraged to enhance their thinking skills more and compete for marks less?

Such proposals, however, might face opposition from parents who seem to believe in the value of preparing students at an early age for competitive exams.

How might teachers in early primary school adjust their approach to assessment? I recommend enhanced communication between teachers, students and parents about the learning potential of assessment. At present, there is usually too much focus on the mark awarded, and insufficient attention on how to advance learning.

Teachers and parents need to explain more clearly to learners how they can use assessment to reflect on and improve their work. This can include issues such as how students can revise effectively and how they might learn from any feedback.

In its current guise, testing is more of a burden than a benefit to primary school children. The government rhetoric of "Assessment for Learning" has foundered on the rock of entrenched testing traditions.

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