

Why Do We Have National Assessments?

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In an examination-oriented education culture, can an assessment designed primarily for monitoring student learning outcomes survive? This is an important question to consider as we focus on the purpose of national assessments in Trinidad and Tobago.

Since 2004, the Division of Educational Research and Evaluation in the Ministry of Education has successfully conducted an annual national assessment of language arts and mathematics at Standards 1 and 3. This year, the national assessments are scheduled for June 2008. To a public immersed in the culture of preparing everyone for the Eleven-Plus, Sixteen-Plus (CSEC), and Eighteen-Plus (CAPE), national assessments of education achievement are just another test.

And what do we do with tests? We make our children study and “cram” for them. We do not teach the syllabus at all, we just teach narrowly to the tests. We expect harsh consequences for students if they fail. We demand that book publishers produce test preparation material so students can practise at home. Of course, we blame the test for this examination-oriented culture, not ourselves and our own misunderstandings of assessment and assessment practice.

The point is that national assessments are not about the selection or certification of individuals; they are about measuring the performance of schools and systems. In mature education systems, different assessments are used for different purposes—public examinations, national assessments, classroom assessment, and international assessment. We must balance the measurement tensions that arise from using these different measures.

While public examinations are high stakes, national assessments should be low stakes. A public examination cannot be used for measuring the quality of schooling because scores are inflated by test preparation and extra lessons. What you measure, then, is the extent to which parents have paid for extra lessons, not what the student has learnt in a particular school.

Why develop an assessment scheme to measure student learning outcomes at different points in the system? One reason might be to foster greater accountability. In the US, the different state assessments and the National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) have such a role. Test scores provide data on the performance of states and schools, with sanctions or rewards applied to ensure efficiency. Another reason might be to direct a compensatory programme. For example, in Mexico, information from the national assessments is used to guide the allocation of resources. Low-performing schools are specifically targeted with teacher training and resources. Is this type of action an attempt to reward low-performing schools? No, schools that are underperforming must be helped. Moving forward requires that we identify and correct what is wrong. If a system is to improve, all students must meet some basic standard or level of proficiency and we must measure where all students are at a point in time.

How should teachers view national assessments of educational achievement? There is no need for any teacher to mimic the items used in national assessments. Performance assessments are rarely used in national assessments because there are attendant problems with usability, validity, and reliability. In any case, in an efficient schooling system, we would expect a basic level of proficiency in the verbal-linguistic and mathematico-logical spheres? How could an efficient schooling system produce large numbers of students who do not or cannot read and write? What does that say about the quality of teaching and learning?

Efficient national assessment systems come with performance standards—expectations about student performance based on content standards—and teachers should use these standards to craft their own authentic classroom assessments designed to promote learning.

In our country, it is important to build greater assessment literacy among stakeholders. Classroom assessments have a role, but so do public examinations and national and international assessments. National assessments are important in our pursuit of “education for all,” because they provide useful information on the quality of learning that classroom assessments and public examinations cannot. For example, the 2005–2007 data reveals geographic differences in the size of the gender gap and in the levels of achievement across the administrative regions. This pattern closely mimics the geographic distribution of poverty identified in a recent survey based on CSO data.

We must use national assessment data to target and improve underperforming areas, as has been the focus of the better Latin American education systems such as Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. Sadly, to date, only a few Caribbean countries have developed viable national assessment systems; and in Trinidad and Tobago, the misconception of “a test is a test” now looms forebodingly as a threat to further progress.

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