

The interrelation of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment – understanding the struggle

Ruth Dann, Associate Professor, Institute of Education University College London.

Published in Research Intelligence Issue 138 Spring 2019

In virtually all countries where there are high stakes assessment systems there is evidence that the curriculum is narrowed to what is tested. The evidence for this backwash effect means that curriculum design and implementation cannot be easily disengaged from assessment and teaching.

Since the National Curriculum was established in England in 1988 there has been considerable debate about its purpose, content and organisation. Priorities for its purpose were to ensure curriculum entitlement to all and to raise educational standards in England. However, it became increasingly clear that a particular relationship between assessment and the curriculum was being established, as an emphasis on assessment and ‘attainment targets’ preceded the development of curriculum ‘programmes of study’.

Despite the reassurances of the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (1988) that assessments would *‘be the servant, not the master, of the curriculum’* (paragraph 4) and that *‘up until age 16 an assessment system should be designed for formative purposes’* (paragraph 26), what ensued was a far cry from what TGAT proposed. What emerged and subsequently became embedded over the following two decades is a subject-based curriculum with a prioritised core of disciplines, in which pupils are largely summatively tested, individually, in writing. This has given a message that foundation subjects, practical subjects and skills, as well as working together, are less valued. In conjunction, accountability measures have intensified, with education becoming increasingly focused on summative assessment data.

There has certainly been recognition of a narrowing of the curriculum. The Commission on Assessment without Levels (2015) set up by the Department for Education, clearly identified how primary schools were using national assessment levels as teaching targets, resulting in teaching to the tests as well as formative assessment being distorted by summative assessment. Levels were thus removed in an attempt to rebalance curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. However, the extent to which any rebalancing can be achieved seems negligible when accountability systems for schools remain data focused.

The way in which the curriculum has been constrained and that data seems to have superseded meaningful relationships in teaching and learning has caused Ofsted to think anew. Spielman (2018) has given insight into new priorities for Ofsted in its forthcoming inspection framework due for September 2019. *‘We want to know what is being taught and how schools are achieving a good education, not just what the results are looking like’*. There is a call for the curriculum, rather than the data to move center stage and for schools to consider and justify curriculum intent and implementation as well as its impact/outcomes.

Donaldson (2015), in his review of the curriculum and assessment in Wales, has already started to shape a national system which tries to reconsider the relationship of assessment and the curriculum. The extent to which this will be implemented and whether or not its priorities can be sustained and remain distinctive within a global knowledge economy which seems to thrive on performance data, is yet to be seen. What we see repeatedly in our education systems is a struggle for assessment and the curriculum to interconnect meaningfully in ways that support students’ learning and encourages

purposeful education. Understanding this struggle is certainly an essential part of rethinking the curriculum for the future.

References

DfE (2015) *Commission on Assessment without Levels: final report*, London: HMSO

DfES (1988) *The Report of the Task Group of Assessment and Testing*, London

Donaldson, G. (2015) *Successful Futures*. Welsh Government

Spielman, A (2018) Speech to the Schools NorthEast Summit on 11th October

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/amanda-spielman-speech-to-the-schools-northeast-summit>