

LINKING SUMMATIVE AND FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Some Pointers for Parents

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The Educational Assessment Unit has launched a most interesting publication consisting of ten compositions selected from the English Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination held in May 2002.

Scanned as well as typed copies of the original were reproduced. When typing the compositions, an effort was made to present them as similar as possible to the original work. So we were careful not to correct any spelling mistakes or other inaccuracies that were made by the student. One should note that the pictures and the names of the students are fictitious and were included for the sole purpose of giving the compositions a more personal touch.

At least one composition, that written by Jessica, is well above the average or what would usually be expected from a Year 6 student (which brings us to the point as to whether our educational system is challenging enough to gifted children like Jessica). Other compositions fall in the average band, while others, unfortunately, do not reach the desired standard. All the compositions that were chosen deal with three particular titles, namely: (a) 'The Thief' (which is the Picture Composition), (b) 'Close To Nature' and (c) 'The Amazing Thing That Came Out Of The Well'. These titles feature at three different levels of ability, which will make it easier for the reader to compare the work. This may be done by comparing works which share the same title, as well as those which are of the same level. So these compositions are presented as exemplars to teachers who may need to continue to develop the ability of evaluating children's work. These compositions will give the reader an idea of what would normally be expected from a ten

or eleven-year old Maltese child writing in English, which, apart from being an international means of communication, is also an official language in Malta.

What I said so far deals mainly with ‘standards’, ‘bands’ and the ‘comparison of one piece of work with another’. This is the everyday language of summative assessment, that is the passing of a judgement on a piece of work and the assignment of a mark or grade. In other words it is the assessment of how much learning has taken place.

The Junior Lyceum examination obviously falls in the sphere of summative assessment; the candidate’s work is judged and given a grade which determines whether the boy or girl will go to a Junior Lyceum or not. But that’s not the end of the story.

Our National Minimum Curriculum emphasises the link that may exist between summative and formative assessment. As Mary Vella, the ex- Director of the Curriculum Department points out in the Preface to the publication, the Educational Assessment Unit carries out an important exercise after the marking of all the scripts – which roughly amounts to four thousand five hundred a year. This exercise is called Item Analysis. It involves the study of the candidates’ answers, which checks in a scientific way, whether, for example, a particular question (better still call it an item since some ‘questions’ are not questions at all) was too difficult or too easy. The results are then published in an Annual Report that is available to schools and to those who are really interested. This Report includes the Chief Examiner’s remarks and deals with the assessment of the childrens’ work in a general and holistic manner. Hence teachers (and perhaps parents) are able to adjust their teaching accordingly. For example if a teacher adopted a particular method when teaching prepositions or the use of appropriate connectives, and the report shows that quite a number of pupils are mixing things up, the teacher would reflect on whether his or her teaching is really being transformed into learning. So the point is that we can make use of examination scripts to help us in the refinement of our teaching strategies. In doing this we are being formative. This is exactly what we tried to do in the publication mentioned above.

The publication gives teachers and parents a clear idea not only of the standard that is desired, but also of the ingredients or aspects that should be emphasised so that more effective learning will take place. This would place pupils in a position to write better English, which would happen naturally with avid readers (a point which needs to be emphasised because many of our youngsters are not reading enough). The Examiner's Comments after each composition should prove helpful because these refer to certain aspects that are to be given due importance when writing a composition. They also refer to common mistakes that should be avoided. For example children should be encouraged to come up with original and imaginative ideas, and pay attention to good sentence structure, correct spelling, use of different forms of punctuation, vivid and rich vocabulary, and accurate grammar including the use of prepositions.

The Educational Assessment Unit (which was known in the past as the Test Construction Unit) hopes to continue with its publications, emphasising the formative aspect of assessment apart from the summative. This is reflected in our Mission Statement, which states that we aim to provide, develop and implement fair and valid assessment practices for all learners. It is also our objective to guide and support schools in all their requirements regarding assessment procedures. We sincerely hope that our Unit lives up to its promises, including helping parents with the education of their children.

Unfortunately, a number of parents forget that children have to learn in their own way and at their own pace. Children are not a car, in which case, you press the gas pedal to run faster, and cover a given distance in a shorter period. We often want our children to run before they even know how to walk. We expect our children to move up from a D to a B grade. In education things don't happen that fast, because learning is like a flight of stairs. You cannot reach the fifth or sixth step unless you move up starting from the very first step. You assess what your child knows, that is, where s/he stands, and you teach her or him accordingly without any rush or anxiety. This is formative assessment, and it is the best way to develop the potential of the individual. The child can be stretched only to the limit of his or her potential. Parents would be committing a serious mistake (and in fact being very cruel, even if unintentionally) if they expect their children to reach standards which are beyond their potential. Rather than being obsessed with standards, parents should concentrate on creating an environment that is conducive to learning.

They have to be pro-active, for example by reading daily with their child, and remembering that reading should be an enjoyable experience.

Being concerned with the development of your child, whether in the physical, academic, emotional, social or moral aspect, is a very positive step. But this is not enough, because no improvement will take place if all we do is worry and become anxious. Doing something positive by being proactive, as has been pointed out above, would be similar to linking summative and formative assessment in the educational sphere. We hope that our publication about the English Composition will prove to be helpful to teachers and parents, at least in the academic aspect of the development of the child.

The Educational Assessment Unit held a special activity to distribute the publication mentioned above. It took place on Friday, 28 March at Adelaide Cini Girls' Secondary School in Hamrun. All State and Non-State Primary Schools, having Year 5 and Year 6 classes were invited to send representatives. The Assistant Director Student Assessment - Mr Peter Vassallo - introduced the activity, and the Director General - Mr Charles Mizzi - delivered the closing speech. Free copies of the publication were distributed to all schools attending the activity. Parents and all those who are interested will be glad to know that the publication is available on the web-site of the Educational Assessment Unit (<http://www.curriculum.gov.mt/eau>).
