

Parents and the Child's Educational Assessment

The Maltese Experience

by Leonard Grech

Introduction

In this paper I intend to focus on parental involvement in the educational assessment of pupils. This will lead to a reflection on specific educational scenarios existing in Malta. Moreover, it will enlighten parents to act as a catalyst in reforming our educational assessment practices.

Andrew, a pupil in Year 5, is very proud of his father who regularly attends Parents' Association meetings. At the moment the Association is being consulted regarding the Assessment Policy of the school. Reflecting on the situation, Andrew's father said to himself: "Should we, as parents, be merely consulted, or should we be active participants in all decisions that are taken regarding the assessment of our children?"

After receiving the results of the monthly tests, Mrs Borg goes to school to discuss Mandy's performance. In English Mandy scored a not very impressive fifty-five on hundred. However, Mandy said that the test items were too difficult and almost no one scored more than sixty. Another issue Mrs Borg wants to discuss is Mandy's behaviour at school. Lately Mandy has been having bad dreams and waking up in the middle of the night. Could there be a connection between this and the child's academic performance?

Mr and Mrs Camilleri spend hours with their children. Together they read interesting books, write plays and act them out, share information, discuss ideas, and enjoy each other's company in the countryside. It's a joy for the Camilleris to watch their six-year-old son organising his special folder – a collection of the boy's own work. Philip not only chooses what he wants to keep in the folder but also writes down the reason for his choice. Philip and his sister Tania criticise each other's work: this helps to improve their performance. Tania, moreover, having been trained by her parents in the skill of self-assessment, is able to criticise her own work. The Camilleris would like to see their educational methods implemented at school. (Their hopes are presently high because they heard that Government schools will shortly become autonomous. Perhaps it would therefore be easier for them to influence the school council regarding the assessment policy of the school).

The first two of the above examples point out the co-operation that exists between primary schools and parents in the area of assessment. The third example is an indication of what parents may do, independently of the school, to assess their children and help them improve both their academic performance as well as other areas of development. All this brings about situations which are very challenging to both schools and parents. Therefore this paper will be divided into three sections:

Section A: Direct or indirect forms of co-operation that exist between primary schools and parents regarding assessment

Section B: Parents and the child's assessment independently of the school

Section C: Challenging situations that need to be studied.

Section A: Direct or indirect areas of co-operation that exist between schools and parents regarding assessment

Teachers, parents, and individual pupils

There are many areas in which parents and schools can co-operate in the field of assessment. The following are but a few noteworthy examples:

- Parents may go through their child's copybooks, thus familiarising themselves with what is taking place in the classroom. They will be able to read the teacher's comments keeping themselves up to date with the child's performance/progress. In this way parents will be in a better position to help their child.
- Parents may read with their children particularly in the case of slow readers. They will be reinforcing teachers' efforts.
- Parents can also be of great support in the area of creative writing. A composition title can be discussed at home. This has proved to be very challenging to parents especially when it comes to argumentative titles tackled by students both at primary and secondary level. Incidentally, this active participation of parents is nothing less than an exercise in (a) the life-long education of parents themselves and (b) the school becoming a learning community.
- Meetings between teachers and parents regarding individuals need not be restricted to Parents' Day. Although such meetings can be very time consuming, meetings which focus on indicating strengths and weaknesses and which provide tips for improvement, can work wonders.
- The use of a special notebook, kept in the child's school bag and therefore moving from home to school and vice versa, will prove to be of great educational value. Teachers and parents will be in a position to write short messages to each other regarding the assessment of the pupil. In the same manner, e-mails may prove to be very effective. This is particularly necessary in the case of children with special needs.

Schools and parents in general

Special meetings for parents are sometimes crucial.

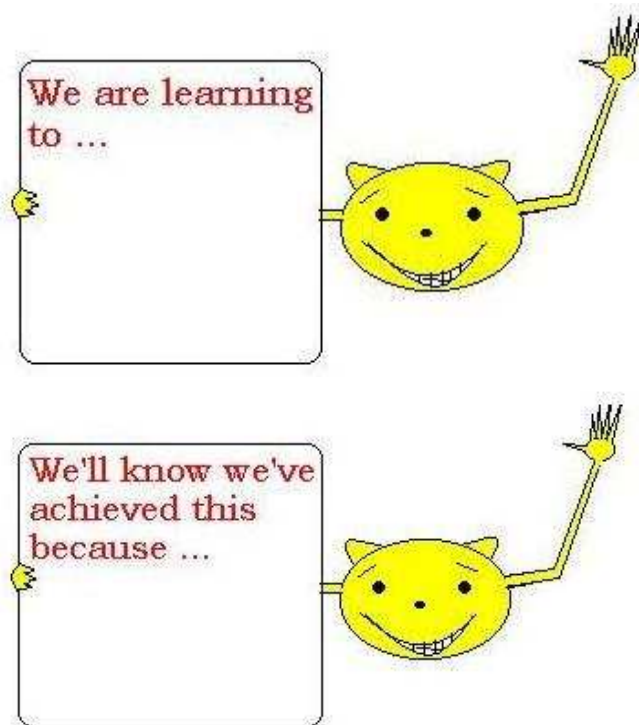
- At times parents need to be informed and consulted regarding the introduction of for example:
 - (a) a new subject (such as Technology Education and the way it is to be assessed),
 - (b) a new textbook (for example replacing *Pathway* and therefore ensuring a more effective way of teaching and assessing the English language to Maltese primary school pupils in state schools).

- Parents have to be educated regarding innovative teaching methods.
 - (a) The Abacus approach has to be explained to parents. They have to know which methods are being used to teach their children how to add and to subtract. Otherwise children may get mixed up if they are taught using two different approaches.
 - (b) Reading and its assessment also needs to be explained to parents. We cannot afford to have teachers adopt the ‘Look and Say’ method when it comes to reading, and then have parents teach the alphabet in the traditional way or adopt some other method (for example one based on phonetics) which, in their opinion is more effective than the method used in the classroom.
 - (c) The concept of New History and its new methods of assessment may prove to be extremely confusing to parents. They may expect their children to learn the subject in the same way that it was taught to them twenty years ago. This mistaken idea on the part of the parents may be strengthened by the fact that in Secondary Schools and Junior Lyceums we still use textbooks for Maltese History that were published in the 1970s. In spite of this, great efforts have been made to introduce new methods. One of these is to deviate from the idea of ‘*teaching* history’, and encourage children to investigate and to reconstruct history themselves through the use of sources. Parents have to be aware of these changes and understand the new and innovative ideas that are being introduced. On their own, that is without guidance from schools and central authorities, parents will find it very difficult to understand what is going on.

- Parents definitely need guidance in the area of assessment – an area which has a direct influence on methodology and vice versa. It has been noted that some educators themselves tend to misuse concepts like continuous assessment, teacher assessment, coursework, portfolios, and formative assessment. Due to space constraints it is impossible to enter into details, however, it is more than necessary to make some very relevant remarks regarding the latter. Formative assessment does not **necessarily** include coursework or the keeping of portfolios (which in themselves can be of great educational value). Moreover, the implementation of formative assessment depends on the initiative and the willpower of the central authorities, heads of school, teachers, and co-operation of parents. Discussions with parents about formative assessment would prove extremely useful.
(There should be no trade union difficulties regarding formative assessment. If some people are under the impression that such difficulties exist, this is due to a misunderstanding of the term).

Formative assessment (or assessment **for** learning) as opposed to summative assessment (or assessment **of** learning) is a whole attitude towards teaching and learning. The following are the principles on which formative assessment is built:¹

- (i) The teacher should have clear learning intentions (or objectives) which ought to be written down.
- (ii) Such learning intentions should be shared with the pupils.
- (iii) Clear definitions of success criteria should be formulated.
- (iv) Again these criteria ought to be shared with the pupils, who may write them down on their copybook. (These steps have proved to help motivate pupils as well as parents. The latter can easily follow what is happening in the classroom and hence attempt to re-enforce learning. Moreover, it may also prove to be a learning experience for themselves).

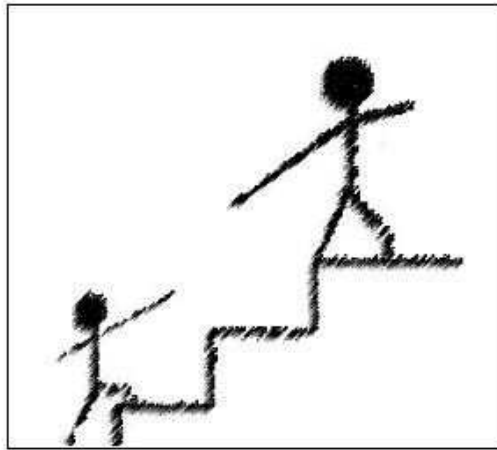


The learning intentions and success criteria need not be presented to the children in a tedious manner.

- (v) Development of an effective questioning technique is fundamental to formative assessment. Both teachers and parents have to understand the importance of open questions (usually starting with 'How', 'Why', etc), which prove to be much more motivating and challenging to pupils than closed questions (usually starting with 'When', 'Where', 'Who', etc).
- (vi) Marking children's work is part and parcel of formative assessment. Parents have to know that in formative assessment marking is always

¹ These principles are based on Black and Wiliam (1998) Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment, < <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kbla9810.htm> > [accessed: 7/10/2003]. Refer also to Grech (2004) *Parents and children's formative assessment*, in The Sunday Times, February 29. (The illustrations in Section A were first published in this article).

carried out in relation to the particular learning intention and the success criteria. For some parents it could prove to be very unorthodox. So, for example, parents have to understand that the teacher is not going to correct spelling for each and every piece of work handed in by pupils, unless, of course, spelling is the learning intention for that particular lesson. Moreover, marks are not given, because these do not help the child to improve. The teacher gives feedback to the child in the form of comments which, in other words, are practical tips for improvement. These comments may be given orally and/or written down on the copybook.²



Comments made by the teacher should be practical tips intended to help the student make progress, however small.

- (vii) Peer-assessment is another area fundamental to formative assessment. Parents have to understand that this is not done to compare children's work, or to criticise negatively. The aim of peer-assessment is to train pupils in the skill of evaluating a piece of work and reflecting on how it may be ameliorated.
- (viii) The skills of evaluation and assessment may then be applied to the pupils' own work as they acquire the skill of self-assessment. Pupils have to come to a point when they are able to assess their own work by finding their own strengths and weaknesses, and thus be capable of knowing how to improve.
- (ix) This will help students have a better opinion of themselves; in other words enhance their self-esteem, an area that tends to be affected negatively by our present summative assessment practices.

² Shirley Clarke has carried out lots of research in this area and in other areas of formative assessment. Her books Targeting Assessment in the Primary Classroom (1998), Unlocking formative assessment (2001), and Enriching Feedback in the primary classroom (2003) make excellent reading.

It has to be pointed out that

- (a) formative assessment leads to more learning taking place and hence to the raising of standards³
 - (b) parents have a crucial role to play in the whole process. Their co-operation is a sine qua non. Moreover they have to be kept informed of their child's progress. Hence the importance of recording and reporting, areas which very often are not given enough importance because some people think that these involve quite an amount of paper work. However, such recording and reporting is very important. It is a significant aspect of what is called continuous assessment. The teacher will have a much clearer picture of the children's progress. This will put the teacher in a better position to give his or her own assessment of the child. If carried out properly, such an assessment would be definitely more valid and reliable than a test or an examination.
- All the above strengthen the argument that schools should develop an assessment policy, and that parents should be very much involved in the whole process through the use of parent-teacher conferencing and more general school meetings. Such a policy should be a written document, published for public perusal and amended according to circumstances. This assessment policy should go into details, especially when it comes to success indicators or criteria and particularly when it explains level descriptors. Although they are not yet being implemented, these levels have already been published. We are still in the awareness phase. Teachers, parents, and students themselves must have a clear indication of what it means when, for example, it is reported that in English a child is in the top range of Level Two but has not yet reached Level Three. Moreover, it naturally follows that it is the child's and the parents' right to know what it takes to reach Level Three. In this way Level Descriptors become a tool for formative rather than for summative assessment purposes.

Conclusion

It is quite clear that parents cannot be left out of the area of assessment. We teach and assess all the time even if some of us are not aware of the fact that formative assessment is part and parcel of the teaching and learning process. We already have the experience of parents' participation in programmes run by the Foundation for Educational Services and by different schools. These links with parents may be kept alive not only through the organisation of meetings, but also by means of publications and the maintaining of a website. Results have proved to be very positive. As Kay has pointed out

“Current thinking based on research, supports the view that parental involvement and partnership between parents and schools helps children to succeed in their learning and can support the work of the school”.⁴

³ Black and Wiliam (1998) Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment, p.3. For further valuable information refer also to Black and Wiliam (2001) Assessment For Learning - Beyond The Black Box; Black et al. (2002) Working Inside the Black Box; and Black et al. (2003) Assessment for Learning: Putting it into practice.

⁴ Kay (2002) Teaching Assistant's Handbook, p.viii.

Parents' participation brings about improvement in relationships, the development of a more motivating atmosphere, and an understanding of the real needs of the individual child. Parents become educators, they become more conscious of what is to be learned and how, and they give and receive feedback, thus contributing towards the build-up of a learning community. This experience will help parents become better educators in the comfort of their own homes.

Section B: Parents and the child's assessment independently of the school

Introduction

In this section (as pointed out in the general introduction) I shall deal with parents and educational assessment independently of formal schooling. This is important for parents because they are the first educators of their children. Teachers are there to help, that is why they are called 'loco parentis'. Thus parents should not shrug off their responsibilities. The following are areas parents should give special importance to:

the teaching and the assessment of skills, the use of portfolios, self-assessment, ipsative assessment, and the impact of assessment on self-esteem. **It is of paramount importance to point out that the ideas expressed in this section can also be implemented in schools.** Some teachers have been doing this for a long time, and others should follow suit. If such practices are also adopted by parents at home, we will be ensuring:

- (a) higher educational standards
- (b) less stress on our children
- (c) more harmonisation between home and school.

➤ Teaching and assessing skills⁵

Very often skills are taught (and therefore automatically assessed) when parents spend quality time with the child, and, one should emphasise that the teaching of skills should start at a very early age. Perhaps we need to ask two pertinent questions:

- (a) Which skills do parents need to teach?
- (b) Which are the best methods to teach such skills?

Using visual images (very often without any involvement of financial expenses) can help parents in the teaching and assessment of basic and higher order skills. These include observation, sorting, ordering, concluding, imagining, and empathising. Children also need to acquire other competencies such as the skill of distinguishing fact from opinion,⁶ the ability to recognise inferences,⁷ to recognise relevant information,⁸ to interpret data⁹ and the ability to detect bias. Moreover, children need to acquaint themselves with basic concepts such as the concept of time, change and continuity, and cause and effect. Over and above everything children need to acquire literacy. This, of course, involves reading. Parents can help a great deal in this area.

⁵ Refer to Grech (2004) *Teaching and assessing skills: Tips for parents*, in The Sunday Times, July 4.

⁶ Refer to Grech, (April 2004) *The Skill of Distinguishing Fact from Opinion*, in Resources.

⁷ Refer to Grech, (October 2002) *The Ability To Recognise Inferences*, in Resources.

⁸ Refer to Grech, (April 2003) *The Ability To Recognise Relevant Information*, in Resources.

⁹ Refer to Grech, (December 2002) *The Ability To Interpret Data*, in Resources.

They may read for and with their children, who on their part, will then develop a desire to read. In other words parents can prepare their children in what is called 'reading readiness'. Understanding is automatically implied in reading, and this involves (always according to the age and maturity of the child) important skills such as application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Our children have to become avid readers. The example of parents counts a great deal. PISA results have shown that while the degree of engagement in reading varies considerably from country to country, fifteen-year-olds whose parents have the lowest occupational status but who are highly engaged in reading, obtain higher average reading scores than students whose parents have a high or medium occupational status but who report to be poorly engaged in reading.¹⁰ It goes without saying that if parents are fully aware of how much they can influence their children they will play a greater and more active role in their education. The use of portfolios at home can help them to do this.

➤ Portfolios at home

There are a number of schools in Malta where portfolios are being used.



These portfolios belong to children in a Maltese primary school.

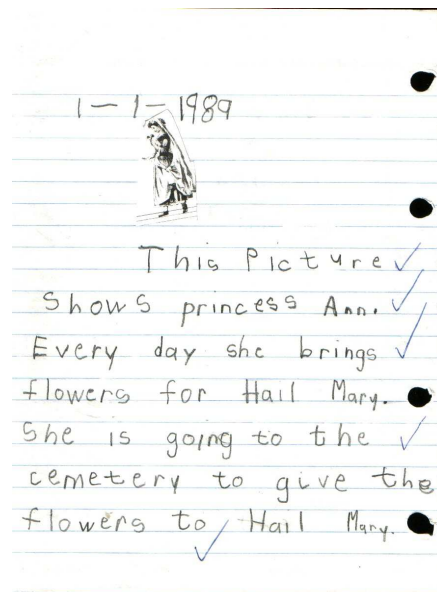
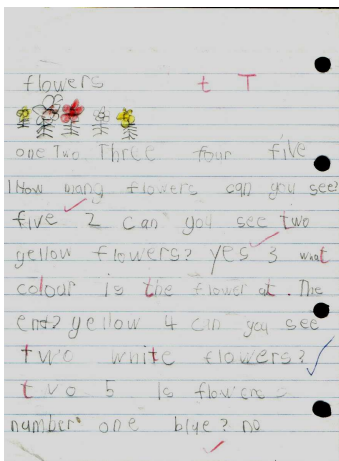
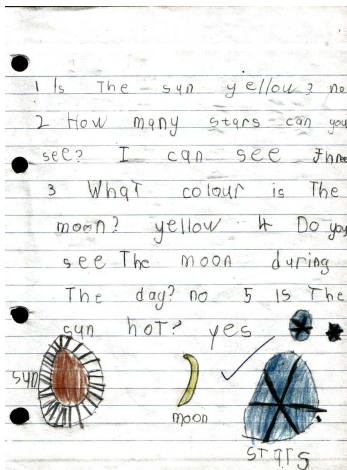
In this part of the paper, however, I shall deal with the keeping of portfolios at home independently of school.¹¹ Such a portfolio could be called 'my magic folder', or 'my favourite box'. In fact any name will do as long as it has positive connotations for the child. In the comfort of their homes parents can choose to become significantly instrumental in the teaching and learning process.

A portfolio kept at home can be very simple. Indeed it may take the form of a collection of items. Personal experience has convinced me that keeping a portfolio at home can be a means of teaching particular skills. Let us take the case of Marianne, who since her childhood was encouraged by her parents to keep a collection of her best work. It became great fun for her and therefore she developed a very positive attitude towards learning. The whole process convinces the child that his parents appreciate his work. Obviously this further motivates the child who instinctively craves praise and approval. The child's interest in his own work increases as he learns how to organise the folder, and this makes him proud of his own creation.

¹⁰ Kirsch et al. (2002) Reading For Change: Performance And Engagement Across Countries: Results From PISA 2000, p.3, <http://www.pisa.oecd.org/Docs/Download/reading_for_change.pdf> [accessed: 8/06/04].

¹¹ Refer to Grech, (2003) *Parents and children's portfolio*, in The Sunday Times, September 28.

The process of choosing the items to be kept is very important. In the case of Marianne she did ask for the opinion of her father, but he was wise enough to let her decide for herself what to keep and what to discard. It was not important which item was chosen. Of greater educational value was the reason for choosing a particular piece of work. So Marianne would not only choose an item herself, but also **record** the reason for her choice. The whole process sharpened her mind, and in time she acquired the skill of self-reflection. In other words she learned how to evaluate her own work.



These pieces of Marianne's work go back to 1989, when she was five years old.

➤ Self-Assessment

The case of Marianne referred to above points to the skill of self-assessment. Perhaps one should give some tips to parents as to how they can help their children to acquire this skill.

Initially one should start developing the child's skill of observation.¹² Pictures can be chosen and the child asked to point out what he likes or dislikes about them. A child needs to look at other people's work with a critical eye before starting to assess his own work. A step forward would be for the child to criticise a piece of writing, not his

¹² Refer to Grech, (2003) *Parents and educational assessment practices*, in The Sunday Times, January 19, and *Children and self-assessment: How to help your child acquire the skill*, in The Sunday Times, February 23.

or her own, but someone else's, preferably someone who is anonymous. We have to keep in mind that we are criticising a piece of work and not the individual per se. At first, our focus should be on the good points, that is those aspects worthy of praise. In time we move on to those points which need to be improved. In the process of assessing other people's work the child will learn to assess her own work. This is in fact what happened in the case of Marianne who soon realised that a piece of work needs to be re-examined and improved upon, particularly in view of stated and clear success criteria which should be realistic and definitely not over-demanding. In this way one emphasises effort rather than ability, a factor which motivates the child to work harder.

Developing the skill of self-assessment helps children not only in their academic achievements but also in their attitudes and in the values they cherish. This will, in turn, help them understand that they can improve even on their behaviour and become better individuals.

➤ Ipsative Assessment

Self-assessment and ipsative assessment are two sides of the same coin. In fact they are extremely complementary. Basically, the latter involves comparing the present performance of an individual with his or her own past performance.¹³ Marianne was extremely satisfied and happy when she became aware that she could ride the bike without falling or bumping into trees as she did the week before. She realised that progress had taken place due to her own effort. Hence she became even more motivated, particularly because her parents celebrated her achievement. "Today, you did much better than last week, darling. Congratulations. Keep it up".

"The most important of all pedagogical tasks is to convey to children and the young that they are continuously making headway so that they gain trust in their own abilities".¹⁴

Parents need to adopt the principle referred to as the 'personal best' and often adopted in the realm of sports. It involves knowing where you stand and finding ways and means of improving your performance. There is no comparison with the neighbour's achievement, no competition except with oneself. I was extremely impressed when I got to know that in one of the Church schools in Malta, a child with a severe disability was presented with a medal not because she qualified in a race but because she improved her timing in the sixty meters. She managed to improve her timing from thirty five to twenty seconds. This is ipsative assessment in practice, and parents have a lot to learn from such situations.



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¹³ Gipps (1994) Beyond Testing, p.vii and p.42.

¹⁴ The Royal Ministry Of Education, Research And Church Affairs, (1997) Core Curriculum For Primary, Secondary And Adult Education In Norway, p.22.

¹⁵ This picture is taken from < <http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/subj/eds/pgcert/assessing/assess5.htm>> [accessed: 17/12/2003].

Another aspect of ipsative assessment may take the form of comparing present performance in different subject areas. Marianne's father once made the following remark to his daughter:

"You know Marianne, I think you are stronger at swimming than volleyball".

Before passing such remarks, however, we have to realise that these can have a long lasting effect on children. Remarks such as:

"OK, you may not be an excellent cook, but you are a very good swimmer," can raise the morale of someone who is feeling down after a less than sterling performance or some other disappointment. Such a remark can have a very positive effect on self-esteem.

➤ Self-Esteem

- (a) Parental support is necessary to all children, even those considered to be high achievers. The pressure on such children is tremendous particularly in Year 6 of primary education. Parents need to develop parental skills and understand that their children pass through a period of great stress. Sweating, tiredness, loss of appetite, asthma, indigestion, and irritable bowels may be stress symptoms that may need to be dealt with. Parents have to know how to behave during the 'revision' period as well as during the days of the actual examinations.¹⁶
- (b) Our educational system poses serious threats to the self-esteem of low achievers. Streaming and our selection system lead to labelling. Unfortunately there are times when parents themselves brand their children 'good for nothing', causing them serious psychological damage. Children become tortured with self-doubt and self-distrust and no longer believe in themselves. Hence they give up, and upon leaving school at sixteen may still be illiterate. We have children who experience failure repeatedly and, perhaps without knowing, pass through very difficult periods. Such situations have a negative effect on a number of parents who blame themselves for their children's failures. The situation may be even more serious than we realise, considering the incidence of schoolchildren that have some form of learning difficulties, as well as those considered to be slow learners. In these circumstances parents have to be perceptive and down to earth. They should seek help that will allow their children to set up realistic and attainable targets.¹⁷ It is furthermore of paramount importance to remember that parents must constantly show their child that their love is unconditional and not dependent on academic success or other particular achievements.

¹⁶ Refer to various articles on the web: Moyles (2003) *What is Stress, Stress Management, and Recognising and Controlling Stress*, in Listen Live, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/one/education/exams/explained.shtml>> [accessed: 29/01/2003]. Also Suri (2003) *Dealing with Exam Stress at Primary Level and The Revision Game*, in Schools Parents, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/parents/article_primary_06022002.shtml> [accessed: 29/01/2003]. (In these and in other articles available on the same site parents will find practical tips that will surely prove useful).

¹⁷ Refer to Grech, (2003) *Parents and children's self-esteem*, The Sunday Times, December 21.

Conclusion

Parents have to realise and sincerely believe that their responsibilities go a very long way. They have to be actively involved in the education, and hence in the assessment, of their own children. Treating them as individuals, and therefore without comparing them to others, will help them develop very important skills. Hopefully this will have a very positive effect on their children's self-esteem.

Section C: Challenging situations that need to be studied

Introduction

In the previous section I have already referred to streaming and our selection system and the negative effect this has on self-esteem. In this section I intend to present the reader with what I consider to be the most serious challenging situations that educators in Malta have to face. Parents have to be involved in finding the best solutions particularly at this point in time, that is, in view of the coming update of the National Minimum Curriculum and the envisaged autonomy of state schools.

- What sort of diagnostic assessment is taking place during the early years of schooling? Our National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) mentions “early screening of children’s needs and potential”.¹⁸ Surely not enough is taking place considering that a number of children are being diagnosed with Special Learning Difficulties, Attention Deficit Disorder, or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder as late as in Years 5 or 6 of primary school. Parents have to co-operate in this area. They have to understand that their feedback will help to identify children’s strengths and weaknesses, and thus any learning difficulties will be identified as early as possible. Similarly a young child may exhibit a notable potential within some particular area. Such children must also be identified and their strengths cultivated.
- The implementation of formative assessment (as interpreted by The Assessment Reform Group¹⁹ and as explained in section one of this paper) is another hot issue. What is holding us back from its implementation when we know that such an assessment brings about improvements in standards? The Educational Assessment Unit of the Education Division is doing its utmost to accelerate such an implementation. In fact, formative assessment is going to be implemented on a whole school basis in a government primary school. We augur that other schools will follow.
- The NMC refers to “the strengthening of mixed ability teaching in the first four years of primary school”.²⁰ But what about Years 5 and 6? Do we intend to hold on to streaming in spite of its negative effect on children?²¹ Do we want a large

¹⁸ NMC (1999) p.78.

¹⁹ <<http://www.assessment-reform-group.org.uk>>

²⁰ NMC (1999) p.78.

²¹ The literature on this subject is prolific. Refer to Bonnici & Soler (2002) Repeating Year 6: Views and Perceptions of Different Stakeholders, unpublished B.Ed. (Hons) dissertation; Borg (1997) *A case*

percentage of our children to be classified as ‘slow learners’, ‘good for nothing’, ‘mohhhom ma jerfax’ and ‘stupidi’. I myself have heard such expressions during my teaching career. Education authorities as well as parents themselves have to share the responsibility for the present state of affairs. Parents have to understand that mixed ability schooling has advantages for all students, whatever their ‘apparent’ abilities or capabilities.

- Students in Years 4 and 5 are still made to sit for formal examinations set by the Educational Assessment Unit in spite of what was stated in the NMC back in 1999, namely that during these years “schools will be responsible for the summative assessments”.²² School-based tests and examinations have their advantages in the sense that these can take into consideration the progress and level of attainment reached by particular groups of pupils. Schools will be in a position to include those items that are relevant to their pupils. In view of all this one has to stress the need for class-based tests and examinations when the need arises. However, a preferred alternative would be a graded paper, professionally prepared to cater for high, medium, and low achievers. In spite of this, I have met parents, heads of school and teachers who are against school-based examinations. Their objection is that standards may fall because teachers would be setting their own papers (as in fact they are already doing for the half-yearly examinations). This ‘fall of standards’ will hopefully not happen if there is adequate monitoring in place, and if the syllabuses are broken down into attainment targets. There is however another important issue that needs to be focused on. Are teachers trained enough to set examination papers? We have to say that certain schools have made gigantic steps in the right direction. They know what characterises a good examination paper. They are even aware of the marking scheme and the specification grid. Other schools, however, are producing papers that leave much to be desired.
- Apart from the issue of school-based examinations, there is constantly lurking in the background, the question of continuous (hopefully this will be formative) and teacher assessment. We cannot rely merely on tests and examinations. We have to find the right balance between the two. The question is: “How often are we going to test in a summative way”? Testing students for benchmarking purposes at the end of Year 3, Year 6, Form 2 and Form 5 will ensure standards. But the question remains: “What is going to happen in between?” The NMC says that between Year 4 and Year 6 there should be a mode of assessment that

for destreaming, in *The Teacher*, No 2, pp.6-7; Borg & Falzon (1989) *Streaming in Maltese Primary Schools*, in *Research in Education*, vol. 45, pp 1-12; Duca et al. (1999) Parental Perceptions Regarding Issues Pertinent to Primary Education in Malta, unpublished B.Ed. (Hons) dissertation; Evans & Varma (1990) *Pupils’ attainment in streamed and nonstreamed primary schools*, in Farrugia (ed.) *A New Vision for Primary Schools*; Galea (1991) The Bottom-less Buckets: An experience of Year 6 lower-streamed primary pupils, unpublished B.Ed. (Hons) dissertation; Gatt & Vassallo Agius (1988) A Study of the Knowledge and Attitudes that Primary School Children and their Parents have on Streaming, unpublished B.Ed. (Hons.) dissertation; Mercieca (1994) *Pupils’ Attainment in Streamed and Non-Streamed Primary Schools*, in Farrugia (ed.) *A New Vision for Primary Schools*; Sultana (1989) *Streaming: a sociological perspective*, in *Education*, vol.3, no.3, pp.9-14; Zammit (1999) Children at Risk of Failing in School: Maltese Professionals’ Perspectives and Perceptions, unpublished B.Ed (Hons) dissertation.

²² NMC p.78.

will combine summative and formative assessment.²³ In my opinion we have to be careful because this could still present too much stress on our children. Given the circumstances I would say that we should focus on formative (which is always continuous) rather than on summative assessment. It is formative assessment which brings about progress and which helps us to eliminate the danger of teaching for a test. This issue obviously brings us to the Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination into Form 1.

- As stated above, testing students at the end of Year 6 for benchmarking purposes is beneficial. So one of the first measures we should take is to eliminate the Year 6 'Half-Yearly' examination and keep only one examination at the end of Year 6 which nowadays is the Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination. The point remains whether we should keep this examination for selection purposes. Around 45-46% of students fail this examination and, as I have pointed out elsewhere "there is a general assumption that these students, although only eleven years old, are already a failure. Receiving an F result may prove to be extremely traumatic to a number of students".²⁴ I have also already expressed myself elsewhere in detail regarding alternatives to the present challenging situation.²⁵ I think I said it all when I pointed out that I am in favour of schools comprising students from Year 1 to Year 11 without any consideration of ability. I have also already said that this does not mean that an academically very able pupil in a particular subject will necessarily always be in the same class as far less able pupils. However, this should not lead to strict streaming either. The able and the less able have to be together at certain periods and separated at other times.

The Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination is having further repercussions:

- It is having negative effects on students attending Years 4 and 5 of primary schools. Because of the streaming policy some of these pupils are being pressured to perform beyond their abilities. They have to obtain the highest possible marks if they want to secure a place in the 'A' or at least in the 'B' classes.
- Another consideration should be The Common Entrance Examination. If this remains in place and the J.L.examination is no longer held for selection purposes, boys will be pressured even more than before. As a short term measure there should be an amalgamation of the two examinations. As a long term measure the 'new examination' should serve only for benchmarking purposes.

Parents have an important part to play in all this. One has to appreciate the fact that parents are not a homogenous group. Some of them may not even care what happens to their children. Some may have values which are in conflict with those of the school. So a number of parents themselves need to be educated and to familiarise themselves with the above issues. Parents need not fear change. They

²³ NMC p.78.

²⁴ Grech, (2003) *The junior lyceum entrance examination...and after*, in The Sunday Times, August 31.

²⁵ Grech, (2003) *Parents and assessment of children at the end of Year 6*, in The Sunday Times, June 1.

should not blindly support the status quo. They are major stakeholders and their children's future is at stake. Hence their active participation is necessary. They have to sound their views and assume part of the responsibilities in carrying out the much needed reforms.

Conclusion

In this paper I have emphasised the point that parents have a crucial role to play in the education of their children both in the school environment and at home. Parents have to help in the total development of their children, particularly through active participation and through their example. Nothing should prevent parents from helping their children develop their potential even in cases when the child has special needs. Indeed parents are a determining factor in ensuring that children develop into mature and self-satisfied individuals ready to play their part in a developing society. Parents have to give their children roots to grow and wings to fly as young Maltese citizens of the European Union.



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These roots have to be watered with an abundance of love and respect. This will help our children become emotionally healthy, happy, and successful young people. In their teenage years they will manage to find themselves, accept who they are, and become independent. Thus they will establish their identity and later develop into mature and productive members of the community.

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²⁶ Alf Rolfsen (flying birds) drawing, in The Royal Ministry Of Education, Research And Church Affairs, (1997) Core Curriculum For Primary, Secondary And Adult Education In Norway, p.24.

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