

PARENTS AND EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

**by Leonard Grech - EO Test Construction
Educational Assessment Unit**

[Article published in the Sunday Times of Malta on 19 January 2003]

Tony and Alison were playing Table Tennis and I noticed how he kept smiling at her, congratulating his daughter on her good performance, even though, at times, she was making some very silly mistakes. When this happened he laughed, telling her she could do better and showing her how she could improve.

Martha was in the kitchen mixing the ingredients to make a cake. She was then to bake it making sure it would be ready to serve with tea at 4.00 p.m. Her mother was present to support and supervise Martha.

In both the above cases, assessment is an integral part of the learning process. Assessment may be said to have become common parlance particularly because our National Minimum Curriculum highlights its educational significance. There are different forms of assessment, such as written and oral, or as is exemplified in the cases above, a more practical type of assessment. The type we adopt depends very much on what we want to achieve. Tony's objective is to teach his daughter how to play Table Tennis. As a result of his assessment of his daughter he knows that she has a strong backhand, and he therefore does his best to help her reinforce what she is already capable of doing. On the other hand Alison is very weak

in the throwing of the service, so Tony gives her practical tips on how to improve on her performance.

I think it is obvious to say that the type of assessment we adopt should measure what we really want to measure. Marija takes Jason to Ta' Qali to find out her nephew's ability to ride the bicycle. This form of assessment is far more valid than one which would, for example, require for Jason to explain verbally or in writing how to ride a bike. Although this may appear as obvious, the forms of assessment that we sometimes choose, are not always the most valid ones. You want to assess Martin's knowledge of the Hypogeum and you ask him to write two pages about it. Martin finds it very difficult to express himself in writing, but he can talk about it, and, what's more, he would enjoy it. So in this case our assessment would be more valid if we were to resort to oral rather than to the written expression.

So first of all we have to make sure that the type of assessment we adopt is intrinsically capable of presenting us with a clear picture of what we are truly seeking to know (I'm taking it for granted that in the first place we are ourselves clear in what we want to know). But there is more to it than that. Caroline undergoes a hearing test because she is suspected of having a hearing impairment. Two audiologists interpret the results in two different ways which means that the test is not reliable. Neither is a test reliable if it produces two different scores or results when given to the same person on two different occasions within an appropriate span of time.

In everyday life we assess all the time but sometimes we are more formal in our assessment. At home many parents help their children with their homework. Unconsciously they very often assess their children so as to have a picture of what they know and what they don't know. Their aim is no more and no less than to help their children improve on their present performance. This means that such an assessment feeds back into the teaching / learning process and is therefore assessment for learning or, as we often call it, formative assessment.

Lately I have had the opportunity to observe a number of parents playing chess with their children. I realised how the greater majority would make excellent teachers. One father smiled while waiting for his daughter to make her move. Melissa did, without realising she was going to surrender the castle to the horse. Still smiling, Mario her father pointed out the impending danger and what could perhaps be done to remedy the situation. This is a case where assessment becomes a tool to reinforce learning as is often the case in the classroom. As a result of assessment the teacher or the parent would know where the child stands and what should be the next step.

There are many ways and means as to how parents can help their children. It was a joy watching Joanna with her ten year old daughter Miriam. Joanna brought over last year's English Composition copybook and went through it with her daughter. Miriam soon realised that she now knows how to write the word 'environment' (she no longer forgets the 'n'), 'pollution' (double 'l') and 'nature' (ending with an 'e'). Miriam realised also that she

could now express herself much better than when she was in year 5. Comparing her present work with past performance gives much pleasure to Miriam because she realises how much progress she has made. This motivates her to work even harder. Miriam is very lucky having Joanna as a parent. After writing an English composition she puts it aside for two days. Then she reads it again with a critical mind and tries to improve it. Miriam has been trained to criticise her own work. It wasn't easy at first but after some time it almost became a game spotting spelling mistakes and replacing words and phrases to render the composition even better. It is unbelievable how Miriam can now wear the hat of a teacher (as she puts it) and mark her own work. Without much effort Joanna has trained her daughter in self-assessment, a skill which learners have to develop in the spirit of our National Minimum Curriculum.

Unfortunately not all parents are like Joanna, Toni and Mario. Some parents spend time with their children with the best intentions in mind of helping them in their homework. However, perhaps because they do not know better, they give one the impression that they are only interested in discovering how much their children know rather than striving to support them in the learning process. They behave as if they were only interested in testing for its own sake, individuals who are permanently glued to summative assessment or assessment of learning. To make matters worse, when the child does not measure up to their expectations, they shout at their sons and daughters, calling them names and slowly but steadily imprint in their children's minds that they are good for nothing. They remind me of what used to happen in schools half a century ago when slow learners were forced to wear a bib with the word 'donkey'. They had to go round and enter classrooms so that

everyone would know who were the 'hmir' of the school. To add insult to injury children were asked to shout 'ja hmar' in chorus style so that the poor individuals would feel ashamed. And they did feel shameful, to such an extent that many of them dropped out of school after years of such verbal abuse. And this abuse is still going on, not in schools but in certain homes where children are stripped of their self-confidence and of their own dignity. They are told that they are stupid and are branded as being idiots until they give up completely and at sixteen they leave school illiterate and emotionally tampered with.

If we want our children to learn we have to encourage and to praise them continuously. We have to find something good even in a presentation which is far below 'average'. Using the word 'average' is in itself rather unfair because it implies comparing the child or the student with others. If we are to compare let us compare the present work with the learner's past performance. This will help our children make a greater effort to present something better next time.
