

Ilm o Amal

A bi-annual education resource brought to you by TRC

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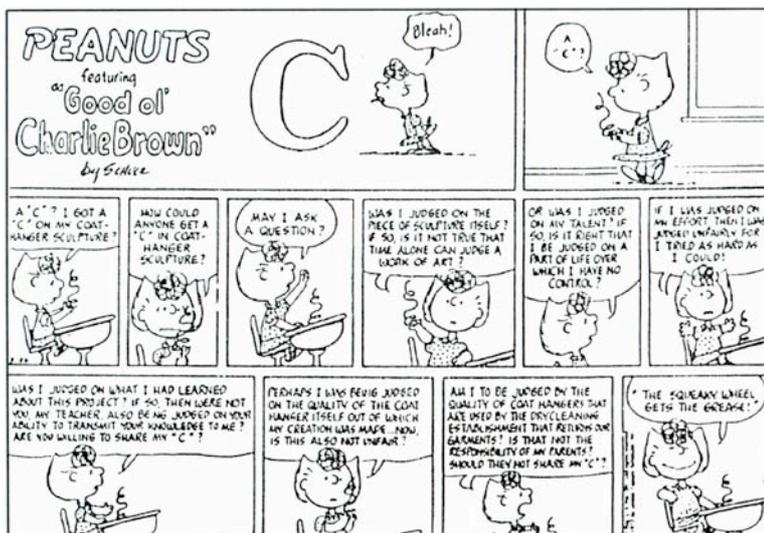
ISSUE FOCUS

The Angst of Assessment

How does grading affect creativity, the desire to learn, and self-esteem?



Teachers' Resource Centre
making a difference



Dear Readers,

Most good teachers worry about assessment. We believe that you are one, and are therefore familiar with the angst of assessment.

How do I assess this essay? What am I hoping to achieve by giving a particular grade? Am I being fair? Do As, Bs, Cs and Ds really reflect a student's achievements? Should I grade to reflect the student's mastery of the subject or should I base the assessment on how students compare with one another?

The questions are endless, which is what makes assessment such a complex issue. Often without realizing, we grade or assess a certain way, because that's how our own teachers had assessed our abilities. Also, sometimes we grade students a certain way because we are trying to manage behaviour along with academic abilities. (Do read our cover story, The Angst of Assessment, for more on what students are thinking of the tests we put them through).

If that sounds familiar, we hope the articles in this edition will help you navigate the choppy waters of grading and assessment and help you sort your thoughts on the matter, especially if you find yourself frequently disagreeing with traditional assessment techniques.

Thanks for taking part in the Ilm o Amal survey. Your feedback is very important to us, and will help us immensely in planning future issues. Some of you mentioned that you wanted to write for Ilm o Amal. We're waiting for those articles! See page 12 for information on how to contribute.

The Editor



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We'd Love To Hear From You

The Ilm o Amal team welcomes your feedback. Please send us your thoughts, ideas, and suggestions.



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Assessment is the backbone of what goes on in the classroom. It can enhance or undo the teacher's work. Nida Alavi (Faculty TRC – Institute of ECE) and Sumer Ahmed (Communication and Events Officer – TRC) asked students (from primary to postgraduates) to reflect on their experiences with assessment. Here's what they found out ...

Is result-oriented assessment giving students all the wrong incentives to learn? Is critical thinking being inhibited through poorly developed assessment methods? Those were the queries TRC sought to answer when we set out to interview students across the spectrum about their feelings on the subject.

Most assessment in schools is based on formal, written exams that incorporate close-ended questions which require specific, factual information. Over the course of formal schooling, assessments become increasingly structured, continuing to require rote learning. Many students and even teachers now feel that most forms of assessment are bereft of meaningful analysis and reflection and are invalid indicators of students' competencies. The tragedy of current assessment methods lies in their failure to give students something to think about other than the grades.

The three fateful hours

The cumulative nature of assessments requires that a large amount of information is retained and regurgitated in a single exam. "The system does not allow you to have a bad day and luck favours the student who brushed up on the selected chapters that showed up on the exam," says Adeel, a recent university graduate. Madiha, an accountant, questions, "How can you expect months and even years of learning to be tested fairly in a three-hour window?"

To be truly representative of student learning, assessments need to be carried out in a non-threatening and supportive environment. Most students' felt that teachers were responsible for adding an element of anxiety to assessments making students uneasy and apprehensive. Eight-year old Yumna observed, "Classrooms are colourless and discouraging places. Students' projects, charts and artwork which boost their confidence throughout the year are missing." Hana who has just completed her O-levels confesses "I get panic attacks before my exams and need to be dragged into the classroom."

Currying favour

Another major concern is favouritism which doesn't just rear its ugly head during grading, but also in the pre- and post assessment phases when students might need extra



What are our students thinking?

help. It is widely felt that teacher's favourites get additional information regarding upcoming tests. And if you are not the teacher's pet, a position often solely determined by exam results, you may be conveniently referred to a tuition teacher. Come grading time and teachers play favourites again – sometimes going to the extent of penalizing the not-so-favourite student for the same things the teachers' pet gets extra credit for. Subjective results such as these form the basis for other, often unrelated decisions. For example, prefects are chosen from amongst the 'good students' as letter grades are directly associated with the ability to handle responsibility.

Failures go public

We found that public humiliation is frighteningly common in instances of poor performance. Students reported cases where class strugglers were further embarrassed in front of their peers. A common practice is when teachers call out the test results she hands back. The lowest scoring students are frequently berated while this is happening (see box "Saim's Geography Nightmare"). Indeed misguided assessment methods often lead to character judgements that stay with students much after they leave school.

Many students thought that bad grades were used as an excuse to reduce exposure to other areas of learning, especially extra curriculars. So a poor result in a 'core' subjects such as Math can reduce the time allotted to Art, Music and even History.

The examiner strikes again

Another gripe is that there is often no way to measure the competence of the examiner. Maham, a BBA graduate, shared, “In a history exam we were asked to write 14 points on Quaid-e-Azam. One of my peers actually got away with writing a few of the points at the beginning and end of the essay, inserting a detailed account of a recent hockey match in between!”

Further it was widely believed that the current system discourages, if not outright prohibits questioning the teacher and her method of assessment, forcing students to seek tuition instead. But for some students tuitions resulted in exhaustion and didn't really improve their faculties. While others believed that extra paid help, enabled them to maintain an 'edge' over their peers. Many students also complained that certain teachers were unwilling to do their jobs well, because they were either giving private tuitions or running tuition centres on the side.

Life and death ...

Poor grades have led many to discourage students from making certain career choices. For example, poor results in the sciences 'obviously' meant you could never become a doctor or engineer. It's not surprising that because there

is an atmosphere of 'your life is on the line' during assessments, the situation perpetuates dishonesty and deceit. And so we hear stories of invigilators who accept bribes and of inventive methods of cheating.

Now what was I supposed to learn?

Exams frequently end up serving purposes that are nowhere close to the ideal of enhancing overall learning and knowledge base. Thus limited time tests create a vicious cycle of fear, anxiety, stress and unhealthy competition.

Generally the students interviewed held that there is an absence of predictability in test preparation, a lack of variety in assessment methods and patchy support from teachers before, during and after assessments. In the final they believe that schools just don't end up assessing understanding and application of knowledge, and instead evaluate test-taking skills such as memorization, time-management and bearing the pressure of it all.

“I was a good test taker so I always did well in assessments, but I did not learn much.”

Madiha - Survey Participant

Assessment:

The view from the other side of the fence

Students were full of suggestions on alternative forms of assessments. We are including the ones that were heard frequently:

- * More formative, ongoing assessment, where students' performance through the year (rather than just the exams) make up a larger percentage of the final grade
- * More well-rounded assessments, that test for genuine understanding of knowledge and a variety of skills rather than the students' test taking skills
- * Break down the content that is being assessed into smaller, more manageable chunks
- * Less 'formal testing'
- * 360 degree assessments which include self-assessment, peer assessment, teacher's assessment of students and students' assessment of teachers
- * Smaller teacher-student ratios so that both students and the teacher can benefit from more individualized evaluation
- * More oral assessments, which enable students to summarize information and are less tiring for the students and the teachers!
- * More Show-and-Tell & Presentations, which allow students to truly demonstrate their knowledge by sharing it with a group

- * Consider class participation a valid component of students' final grades
- * Have open-book tests, which shift the focus from merely retaining information to making it available for analysis and application
- * Solve case studies, which evaluate application of theory
- * In-Class Projects, which engage students in making choices, investigating relevant information and presenting it in an accessible, interactive format
- * More open-ended questions which make students think and analyse rather than regurgitate memorized information
- * Give students a choice of the type of assessments
- * Use creative arts forms such as drama to allow students to express what they have learned

When assessing, teachers should:

- * be fair and consistent
- * be open to awarding the grades student deserve and refrain from 'holding back' marks because they might make the student complacent or overconfident
- * focus on finding areas for praise in each student's performance on assessment
- * give students meaningful, specific feedback for improvement rather than vague comments like "Needs to improve" or "Needs to do better."
- * refrain from public announcement of results
- * provide support for students based on the assessment

Saim*, a student of Grade 5 in a private school recalled this story when we asked him about his assessment nightmare: "We had a Geography test in Grade 5, for which I couldn't study. It was my fault as I was busy with a cousin's wedding, but what finally happened to me was unfair. I was nervous before the test, especially since maps are not really my thing. When I saw the test paper I went blank and forgot even what I did know from class. I ended up inventing terms for symbols and messing up on the scale.

When the teacher returned the test, I waited with butterflies in my stomach. She handed back everyone's test and I got 3 out of 20. Then Miss said she had an example of a test paper that tells you what NOT to do. She passed around photocopies of my test paper! At first I couldn't believe it. She had removed my name from the top, but all my classmates figured out it was my paper. I felt humiliated and thought it was a nightmare. I wanted to disappear, because I felt everyone was looking at me and laughing. The teacher went through the paper, reading out my answers and being sarcastic.

I think a poor grade was punishment enough for me. I was feeling really bad about not studying in the first place. But passing my paper around like that was not on. It was below the belt.

** Name has been changed*

Saim's Geography Nightmare



"I ended up hating my teacher and now I hate Geography too!"

Assessing appropriately leads to teaching appropriately which ultimately translates into better growth and learning.

Maria S. Haque (Mrs. Haque's School) explains how ...

When we talk about classroom assessment most teachers think of tests and examinations. But student evaluation is more complex than making a test, giving it to a group of students, scoring it, and handing it back with a mark or grade. It's not something you do at the conclusion of a unit of study or at the end of a lesson. Rather, it is a continuous, ongoing process which involves a combination of procedures and methods that not only measure what students have learned, but also helps them to grow in the process.

Assessment and evaluation go hand in hand

Before we move ahead, it is important to define assessment and evaluation. While the terms assessment and evaluation are often used interchangeably they are not exactly the same. Assessment refers to data collection and gathering evidence. Evaluation implies bringing meaning to the data through interpretation, analysis and reflection and includes the kinds of instructional decisions that are made by careful examination of the evidence. In other words even though evaluation cannot take place without assessment, assessment without evaluation has no meaning. The evaluation process begins with assessment and collecting data, unless we use the data to inform and guide our teaching, we are not evaluating; we are merely gathering bits and pieces of information.

As teachers, before we can implement authentic assessment methods we need to recognize the following points.

Assessment is continuous and constantly developing

It is therefore imperative that assessment is ongoing and that it is seen more as a way to measure learning over time.

Assessment should be multimodal

Children learn in many different ways and have multiple intelligences, therefore a variety of assessment tools is necessary to provide the most accurate assessment of students' learning and progress. Dependence on one type of tool to the exclusion of others deprives students of valuable learning opportunities.

Assessment is collaborative

Students need to be actively involved in the assessment process. Evaluation should be a collaborative activity between teachers and students. Students must be able to assume an active role in the evaluation process so that they learn to assume individual responsibility as well as self monitor and self evaluate.

Assessment needs to be meaningful

It must be based on the natural activities and processes students do both in the classroom and in their everyday lives. Authentic assessment is evaluation that is expressed in discussions, debates, performances and products. The assessment activity or task should be part of the everyday teaching learning process and should be relevant to students' everyday lives outside of school.

Tools of assessment

Below are a few assessment tools which can help teachers to evaluate their students in more authentic ways. This list is far from exhaustive.

Observation is the foundation of true assessment. The majority of assessment tools used should involve observing students at work. Although teachers for many years have made mental anecdotal records to guide their next day's instruction, more and more teachers are using a written, anecdotal record-keeping system to document their students' progress. As teachers observe, they make notes of the developmental changes, skills, content learning and growth in each student. As mentioned earlier children are learning and growing every day. Through daily observation teachers can record and chart a child's learning over time, thus allowing the teacher to plan individualized and appropriate instruction for each student (*see box 'Using Observation in an ECE Classroom'*)

Student-Teacher Conferences are used regularly by teachers everywhere as an assessment tool. As students are reading or writing, teachers conduct individual conferences where students talk about what they do well and where they struggle. As teachers listen they make notes about students' strengths and weaknesses within that area. Conferences are a powerful tool because they encourage children to self evaluate and provide insightful information about the student which teachers may not get through other forms of assessment.

Journals/Response logs are places where students can respond in writing and demonstrate understanding about something they have read, learned about or discussed. The kinds of responses students make in their journals can either be a free response or specific communication or thinking objectives. Usually these kinds of journals encourage students to think critically and reflectively. For example, after students have completed a lesson, the teacher might assess learning by asking students to spend five minutes writing a journal entry about one new thing they learned about that topic. These types of questions allow teachers to not only assess whether students have understood the required information, but also whether they can synthesize what they have learned, apply it to the real world and express it in their own words.

Portfolios are a collection of students' work and are a wonderful way to evaluate a student's growth in any subject. Just as an artist maintains a portfolio of her best work, a student does the same. These pieces usually best reflect the student's learning and growth over time. With portfolio assessment, evaluation is not based on a single product produced at one point in time. Students are usually involved in selecting the portfolio pieces, thus encouraging them to take a more active role in the self evaluation and assessment process and with the help of the teacher set future learning goals. Portfolios allow the educator to evaluate not only the student's product, but also the process they went through. *(For more on portfolio and self assessment read 'Is Writing Too Difficult to Teach?' in this issue)*

Projects/displays/performances are all ways in which students can demonstrate knowledge or skills. When teachers employ such methods of assessments they allow children to develop real world skills such as research, the use of technology, cooperative learning, leadership, decision-making, public speaking and presentation skills. By allowing children to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways, teachers are encouraging the growth and development of the whole child. *(For more on assessing projects read 'How to assess projects' in this issue)*

Paper and pencil tests are probably the most common method of assessing student learning. However they are not always the best. The biggest drawback is that tests give a limited view of what students can do. They do not take into account students' strengths and skills beyond academics. My personal belief is that tests and examinations for young children are inappropriate and may even have negative effects. To many teachers still, testing is equivalent to learning. For me learning comes when there is good teaching. When appropriate instructional and assessment methods are used and an atmosphere of questioning and thinking is in place, learning will occur. If one were to assess students in a classroom where "good teaching" is taking place, students should not need any special preparation to do well.

How assessment affects teaching

Understanding the significance of assessment methods and how it affects teaching is crucial. Consider the two classroom scenarios below. A teacher who only uses tests as a primary means of assessing students will end up indirectly teaching her students that only learning of academic content is important. These children will likely learn how to take tests by memorizing masses of information. This kind of classroom will probably be one where the teacher is the main decision maker determining what content will be learned and how students will be assessed. Students quickly learn that there is only one right

answer and little value is placed on their thinking. On the other hand, a teacher who employs a variety of assessment tools sends the message that there are other skills and intelligences that are equally or more important than content learning. Her classroom is more likely to be student centered where children are making choices, directing their own learning, self evaluating and are committed to further learning.

In other words, assessment and evaluation methods determine the kind of teaching and learning that goes on in the classroom. When appropriate assessment methods are in place, usually appropriate teaching follows. This ultimately translates into better growth and learning for all students.

Using Observation in an ECE Classroom

Observation in an Early Childhood Classroom is an important tool for teachers who are eager to provide a developmentally appropriate environment for young children.

Teachers objectively observe and make anecdotal notes about each child on a frequent basis. Over a period of time the teacher collects information about the child's development and growth in different domains and develops a Child Observation Record (COR) which contains objective evidence of the child's learning, growth and developmental pattern. This information helps teachers to understand the different needs and abilities of each child as well as directing their teaching.



For instance, there is the teacher who observes several children in her class showing an interest in insects during outdoor time. The next day she brings in several books about insects, which she reads, and then takes the children on a nature hunt where they look closely at a variety of insects. This is an example of a teacher using her initial observation to inform and guide her teaching. Observation is a powerful tool which helps in planning activities, improving the curriculum, understanding children and also helps to cater to the needs of individual children.
- Ishrat Kamal (Mrs. Haque's Nursery School)

For more on assessment in an ECE setting read 'Assessing Young Children Appropriately' in this issue.

Assessment should be a comprehensive system that increases the chances of all children becoming successful learners beyond the early years, says Lila Ram (TRC).

From pre-primary right up to higher education assessment plays a fundamental role in the learning process. When it comes to the pre-primary level, assessment becomes more critical and requires a very realistic and rational approach. Research has shown that developmentally inappropriate assessment may adversely affect the development of young children. Recognising the importance of assessment of young children, this article will focus on developmentally appropriate assessment and reflect upon its related aspects and issues.

Beyond Measuring Performance

It is a widespread belief that assessment is carried out to measure the performance of young learners and the progress they make. On the surface this seems fine and defines 'assessment' concisely. However, there are layers to the issue. The purpose of assessment doesn't just stop at measuring the child's learning. The important thing is to figure out how assessment practices can best facilitate the learning and development of young children. So assessment should focus on children's potential to learn with support, and not only on their ability to perform alone. Thus assessment is not done just to obtain results of children's performance and categorise them in different grades or labels. Assessment is multipurpose; and can:

- * determine progress on educational attainments and developmental achievements
- * diagnose problems in learning and teaching
- * identify children who are at-risk and in need of specialised intervention
- * help in instruction and curriculum decisions
- * make placement or promotion decisions
- * assist a child with assessing his or her own progress

No single type of assessment can serve all of these purposes, so it is important to identify the purpose of the assessment to determine what would be appropriate.

Developmentally Appropriate Assessment: Getting the Right Information

'Developmental Assessment' is the ongoing process of observing a child's current competencies. This includes knowledge, skills, dispositions (temperament/usual moods) and attitudes. This information is used to help the child develop further in terms of care-giving (within and outside family) and learning environments. We will focus on child assessment in the context of learning environments.

Developmentally appropriate assessment (DAA) is part of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP). ECE experts define DAP as those practices which are both age appropriate and individually appropriate for each child. Similarly, DAA has to revolve around these two dimensions: age appropriateness and individual appropriateness.

For age appropriateness, early childhood learning environments and experiences have to be consistent with knowledge of how young children of a particular age develop naturally. They become individually appropriate when they are responsive to the unique pattern and timing of growth of each child in an ECE setting. Individual appropriateness also demands that ECE learning environments must respond to the individual personality, the learning style, and the family background of each child.

A developmentally appropriate system integrates assessment into its curriculum. Matching the assessment system to the curriculum lies at the core of DAP.

How developmental appropriateness is applied to assessment

"In real life, children are most themselves when they are in familiar environments with adults and children whom they know and trust, engaged in tasks that allow them to use the modalities with which they are most comfortable. In such situations they will most likely demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that truly represent their attainments. When we introduce strange people, unfamiliar surroundings, demands for responses to atypical tasks, and constrictions on their usual behaviours, we will likely elicit behaviours that are neither valid nor reliable samples of the children's development and learning."

(Hills, 1993, p. 22)



Developmentally appropriate assessment moves away from dependence on standardised achievement tests of basic skills. Many early childhood experts are not in favour of general norms or standards against which individual learning and development could be measured because these standards would not be appropriately sensitive to gender, cultural, and socioeconomic differences. These experts would rather rely on informal, functional assessment measures than formal, standardized tests. As a general rule, ECE theorists as well as practitioners agree that informal methods should be used to assess young children. However, in certain situations, there is an exception to this stance. Many experts believe that formal instruments are useful to screen children for disabilities and developmental delays and to conduct diagnostic evaluations.

Having said this, the key features of developmentally appropriate assessment can be summarised in the light of the guidelines for DAP stated by National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Assessment of young children should be:

- * engaged with all learning and developmental domains
- * integrated with the curriculum
- * primarily dependent on children's everyday activities
- * beneficial to children, teachers and parents
- * based on ongoing teacher observation
- * based on a variety of methods and tools
- * sensitive to individual differences
- * mindful of children's competencies

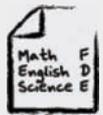
No single type of assessment can serve all of these purposes, so it is important to identify the purpose of the assessment to determine what would be appropriate.

Methods and Tools of Assessment

Generally, we assess young children by observing, asking, talking, testing and collecting samples of their work. For each method different instruments or tools are used. These include portfolios, teacher checklists, teacher anecdotal records, tests, parent evaluations, developmental screening, standardised tests and work sheets. It is important to remember that no assessment method or instrument is error-free. The errors made by informal or anecdotal records are different from those made by teachers' checklists of behavioural items. If you are aware of the potential errors of each assessment method, you can help reduce errors in interpretation as well as increase chances of being responsive to a child's learning needs.

The quality of an assessment system depends on how various factors fit together as well as its overall level of support. Even the best assessment instrument may not bring the required results if it is not linked to the curriculum, complemented by other tools and supported through communication with parents. Assessment is a comprehensive system that is integrated into the larger framework of an ECE setting, rather than a discrete set of tools. Furthermore, an effective assessment system in ECE will increase chances that all children can become successful learners beyond the early years.

Report cards with letter grades or achievement scores are not appropriate for young children, especially at the pre-primary and early primary levels.



Making it Happen

Teachers or ECE professionals play a major role in child assessment. Their training and experience in assessment make them effective assessors provided their conceptual understanding of appropriate assessment is clear and they own the philosophy of DAA.

ECE professionals should involve not only the children, but also their parents in assessment. At first it may seem that self-assessment and peer assessment in pre-primary grades are over ambitious ideas, but they are actually quite practical as well as productive. Young children can be encouraged to assess their work according to specific criteria such as the clarity, interest level, or qualities of the work. Children can also be consulted on their progress. For example, each child can be asked to discuss areas where she thinks she is progressing well and also identify where she needs to concentrate. Most children will be quite realistic and sensible once they are familiar with such tasks. A trained and supportive teacher is all that is required to make this happen.

Report Cards Don't Work

For a variety of reasons, report cards with letter grades or achievement scores are not appropriate for young children, especially those in pre-primary and early primary.

Research does not provide any significant evidence which shows that grades on report cards contribute positively to improve young children's learning. Therefore, ECE teachers need to recognise the limitations of grades on report cards.

Important Questions for Checking Indicators of Effective Assessments

- Do the assessment practices follow ethical principles?
- Are the assessments appropriate for ages and other characteristics of children being assessed?
- Is the assessment evidence gathered from realistic settings and situations that reflect children's actual performance?
- Are the assessment instruments in line with the professional criteria for quality?
- Is what is being assessed, developmentally and educationally significant?
- Are teachers and families well-informed about assessment?
- Do the assessments use multiple sources of evidence gathered over time?
- Are the assessment instruments used for their intended purposes?
- Is the assessment evidence used to understand and improve learning?

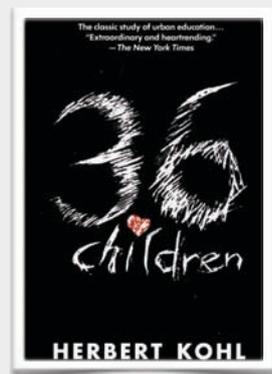
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TRC Recommends "36 Children" by Herbert Kohl

Herbert Kohl is an educator best known for his advocacy of progressive alternative education. He is an acclaimed author and has written over thirty books on education.

36 Children is the remarkable true account of an innovative and open-minded young teacher's year with a Harlem sixth-grade class. Herbert Kohl's shocking revelations and insightful solutions to the problems of an urban school shook the foundations of education. He was warned that his students were unmanageable and unteachable, and that at best, he could hope to prevent them from hurting each other. This heartwrenching book is not only an indictment of the defeatist assumptions perpetuated by the education establishment, but a testament to the locked-in abilities of each child that are waiting to be tapped.



'No it isn't,' says Parveen Abbass (Mrs. Haque's Junior School) as she recounts how she took on the challenge of getting her class to write, using self-assessment as part of the portfolio method.

When I was a student, writing was one of those unavoidable tasks where I was given an obscure, generic topic and required to come up with an essay in an hour. Spellings and handwriting were my primary concerns as my teacher constantly emphasized their importance. My goal was simple: avoid those dreaded (yet inevitable) 'red marks' and get good grades. As soon as I received my marked piece, adorned with the red pen, I'd peek at it hesitantly and then quickly put it away. Whatever well-intentioned corrections my teachers had made, didn't matter. All I saw was the red and little else. Of course, I would never read it again. Why should I? I had received my mark... that was it... end of story. In the next English class, the horrid 'process' would start again.

This was how I defined writing throughout my school years and that is why, during that time I never wrote a story I didn't have to. Even today, many schools employ similar methods of 'teaching' writing. And so we raise yet another generation of young people who write only for their teachers, rather than for themselves.

Nothing seemed to work

Years later as a teacher, I too faced the challenge of improving and assessing my students' work. When I first started teaching I thought that if I pointed out their weak areas, students would learn how to make changes in their work and write better. But what I found was that students just seemed to repeat the same mistakes. I began to ask myself why they weren't able to take my suggestions and apply them to their future writing pieces. How many times would I have to repeat myself? Is writing simply harder to teach? Is it just more difficult for children to understand? All the confusion and doubts made teaching students to write a daunting and discouraging task. It seemed that all my efforts resulted in very little visible improvement.

This prompted me to do some research on the writing process. I came across reading material which helped me realized that I had eliminated a vital component from our writing process which was trusting our students' own judgment and involving them in the process of self-assessment. I was so keen on projecting my idea of what their piece could or should be that I excluded them from its development. Telling them what changes to make robbed them of a chance to reflect on their own work, assess it for themselves and discover how to improve not only a particular piece of writing, but also themselves as writers. With this realization began a remarkable journey

into the world of writing where children were in control of what they wrote.

Introducing ... the portfolio!

The first step was to introduce the students to portfolios. A portfolio is a self-selected collection of a student's work that exhibits their progress, achievement, learning and effort over time. To start the process students were asked to work on loose sheets of paper, rather than in their exercise books. This made their writing more fluid and easier to revise. They were then given the freedom to decide what they wanted to write. Discussions were held about where writers get ideas from and about choosing topics close to the heart. Students wrote many drafts and only stopped when they thought they had a piece that had potential and which they wanted to work on further. Students took the selected piece through several stages of the writing process i.e. peer/teacher conferences, revision, editing and publishing. After publishing and including their piece in their portfolio, students fill out the self-reflection form. Each entry in the portfolio includes a student self-assessment reflection that was based on a specific criteria. It is the self-reflection and assessment that is at the heart and soul of the portfolio process. Through self-reflection students get to know themselves better as writers and set future learning goals for themselves.

As an assessment tool, the portfolio provides much more information about the student as a writer than would any essay examination. The portfolio allows students, parents and teachers to compare learning over various points of time in a year or from one year to the next. Each time students look through their portfolios over a 6 – 8 week period, they become more aware of their own learning and progress. Students begin to value their learning more than their finished work or their final product. They begin to understand how to learn.

Students need the confidence and successful experiences of evaluating their own learning to be most successful in life. Portfolios allow children to gain confidence and to see how they would write in the real world where, after all, they would have more than an hour to write their stories. They feel like authors and so write like them. As a teacher it feels wonderful to be part of a classroom where children are talking, working, laughing and enjoying themselves and all the while absorbing and listening and learning to become observant readers and accomplished writers. And now, when children want an extra half an hour for language, I smile and say... only if you behave yourselves!



A valid and reliable method of assessment would be a combination of different systems designed to improve a student's performance and development, says Rubina Naqvi (TRC).

The word “assessment” is from the Latin word *assidere*, meaning ‘to sit beside’. Sitting beside children suggests a close relationship and a sharing of experience. Educational assessment includes all the processes and products which describe the nature and extent of children's learning and its relationship with the environments which are designed to facilitate learning.

The Art of Assessment

Assessing children's learning is an art, not a science. It lies at the heart of learning, and is all about finding out what the learner knows, understands or can do. In recent years, the responsibility for assessment has shifted slowly from the examination boards to the schools. It is expected to be more diagnostic and formative in purpose than it was before.



“The unexamined life is not worth living”
Socrates - Greek philosopher in Athens (469 BC - 399 BC)

Assessment is a process, not an event. It is a process where the assessor is a human being. So chances are that subjectivity can come in the way, where emotions may influence judgement and thus the process gets affected. It is therefore important for the teacher to be absolutely clear about why we are assessing and then to find out the most appropriate techniques or styles to fulfill that purpose. In the words of Sutton (1992) “Assessment, therefore, is a creative process that can be as varied and interesting as teaching and learning.”

It is understood that different values and beliefs underpin education. My belief has developed from my own teaching experience that students can do well and that my

job as a teacher is to help. As I do not believe that ability is fixed and that only a fixed number of students can succeed, I expect students to grow, change and develop. Teachers begin the year to help and develop children, but soon start to focus on completing the syllabus and to control teaching. They tend to teach to the test. The assessment that is meant to be helpful as a diagnostic tool of learning, ends up as a means to control learning. Students are human beings, not just brains to be trained. Teachers need to develop them as young, responsible citizens. The assessment of students affects their life chances. Consequently, the assessment must be as accurate and fair as possible.

A new school of psychology came up in 1950, around people like Carl Rogers, who believed human beings should not be measured, but should be understood in the context in which they operate.

How performance is measured

1. Norm-referenced assessment
2. Criterion-referenced assessment
3. Ipsative/self-referenced assessment

In light of extensive research in the field of assessments, performance today is understood to be measured in three different categories:

Norm-referenced assessment reflects the deterministic model of intelligence and is designed to enable comparative judgments, child against child, children against children, children against the norm. It is not designed to generate specific information about what an individual child knows, understands and can do, irrespective of other children. In norm-referenced assessment, all the students' scores are put into a distribution table or graph and a certain percentage is assigned to each grade, or a cut-off point is chosen for passing, allowing a certain percentage to pass and the rest to fail. (e.g. only 10% of the students being assessed will be awarded A, 20% grade B and so on.) Clearly the grade a student gets, or whether she or he passes or fails, depends partly on the performance of the other students.

A norm is a socially accepted standard or system against which a child is measured in comparison to others. The learner's performance is judged in relationship to others' performance. This kind of assessment is measurable, but valid only on a large random sample. The pass rate stays constant according to policy decisions. It is based on the belief that intelligence is normally distributed in a population and that most children are average.

The emphasis is on the results of the tests and exam results. Such assessments are required for selection and recruitment.

But there is a danger of such assessments being misused in education. Each student has his own pace of progress. In a small selected number of students in a classroom, this does not yield accurate results as most of the children could be highly intelligent.

Criterion-reference assessment reflects the developmental model and is designed to reflect whether or not a student can do a specific task or a range of tasks, rather than to measure how much better or worse his or her performance is in relation to that of other students. Thus levels or criteria of performance are laid out about what a child should know and the students are marked or graded according to whether they reach the level or attain the criteria. Criterion-referenced assessment measures the child's performance against predetermined expectations, which are usually written down and built into the assessment process and each child's progress is ticked against them. These criteria could be agreed between the teachers and shared with the children. In this system there is no limit to how many students reach any level.

In this kind of assessment, the standard stays constant. Criteria are set for success and they remain important. The pass rate varies and everyone can pass. Here standards depend on the criteria being met. They are not about numbers – they are about reaching set criteria. Most exams now include this system.

Ipsative / self-referenced assessment is the assessment process by which a child's performance is measured against the same child's previous performance. It is used to gauge individual progress over time. Such a process is comfortably child-centred, acceptable even to those who find any comparative judgement objectionable. It is vitally important for parents too, who, more than anyone else, understand the unique complexity of their own children, and the dangers of judging them too simplistically in relation to others

How to achieve balance

The best balance for valid and reliable assessment is a combination of the different systems, so that the assessment would not only prove but also improve a student's performance and development over a period of time. There is a need to draw out the best of all three approaches. More evidence should be sought to support the percentage gained in the annual examination. Promotion to the next level of learning should be based on this collective record.

The best desired results can be obtained when the formative or diagnostic assessment, recorded over a period of time, could be carried out side by side with summative or evaluative assessment, as a snapshot or tests and exams. This would form the true picture of what quality of learning has taken place and what needs to be done for further development of the individual child.

In the words of David Satterly, "Those who found learning to be a predominantly enjoyable experience have often assumed the value of school learning in its own right. Yet for what is probably the majority of pupils, and for a variety of reasons, learning is not easy and some form of assessment seems to be indispensable in the motivation of many learners especially those at secondary school."

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Write for Ilm o Amal!

Many of you who responded to the Ilm o Amal survey have expressed a desire to write for us. We welcome all suitable contributions and especially like theme-based articles that contain classroom activities (preferably aimed at different levels), "how I did it" stories, tips and/ hints, instructions, motivational articles and others that will help our audience (mainly teachers) gain knowledge and insights. For our next issue we are looking for articles on 'Teaching as a Career' and look forward to receiving articles giving a local perspective on the topic. But if you are keen to write about something else, please do so.



Email us at ilmoamal@trconline.org and we will send you our Guidelines for Article Submission to help you get started. Email your article at the same address or send it via snail mail to:

Teachers' Resource Centre, C-121, 2nd Floor
Ehtesham Centre, DHA Phase 1
Karachi-75500, Pakistan

Disclaimer: I am going to ramble a bit in this article, because the issue of grading and testing links to competition and values, self esteem and violence and life itself, the list is endless ... so bear with me please. I hope that the rambling touches you in some little way. If it does, please e-mail me at ilmoamal@trconline.org and we'll move the discussion forward through email dialogue, the Discussion Forum on Interact and at The TRC Debates slated for December 2008. Mahenaz Mahmud (TRC)

When I was growing up, school life wasn't quite so competitive and even if it was, I was blissfully unaware. Grades weren't particularly important. There were other important aspects to life such as, friendship, fiction and fantasy; enjoying the view outside my classroom window; sharing my sandwiches with a friend; thinking about when I would finally be able to tell the difference between the identical twins in the other section of my class. You're right, I wasn't usually paying attention in class. I'm sure you can guess why.

Competition creeps in

So how did schools come to be so competitive? How did it come to be that so many students focus on getting the highest grade, coming first in class, beating everyone else to become class captain - and really not caring how they get there or who gets hurt along the way?

Dr. Tom Verhoeff (Faculty of Mathematics and Computing Science, TUE, Netherlands, The Role of Competition in Education, November 1997) tells us that it was Marcus Verrius Flaccus, a Roman teacher famous in the late 1st century BC, who introduced the principle of competition among his students as a pedagogical aid. He awarded attractive books as prizes. The Italian scholar Battista Guarino (1434-1513) writes in his account of proper educational techniques, *De ordine docendi et studendi*, that teachers should refrain from physically punishing pupils, and that students are stimulated best by competition.

I wish others hadn't built on the work of Marcus Verrius Flaccus and Alfred Binet who introduced IQs tests.

Competition is one of my pet peeves! I believe that competition is pervasive and so deeply entrenched in our collective consciousness that it negates us as human beings. Are we too hard wired to help and support each other? Is it okay to trample over others and compete for survival? It's an endless debate and there are champions for each view.

The best, the most, the biggest

Competing for 'survival', to be "the best", whatever that might mean, to live up to the proverbial Joneses, has made our brains so numb that we are conned into living by

arbitrary standards set by greedy corporations who want us to excel according to their skewed definitions, to become cooler, more popular, more attractive, by using their products, and by constantly buying more and more ... Our sense of self-worth is determined by what we wear, what we drink, and which phone we use - all omnipresent little symbols of success. I refuse to be a logo! But, that's a story for another day and another issue of *Ilm o Amal*.

Revisiting the love for learning

Coming back to the issue of assessment, these symbols of success include grades. We often hear comments like "did you hear about that student who got 9 As in her O' level exams?" or "she is a B+ or an F." As teachers, do we want to actively encourage competitiveness in our students to pass their exams, often through rote memorization, or do we want them to develop a lifelong love for learning?

In many ways, we, the adults are responsible for this mess. Do these shrill words sound familiar? "Pay attention! This will come in your test" or "If you don't listen, I'll cut your marks!"

If we, as teachers were being graded or tested for supporting children in their learning, surely we should be straight F teachers. If threats are the only way we can "motivate" our students to learn, let alone enjoy learning, then we should resign and earn our living elsewhere.

What others are saying

Peter Senge, the management guru, says in his article 'On Competition', "We have become over-dependent on competition, to the extent that it is our only model for change and learning. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with competition. It can be great fun. It can promote invention and daring. The problem is that we have lost the balance between competition and cooperation precisely at a time when we most need to work together."



In his article 'Why Good Teachers Aren't Thinking About the Global Economy', Alfie Kohn says: "Here are some phrases that might reassure us if they were used to defend a particular education policy:



- excitement about learning
- deeper thinking about questions that matter
- promoting social and moral development
- democratic society

Necessary Evil?

When I first stumbled upon the work of Alfie Kohn, quite by accident, in a bookstore in Cambridge in 1995, I thought, "Ah! This guy really makes sense." You can look him up here: <http://www.alfiekohn.org/bio.htm> and also read his article, *From Degrading to De-Grading* on page 15.

Education theorists do not agree on whether competitive desires should be encouraged or constrained. One theory claims that competition is part of every culture and since education should transmit culture, it is necessary to incorporate competition into education to help children get used to it in later life. Another theory views competition as an evil element in culture that should be curtailed.

Do you **really** think higher scores translate into better learning? And you know what? I believe, and some of you will agree, that taking an exam and getting good marks is a skill that can be learned, which is why there are scores of successful tuition centres that vow to deliver top grades. Why can't schools be places of learning where children determine what they want to learn, without the fear of grades? Here's a scenario, which I think is completely workable: Everyone spends time learning together and enjoying the time spent in school. We **can** make learning to read, write and compute enjoyable, you know. When students get to Class 8, we say, okay, now we will learn how to take an exam. We then spend the next two years on curriculum content determined by the exam board and exam writing skills and that's that! The students will move on to college and beyond, having developed a love for learning, knowing a lot more than they do now, and will have the additional skillset needed for taking and passing exams.

The Star Wars

For the last 17 years, I've been working with teachers at TRC and before that, from 1981 to 1991, with young children at the Kindergarten section of the Karachi Grammar School. In all my experience, be it children or adults, competing for grades has never been a "motivator" for learning. I really started learning AFTER I left university. Learning to pass an exam and achieve good grades just did not inspire me to learn. And I know I'm not alone.

At the KGS Kindergarten, we did not test or give children exams; we believed in on-going assessment. Those little shiny sticky stars were, however, given as a means of providing feedback on how a child was doing. What happened? Children, and actually their parents, got hooked on the stars. "Yasmeen got a star yesterday, so why didn't my child get one?" "Nida is on level 3 book 4, why is my child still on level 1?" Why indeed? Your child

still needs a little more time to unravel the intricacies of symbols and letters and words, and is great at singing which Nida isn't ... so can we please focus on what children **can** do, rather than what they currently can't?

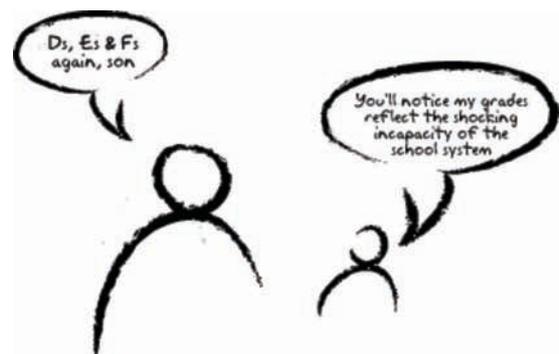
Weary of this 'grading by stars', I decided that I would not give any to my 5 years olds. Instead, I talked to the 29 children in my class, individually, about their work and how it could be improved. We talked about why they felt the need for a little piece of shiny paper to validate their work and self-worth ... they could decide for themselves whether they thought they had done their best or how they might want to change or add to what they'd done and they could talk to me about it too. It worked like magic and at the end of the year each and everyone got a little shiny star, just for fun! Of course, I met with all the parents about this approach to put them at ease.

Breaking the Grade

I have worked with umpteen teachers at TRC, from both private, and public schools. Almost all of them have been extremely interested learners, excited by relevant and meaningful learning content with no tests, grades or stars anywhere on the horizon. They were interested in learning about teaching and have all changed the way they interact with their students.

Moving on to a phase when I just couldn't avoid grades was in the planning phase of our ECE-Certificate Programme ... I was faced with a huge challenge! How should we deal with grading? Well, to start with, I banished the letter grades! The final and mid-term evaluations have made students/teachers nervous to the point of not knowing what to do, even though I give them open-book tests ... residual anxiety and fear from school days and years of negative experience, I guess.

As a mother, I never encouraged my daughter to compete with anyone other than herself. Just raise the bar for yourself and keep growing. During exam time in school, I used to send her off to play ... she keeps reminding me that she wasn't really studying anyway ;-). Today, she is successful by any standards and continues to be a responsible individual and global citizen.



Researchers have found three consistent effects of using and emphasizing the importance of letter or number grades, says *Alfie Kohn* in *High School Magazine* (March 1999).

1. Grades tend to reduce students' interest in the learning itself

One of the most well-researched findings in the field of motivational psychology is that the more people are rewarded for doing something, the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward (*Kohn, 1993*). Thus, it shouldn't be surprising that when students are told they'll need to know something for a test – or, more generally, that something they're about to do will count for a grade – they are likely to come to view that task (or book or idea) as a chore.

2. Grades tend to reduce students' preference for challenging tasks

Students of all ages who have been led to concentrate on getting a good grade are likely to pick the easiest possible assignment if given a choice (*Harter, 1978; Harter and Guzman, 1986; Kage, 1991; Milton et al., 1986*). The more pressure to get an A, the less inclination to truly challenge oneself. Thus, students who cut corners may not be lazy so much as rational; they are adapting to an environment where good grades, not intellectual exploration, are what count.

3. Grades tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking

Given that students may lose interest in what they're learning as a result of grades, it makes sense that they're also apt to think less deeply. One series of studies, for example, found that students given numerical grades were significantly less creative than those who received qualitative feedback but no grades. The more the task required creative thinking, in fact, the worse the performance of students who knew they were going to be graded. Providing students with comments in addition to a grade didn't help: the highest achievement occurred only when comments were given instead of numerical scores (*Butler, 1987; Butler, 1988; Butler and Nisan, 1986*).

In another experiment, students told they would be graded on how well they learned a social studies lesson had more trouble understanding the main point of the text than did students who were told that no grades would be involved. Even on a measure of rote recall, the graded group remembered fewer facts a week later (*Grolnick and Ryan, 1987*). A brand new study discovered that students who tended to think about current events in terms of what they would need to know for a grade were less knowledgeable than their peers, even after taking other variables into account (*Anderman and Johnston, 1998*).

5 Reasons to Just Say No to Grades

1. Grades aren't valid, reliable, or objective

A “B” in English says nothing about what a student can do, what she understands, where she needs help. Moreover, the basis for that grade is as subjective as the result is uninformative. A teacher can meticulously record scores for one test or assignment after another, eventually calculating averages down to a hundredth of a percentage point, but that doesn't change the arbitrariness of each of these individual marks. Even the score on a math test is largely a reflection of how the test was written: what skills the teacher decided to assess, what kinds of questions happened to be left out, and how many points each section was “worth.”

Moreover, research has long been available to confirm what all of us know: any given assignment may well be given two different grades by two equally qualified teachers. It may even be given two different grades by a single teacher who reads it at two different times (*for example, see some of the early research reviewed in Kirschenbaum et al., 1971*). In short, what grades offer is spurious precision – a subjective rating masquerading as an objective evaluation.

2. Grades distort the curriculum

A school's use of letter or number grades may encourage what I like to call a “bunch o' facts” approach to instruction because that sort of learning is easier to score. The tail of assessment thus comes to wag the educational dog.

3. Grades waste a lot of time

Add up all the hours that teachers spend fussing with their grade books. Then factor in all the (mostly unpleasant) conversations they have with students and their parents about grades. It's tempting to just roll our eyes when confronted with whining or wheedling, but the real problem rests with the practice of grading itself.

4. Grades encourage cheating

Again, we can continue to blame and punish all the students who cheat -- or we can look for the structural reasons this keeps happening. Researchers have found that the more students are led to focus on getting good grades, the more likely they are to cheat, even if they themselves regard cheating as wrong (*Anderman et al., 1998; Milton et al., 1986*).

5. Grades spoil students' relationships with each other.

The quality of students' thinking has been shown to depend partly on the extent to which they are permitted to learn cooperatively (Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Kohn, 1992). Thus, the ill feelings, suspicion, and resentment generated by grades aren't just disagreeable in their own right; they interfere with learning.

The most destructive form of grading by far is that which is done "on a curve," such that the number of top grades is artificially limited: no matter how well all the students do, not all of them can get an A. Apart from the intrinsic unfairness of this arrangement, its practical effect is to teach students that others are potential obstacles to their

own success. The kind of collaboration that can help all students to learn more effectively doesn't stand a chance in such an environment.

Sadly, even teachers who don't explicitly grade on a curve may assume, perhaps unconsciously, that the final grades "ought to" come out looking more or less this way: a few very good grades, a few very bad grades, and the majority somewhere in the middle. But as one group of researchers pointed out, "It is not a symbol of rigor to have grades fall into a 'normal' distribution; rather, it is a symbol of failure -- failure to teach well, failure to test well, and failure to have any influence at all on the intellectual lives of students" (*Milton et al., 1986, p. 225*).

Do we hear you say, "And what about the administration and the parents"?

Well, this is what Alfie Kohn says in the same article:

Administrators should be prepared to respond to parental concerns, some of them completely reasonable, about the prospect of edging away from grades. "Don't you value excellence?" You bet – and here's the evidence that traditional grading undermines excellence. "Are you just trying to spare the self-esteem of students who do poorly?" We are concerned that grades may be making things worse for such students, yes, but the problem isn't just that some kids won't get A's and will have their feelings hurt. The real problem is that almost all kids (including yours) will come to focus on grades and, as a result, their learning will be hurt.

If parents worry that grades are the only window they have into the school, we need to assure them that alternative assessments provide a far better view. But if parents don't seem to care about getting the most useful information or helping their children become more excited learners – if they demand grades for the purpose of documenting how much better their kids are than everyone else's, then we need to engage them in a discussion about whether this is a legitimate goal, and whether schools exist for the purpose of competitive credentialing or for the purpose of helping everyone to learn (*Kohn, 1998; Labaree, 1997*).

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TRC Recommends "No Contest: The Case Against Competition" by Alfie Kohn

Alfie Kohn writes and speaks widely on human behavior, education, and parenting. The author of eleven books and scores of articles, he lectures at education conferences and universities as well as to parent groups and corporations. Alfie Kohn's criticisms of competition and rewards have been widely discussed and debated, and he has been described in Time magazine as "perhaps the country's most outspoken critic of education's fixation on grades and test scores."

No Contest, which has been stirring up controversy since its publication in 1986, stands as the definitive critique of competition. Drawing from hundreds of studies, Alfie Kohn eloquently argues that our struggle to defeat each other - at work, at school, at play, and at home - turns all of us into losers. Contrary to the myths with which we have been raised, Kohn shows that competition is not an inevitable part of "human nature." It does not motivate us to do our best (in fact, the reason our workplaces and schools are in trouble is that they value competitiveness instead of excellence). Rather than building character, competition sabotages self-esteem and ruins relationships. It even warps recreation by turning the playing field into a battlefield.

