Measuring student progress in school:
A role for teacher judgement

Thesis submitted by

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September 2010

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the School of Education

James Cook University

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Contribution of others

Financial Support

Financial support was gratefully received from the James Cook University School of Education, through Professor Trevor Bond, for the initial analysis of the data.

A travel grant was provided by the School of Education to attend the 2005 Pacific Rim Objective Measurement Symposium in Kuala Lumpur to present a paper.

Supervision

Professor Trevor Bond was principal supervisor.

Dr Helen Boon was second supervisor.

Editorial Support

Professor Bond and Dr Boon provided editorial advice as part of their supervision duties.

Access to data

The Department of Education and Children's Services, South Australia agreed to the release of data for a re-analysis (see Appendix 1).

Statistical Support

Professor Bond provided detailed advice on the use of the Rasch model.

Statement on sources

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education.

Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

14/12/2010

Signature Date

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful for the encouragement and support provided by my partner Margie Darcy over what turned out to be a longer period than expected. Without her positive approach in the face of a diminished social, family and work life, this document would not exist. She very generously accepted the limitations imposed by a student life.

I am appreciative of the support from Alan Green, of the Department of Education and Children's Services, in clearing the way for the release of data. The data are unique in South Australian education, and while parts were widely reported in the years of their creation, the opportunity to explore them for other messages has been rewarding and I believe tells us that the professional role of teachers as observers of learning is under-utilised. The assistance of Gary O'Neill in the creation of the data files is greatly appreciated.

The data would not exist in the form analysed without the conceptual and software development of Ian Probyn who was able to create an intuitively simple data collection process. He has also provided a sympathetic ear to the ongoing summary of what *his* data seem to say. The writing project would not have commenced without personal references from John Ainley and Richard Jenkin, nor without an initial encouragement possibly now long forgotten, from Professor John Keeves.

Articulating the concepts in the thesis was made possible through the strong support and ongoing reassurance of Professor Trevor Bond. He graciously agreed to supervise a complete stranger who tracked him down through the wonders of the internet. A more encouraging supervisor would be difficult to find. His openness to a less conventional approach and his non-pedantic and sensitive supervision are deeply appreciated.

Dr Helen Boon came late to the supervisory challenge of helping a slow and ponderous writer complete a manuscript. I am grateful she was prepared to wade through the draft chapters to improve their logic and readability. Neither supervisor is responsible if any errors of logic or fact remain.

Finally to our children, all four of them and their partners, my four sisters and my friends in Adelaide, Canberra and Sydney who suffered with or because of me, I acknowledge your support and regular inquiries about progress. To Sue Pender, a regular encourager and mentor, a particular thankyou.

I dedicate the thesis to Tess Caust, who showed it is never too late to study and that a passion for something can make a difference.

Abstract

The documentation of learning is a weakness of all schools and systems, leading to complaints about the lack of information and a press for teacher accountability. Current solutions to increase information about learning and improve accountability promote standardised (and national) testing of student cohorts and/or better use of often-archaic classroom assessment results. System-wide testing, while not without value for some purposes, is very limited in its contribution to improving classroom practice. In particular testing is a process detached from the needs of classroom teachers and given the time for results to be returned, unhelpful in timely decision making.

Assessment of students by teacher judgement is a general feature of classroom teaching but its quality is often unknown. This thesis addresses the history and application of teacher judgement assessment and then analyses teacher and test assessments of the same populations of students (from South Australia in 1997 and 1998). The analyses establish the comparability of the assessment processes, and thus one basis for inferring the quality of teacher judgement. The purpose is to test the feasibility of using teacher judgement assessments, calibrated to scales of learning, as the prime data to record, manage and report learning and monitor its change over time.

In curricula structured in levels, as apply in some Australian school systems, one possibility for recording assessments is in the form of the level judged to be most recently achieved. Over an extended time frame a general trajectory of learning for each student can be documented. If the progress made as a student learns new skills, knowledge and understandings could be assessed and recorded by a teacher in finer detail than a level, a basis might exist for documenting learning with utility for teachers, students and all other parties interested in being kept informed. These two broad ideas, the teacher's concept of learning in a specific strand of the curriculum and the mandated test as one method to describing that learning, are brought together to appraise the feasibility of creating methods of assessing and recording learning, built upon the constructs rather than any particular test or assessment process.

The data analysed are unique. They are limited to two calendar years (1997 and 1998) for two learning areas and are useful in estimating the potential for teacher and test assessments to track the learning development of students over time in the same fashion. Within the limitations of the data the potential of teachers to record the learning development of students directly, using broad scales to locate their current learning status is confirmed. Very strong similarities are found in the general characteristics of the data once the teacher scale is transformed to the scale of the test. Both assessment processes show increments in mean leaning for age cohorts grouped in 0.1 of year of age and smooth growth trajectories with age and Year level. Both processes show marked gender differences for English language, trivial gender differences for mathematics. Both processes show

within Year level patterns by age and gender that are consistent with test data analyses found elsewhere.

When case studies for individual schools are examined, it is clear that at some sites teachers assess with high correlation to the test scores, indicating the potential for easily recalibrating some teachers to increase the match of the assessments from the two processes. It appears potentially feasible to design classroom and school assessment systems on the basis of teacher judgement assessment data as the prime data source. Test data can be integrated readily and usefully into the scheme. The issues that need further consideration are outlined along with the general implications for support to teachers, training and re-training and some broader data management issues for classrooms, schools and systems. Subject to the resolution of a number of design issues, schools and school systems might then optimise the skills of teachers as both managers and documenters of learning. This would allow for the professional skills of teachers to be acknowledged and capitalised upon. Rather than the assessment skills of teachers being directly derided, or derided by implication as a consequence of externally imposed testing procedures, testing arrangements might be reconfigured to support and confirm the quality of teacher judgement assessments.

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